

## The Scorned

His face was flushed and he felt about six inches tall as he slid into his seat. Slouching down in his desk, just *seething*, hardly glancing up at the next group, even though it was Todd the Turd's. When it came time to mark them for clarity, visual aids, research, all that crap, Conrad gave them sevens across the board. *Fuck it.*

Fanning, Conrad noted with a fresh spike of fury, barely questioned the Turd and his partner, the lovely but terminally dumb Debbie Waring. And other than a half-hearted swipe about "brevity being the soul of wit", he didn't blast them for the poor quality of their presentation, the fact that they didn't even cover their topic, which was *supposed* to be medieval weaponry. How could you fuck up something as cool as that?

"I think we have time for one more. Particularly if you keep it short and sweet like our last group." Fanning saw Conrad's hand and hesitated, as if giving him a chance to change his mind. But Conrad waited him out. "Yes, Conrad?"

"I just want to say that what you did with Ted and me, that was totally unfair." Kids were turning around or angling for a better view and Ted Mikkelson, his worthless partner, gaped at him, his eyes practically pleading *whatever you do, keep me out of this.*

"Yes, well, perhaps you should wait for your mark before you rush to judgement."

But he couldn't leave it. Not after the show Fanning put on. Taking such pleasure in cutting them down. "You gave us an assignment, okay, fine, and Ted and I followed what we were supposed to do." Mikkelson, the twerp, ducked his head at the mention of his name.

"I agree, you fulfilled the *minimal* requirements of the assignment." Fanning rolled his eyes, mugging for the crowd. "I merely pointed out what I thought were some structural and logical loopholes in some of your arguments."

Which was complete bullshit. Their presentation, "Feudal = Futile", was basically a rehashing of stuff they'd taken in class, things *he'd* taught. Even the title was cribbed from one of his bad puns. But Fanning completely fucking *shanghaied* them, shutting down Conrad's attempted rebuttals and pouring scorn on clueless Ted. When he was done, he'd dismissed the two of them with a wave, practically sneering as they slunk past him on their way back to their desks.

"But we did all that research and--and--"

"I was hoping for something a bit more *original* from one of my better students."

Ladling on the charm. "But there was a paint by numbers quality to the whole thing that I found...disappointing."

"But we--we covered the points, we, uh--"

"*Hmm*, yes. But when put to the test, as it were, Ted didn't seem to know the material."

Conrad kept his cool. *Of course* Ted didn't know the material. Ted was a lazy, no-good shithead of a partner, who couldn't even come up with some decent pictures for their poster. Conrad ended up doing the lion's share of the work, even going so far as writing Ted's part out on recipe cards. Which the stupid bugger apparently neglected to read in advance.

“I just think you were being unfair.” Now it sounded like he was whining and he could feel his face heating up again.

He heard the Turd ask someone: “Is he gonna cry?”

*Asshole.*

“Do you mean the process? That it’s somehow biased?”

“No, but--”

“Yet clearly you feel badly treated.” Fanning raised his arms for dramatic effect. Now he had their complete attention, the way he liked it. “Why don’t we put it to a class vote? Those who think Mr. Dahl and Mr. Mikkelson were treated in any way unfairly, raise your hand. Go on, this is a free vote, *vox populi* and all that.”

And, of course, no one put up their hand. Not one of the gutless wonders. Not even Ted. Fanning waited a good long time before stating the obvious. “I’m afraid your supporters are few in number. So let’s move on to other matters and put this business behind us.”

Kids were smirking at him and the Turd gave him a mock thumb’s up.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.* Conrad felt like pounding his forehead on the desk in front of him.

*This shouldn’t be happening. Something is out of whack.* He had always considered himself a favorite of Fanning’s, immune from the withering comments and sharp rebukes he directed at students he perceived to be unmotivated or disinterested. “Zombies”, Fanning called them. People who went through life programmed to get a job, breed, be good worker bees and then die after their productive years were over.

Conrad didn’t blindly accept what he read in newspapers and magazines or believe everything that was reported on TV. Current events and stuff to do with history *fascinated* him.

He constantly had his nose stuck in a book. A good kid, a smart kid, one who never caused trouble or pushed back. But Fanning had gone too far and for his own selfish reasons. And look who'd paid the price.

Fanning checked the clock and decided there wasn't time for another group so Gary and Paulette got a reprieve. The extra day wouldn't help, they were both useless spazzes.

For ten minutes people worked on homework or read a book while Fanning marked papers at the front of the room.

He didn't look up when the bell rang and Conrad filed past without meriting so much as a glance.

It *had* to be because of what happened with Miss Bigelow.

Ol' Boom-Boom. The nickname courtesy Neil Penner. He said her body reminded him of a stripper's: big, exaggerated ass and torpedo tits. Doing the whole M.C. shtick. "And now for your viewing pleasure, gennulmen, please welcome, all da way from *Kan-sas* City: *Miss Joyce 'Boom-Boom' Bigelow!*" Neil was fantastic at stuff like that. He could do *hours* of Cheech and Chong and Pryor routines. Voices, accents, *everything*. Kid was a bloody genius. A genius...and a sex fiend. A terrifying combination. Like Leonardo Da Vinci and Jack the Ripper.

To be sure, Miss Bigelow was a walking wet dream. Her ripe, potent beauty had a lethal effect on most of the male population of the school, young and old...and that included the aforementioned James J. Fanning. As Conrad had recently discovered while engaged in a semi-illegal act, i.e. sneaking into his locker during lunch hour.

You weren't supposed to do that; certain areas of the school were off limits until the bell rang, though the reasoning behind that rule was somewhat unclear. *But...*he'd forgotten about a quiz coming up in Health in fourth period and wanted to have a quick look at his notes on the circulatory system. He'd dialed the combination and was about to crack the lock when he heard voices from Mr. Fanning's room. His locker was second from the end so it was easy to eavesdrop through the partially open door.

"It was one time, Jim, big fucking deal."

"But it was amazing, it was--"

"It was o-kay, all right? But it's not going to happen again and that's that."

"You sound pretty definite."

"Listen, Jim, you're a sweet guy and everything but enough's enough. We had our little fling, now let's move on. Be grown up about it."

Holy shit, Conrad thought, his curiosity doing battle with a strong instinct to flee. *Miss Bigelow and Mr. Fanning doing the dirty hula. And now she's dumping him. Wait'll Neil hears this...*

"Clearly our little tryst meant more to me than it did you."

She laughed. "I guess you could say that. *But...*c'mon, let's not turn this into something ugly. There's no need for that."

"Maybe we could meet some place and see if there's any way we can--"

"*No.* You are definitely *not* my type. I'm a fun-loving gal, Jim. I like to go out and party and boogie and have a good time. You're too much of a mope. A nice guy and all that but, to be honest, you're too old for me."

Along with English she taught gym half-time and kept herself in pretty good shape. She looked great even when she was sweating.

“I...guess I’ll have to accept that. I think...I could be good for you but--”

“Great, I’m glad you understand. Just friends, right? So no more notes, okay? Little cards and stuff?” Sharp squeaks and, too late, Conrad realized it was her shoes on the waxed tiles as she headed for the door. There was no time to bolt, no time to do anything except go into survival mode and hope for the best.

He popped the lock and had his locker door open when they came out. He pretended he was searching around inside, totally preoccupied with what he was doing. She didn’t seem uptight but Fanning looked like he could eat rocks and shit lava. Conrad felt transparent, the guilt written all over him in bright red ink.

“Sorry, sorry...just trying to find my binder.”

“Just get on with it, Dahl,” Fanning snarled. There were terrible things written all over him as well. Stuff that would *never* come off, no matter how hard he scrubbed.

“Right, sorry...here it is.” Slamming the locker, snapping the lock into place and getting away from there as fast as he could. *But Fanning knew.* Knew he’d been a witness to his shame.

That shit with the presentation...he must have felt he had a point to make, needed to remind Conrad who swung the biggest dick. On some level Conrad understood the mentality involved and perhaps even empathized. But that didn’t diminish his fury *or* his desire for revenge the slightest bit.

Even *the Turd* had joined in on the fun.

Something like that couldn’t be taken lying down...

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It was weird because up until then, Conrad had always gotten along well with Fanning. Most kids hated him and were constantly slagging him, but Conrad got a kick out of him. Sure he could be a first class A-hole, but he also had to regularly deal with dickheads like the Turd so you couldn't really blame him. Say what you wanted about him but the guy really *cared* about teaching. In his class you didn't just learn the usual crap, you also talked about the Cold War and Nixon and the Middle East, things going on in the real world.

The way he taught it, history wasn't just dates and numbers. "History is about *people* and it's made by ordinary men and women, *not* by kings and queens. Mark my words, boys and girls." Fanning constantly came up with zingers like that. "The right person in the right place can achieve great things...or screw things up royally. Usually both." He told lots and lots of stories that helped fill in the spaces, things you wouldn't find in the official, authorized version of events.

Mr. Fanning also liked to remind his class that history "is written by the winners and bound to reflect their point of view". Conrad wrote that one down. The teacher dropped the remark in the middle of one of the debates he often started to keep them on their toes. No subject was *verboten* and you weren't allowed to abstain once he called on you for your opinion.

It was during one such debate, early in the semester, that Conrad first caught Mr. Fanning's attention. Initially, he contributed little in class, deliberately keeping a low profile. But during a discussion on euthanasia, the Turd uttered a comment that was so off base and stupid--something like everyone being put to sleep except white people--that Conrad found

himself blurting: “Thank you, Archie Bunker.” His spontaneous quip broke everyone up. Even Fanning was laughing.

After that, everything was cool. Conrad worked diligently and made sure his assignments were done on time. He paid attention in class, laughed at the teacher’s little jabs and never, *ever* caused him any grief. Why should he? It was fun watching him go after the zombies, hilarious watching them squirm.

Other teachers might be fooled by the Turd’s seemingly innocent and harmless exterior but Fanning, bless his soul, saw him for what he was: a moron.

“Your kind, sad to say, is cannon fodder, Mr. Tardif,” Fanning barked at him one day. “You refuse to ask questions, merely accept everything that’s doled out to you by the people pulling the strings.”

The Turd sat there with his chubby arms crossed, an expression of befuddlement on his ugly puss. “Why would they lie to us? What would be the point? Man, I just don’t *get* this.”

“No, Todd, you don’t,” Fanning sighed. “And more’s the pity. So much for the notion of an informed and intelligent electorate.” His eyes came to rest on Conrad, who couldn’t hide his glee at the tortures being visited upon his longtime adversary. “I trust you aren’t nearly so gullible, Mr. Dahl.”

“No, sir. Completely jaded and cynical.”

“Well done. These days cynicism isn’t merely understandable, it’s *mandatory*. As for Mr. Tardif,” starting back toward the front of the room, “there are times when I truly wish I sold vacuum cleaners or encyclopedias. I could make a fortune off the likes of you.”

At mid-term, Conrad's mark in Social Studies was 84%. It was his second best class, after Drafting. His father slipped him ten bucks and told him to keep it up. His mother signed the back of the report card and returned it without comment. She wasn't one for faint praise. Plus she was drinking again, which meant sometimes she forgot to *care*.

And so Social Studies, once his favorite subject, became a complete drag. No fun at *all* any more. Not even good for a laugh.

Conrad completely pulled back, rarely participating in classroom discussions and activities. Fanning didn't look his way or call on him and, for the most part, seemed bored or distracted. His lessons lost their entertainment value and his cracks, while still frequent, lacked their customary venom.

They finished the medieval unit and the test was a cinch...and yet somehow Conrad ended up with only a 75. He lost big marks on his essay, which was judged to be "incomplete" and "unclear".

It really pissed him off but there wasn't much he could do about it. Complain? To *who*? Besides, a tenuous truce had been established since their stand-off and he didn't want to blow it by raising a stink.

As the semester entered its final weeks, Fanning seemed to be coasting. He'd give them some dumb-ass assignment and let them go down to the library or work on their own while he sat at the front, basically ignoring them as long as they kept the noise level to a minimum. Really freaky behavior.

While filing out of the room one day, Conrad passed by Fanning's desk, looked down and saw a coil notebook that had been left open. There was neat, tight printing squeezed between generous margins. Short sentences...no, it was a *poem*.

He glanced toward the door. The bell had finished ringing, classes were over for the day. He could hear Fanning talking to someone outside, the voices getting lower, perhaps moving off. He leaned over so he could read the poem, a few brief passages filled with longing and despair. Really mushy stuff. There were sheets of paper beside it--earlier drafts, discards. One of them was dedicated "To My Beloved Joyce". The only thing missing were tear stains.

Still no one in the doorway or approaching from the hallway.

*He took it.* Before he knew it, the sheet was in his hand and he was slipping it between the frayed pages of his binder. His heart beating a mile a minute, the surge of blood roaring in his ears. At that moment, he felt almost super-human, with the added realization that his powers were only temporary and if he wanted to use them, he needed to act *quickly*...

Nothing is as hard as it seems.

Mrs. Clarkson left her room open during recess and noon hour so students could come in and practice. Rows of desks, each sporting an IBM electric typewriter. Heavy duty and practically indestructible.

Few took her up on her offer and nobody walked in on him as he sat at one of the machines, tapping away, his hands *tingling*:

You think you can use me and dump me like some kind of cheap WHORE, well your wrong...

And then the aftermath.

No one ever said a word to the kids. But the next morning anyone entering the school could *feel* something in the air, like a cyclone had just darted overhead, narrowly missing the playground.

Mr. Dreyer, who rarely ventured out of his office, spent the day prowling the hallways or thrusting his head into classrooms, making sure everything was running smoothly. Sometimes he'd stand at the back of the room as a teacher rambled on and on, clearly rattled to have the principal listening in.

Miss Bigelow was gone, transferred elsewhere to fill in for someone going on maternity leave. That was their story and they were sticking to it.

Give old Fanning credit for sheer balls, if nothing else. He showed up for school, regular as clockwork, pulling his orange Vega into its usual slot just after 8:00. He looked pretty composed for a guy whose job was hanging by a thread.

Trevor Newton's mom worked as a secretary in the office. She was the one who came running when she heard Miss Bigelow scream. Trevor listened to her telling a friend about it later and the story went like this:

Miss Bigelow was as white as the sheet she was holding. It had been left in her message box and Trevor's mom took it from her. Read it. Marched the two of them into Mr. Dreyer's office.

The shit hit the fan with a resounding splat. Fanning was called down and when confronted with the evidence, things got ugly. Fanning denied responsibility for the note and

point blank refused to quit or take a leave of absence. He threatened to sue the school if anything was said or done to damage his professional reputation.

It came down to Miss Bigelow and it turned out she just wanted the whole thing to go away. Trevor's mom said Fanning should have been fired or at least suspended. It was a clear cut case of harassment. But nothing would come of it. This was a small town and nobody wanted the trouble and embarrassment.

It was nearing the end of the school year and finals were looming. Conrad had a decent shot at making the honour roll as long as he kept his marks up. He studied hard and was reasonably confident of his chances.

To be honest, Fanning's Social final was a joke. Conrad was sure he'd aced it. That impression was confirmed when he picked up his report card and discovered he'd snagged an 86 in Social and did well enough in his other classes to earn a class pin.

There was a sense of satisfaction but something else too: this achievement came at considerable personal risk and required courage and initiative on his part. He had set certain events in motion and, thanks to his efforts and ingenuity, everything he envisioned had come to pass. *That* was an amazing feeling. Like nothing he ever could have imagined.

He wondered if Fanning would be back at school in the fall. The rumours and gossip would follow him around everywhere and gradually the story would change, the details becoming increasingly muddled and sordid.

The poor guy would never escape the feeling that people were looking at him funny, remembering the things they'd heard about him. It seemed like harsh punishment, unless you

knew the complete picture and then you'd see he totally had it coming to him. Too bad about Miss Bigelow but, then, she wasn't exactly an innocent either, was she?

The next thing Conrad knew, it was summer, the beginning of the holidays, and none of that stuff mattered any more.

School was *over* and all at once the sun seemed to shine twice as bright and twice as long. He worked some shifts at the bakery but found plenty of opportunities to goof off with Neil and Tom. He hardly spent any time at home, mainly to eat and sleep, that was about it.

So he wasn't there when his mother walked into the garage and discovered his father hanging from a length of clothesline. He wasn't there and didn't find out about it until nearly two hours later, when his older sister Peg came and found him, screwing around with the old, recycled tires behind McPherson's Garage. Stacking them on top of each other and then tipping them over. Kids' stuff.

She couldn't come right out and say it, could only manage "Oh, Con..." before bursting into tears and throwing herself on him, nearly knocking him over.

At first he didn't understand what had happened. For one panicked instant he thought someone had seen him in the office that day, sneaking the note; that he had finally been caught. His eyes filled and he started bawling too, the two of them clinging to one another, grieving for what had been lost.