

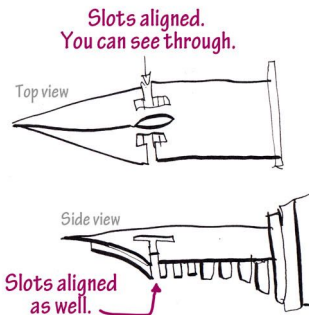
# 18

## Finding Fault

*The unavoidable complications of a classroom*

Gentle reader, before I tell you this story, I must paint for you a little of the physical environment that made it all possible, though I hasten to add that it by no means caused the series of incidents (a considerable understatement) that resulted. After all, it was humans who made this physical environment in the first place, and humans who, once trapped inside of this environment of their own making, made possible the disasters that inevitably occurred.

Before ball point pens were invented, there were ink wells and pens. Moving to pens from pencils for kids in about grade three was a huge coming-of-age graduation. However, fountain pens, those amazing gadgets that had a little rubber tube inside them, into which you sucked up the ink, were not permitted. All kids had to have a simple pen that had a wooden shaft and a metal pointed nib, the design of which was surely one that made sure that a kid's use of pen and ink would not go smoothly. The nibs were a piece of thin pointed metal with a split down the center, and at the back end a small indentation on each side of the nib. Why that indentation was there is probably the great unanswered question of all time. For it was the source of many embarrassments and of very serious spilled ink disasters. For those who find this difficult to believe, here is a simple drawing of a nib of the 1940s and before.



One might see no special problem with such a pen, but the problem arose when the pen was coupled with its source of ink: the ink well. The cunning design of this well, a thin ceramic or Bakelite container, had a small hole at its top, and a wide lip, so that it dropped nicely into the hole that was bored into the top of the school desk. To give you a better idea, here is a photo of an old pen and inkwell in a school desktop. You can see signs of use, though the inkwell has been considerably cleaned up.



Every Monday, the boys in grade five vied to be appointed ink monitor (girls not allowed because of its messiness, it was a boy's job). This required the mixing of dark blue ink powder in a large container with a set amount of water. Each inkwell had then to be filled as it sat cradled in its hole on top of the desk, or if the desk was a double, there were two holes, though sometimes only one in the middle which the students shared (also a scene of likely disaster). It was particularly difficult to pour the ink into the wells when they were seated, so sometimes they had to be lifted out and stood on the desk beside the hole in order to be filled. Or even held up to the pouring device. The temptation, of course, to the boys was to accidentally on purpose spill the ink. This is why the ink monitors had to arrive in the classroom well before the bell rang for start of classes, to fill the wells before the kids came in.

Young Mr. Potts, always dressed in a nice suit, covered by an old grey dust coat to protect it from chalk dust and other smudges of a busy classroom, supervised the two boys this Monday morning. Tich was in his element, and had practiced at home pouring water from a jug into egg cups so he would be sure not to spill any ink on this day that he had looked forward to for

a long time. The trouble was that his collaborator, Dog (so called because he spent a lot of his time crawling around under his desk and making barking noises) was not so careful. The rest of the class could not understand why Mr. Potts ever allowed Dog to be monitor, because it seemed that he was forever being growled at and never did his work. But Mr. Potts, fresh out of Teachers' College, was careful not to discriminate against a child simply because he was dumb or otherwise handicapped. All children were able to learn. It was a matter of fairness, as he had been taught in Teachers' College over and over again, that each child was different and each child should be allowed to progress at his or her own pace. Never mind that Dog was not progressing at all, could barely write his name, and was still doing work at a grade one level. This was an embarrassment to young Mr. Potts, especially as the school inspector had visited his classroom the week before and left a caustic note on his report expressing his displeasure at the lack of progress of Dog. Mr. Potts was still suffering from this rebuke, and more importantly, worried that he would now not get his promotion. So he stood at his very carefully arranged desk, so tidy, as he often reminded his pupils, "a place for everything and everything in its place," and looked with some satisfaction at the two boys, carrying out their task, Tich highly skilled, and Dog even doing well under Tich's tutelage. He was hoping that Tich would be a good influence on Dog, maybe even teach him something.

Mr. Potts stood perfectly upright behind his carefully arranged desk as the children marched in, and stood at their desks.

"Good morning children," said Mr. Potts.

"Good morning Mr. Potts," chanted the children.

"Now sit quietly. I have something special to show you all this morning. "

A familiar, even comforting, rustle of the kids' shoes scraping on the wooden floor. An excited murmur. Mr. Potts reached for a large rectangular envelope that sat, perfectly aligned with the edge of the desk on top of the perfectly aligned blotter pad, which was, so far today, spotless, no sign of ink stains. He opened the envelope and peered inside. The children started to chatter.

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“Now, children! No chattering. Heads down on your desk, please. That’s the way.”

The children all, even Dog, put their heads on their desks and covered them with their arms.

“OK. children, You may look now!”

The children looked and gasped, and chattered, and oed and aared. The girls in the back giggled.

Mr. Potts held the picture high and walked around the room showing it. It was a charcoal portrait of someone who looked like Mr. Potts, but wasn’t him. The figure had a big brushy moustache, and Mr. Potts had nothing of the sort. But the eyes were not quite the same, though all the rest was definitely Mr. Potts. Tich raised his hand.

“Yes, Tich?”

“Is it you, Mr. Potts? It sort of looks like you but you’re not that old, are you?”

“Very good, Tich. It is not a picture of me, but of my grandfather, drawn when there was no such thing as a camera, there were no photos at all.”

The buzz of excitement and the clear display of the children learning made Mr. Potts very happy with the class and with himself. “When you go home tonight, ask your parents if they have drawings of their grandparents. And if you can, bring one in tomorrow.”

Dog raised his hand.

“Yes, Dog?”

“I have to go to the toilet.”

Mr. Potts looked at him sternly. “First, Dog, you know that our rule is that you cannot go to the toilet before morning recess, and we have only just now started our morning class.”

“But sir...”

“No buts. Second, you know that the way you said it was discourteous.”

“Dis-what?” responded Dog cheekily.

“You didn’t say please,” called one of the girls from the back.

Dog stood up and jiggled his legs. “Please, Mr. Potts, I have to go.”

“Sit! And mind your manners!” growled Mr. Potts. Dog had ruined the whole lesson.

Mr. Potts addressed the class. “Get out your workbooks and do the arithmetic I have put on the board.”

The children responded with mutters, chatter and the banging of desk lids as they were opened and shut. Dog slid down under his desk and started to bark, somewhere in that bark the word toilet could be heard.

Mr. Potts placed the drawing on top of the blotter pad, taking a moment to admire it. He felt very close to his grandfather, even though he was a baby when his grandfather passed away. He then looked up and scanned the class. There was a bit of chatter, mainly from the girls at the back, but all the kids were doing their work, with the exception of Dog, of course.

“Those of you who finish before recess bell may come up and get one of the special comic books I have on my desk, and read until recess. In the meantime, I am going to pass the picture of my grandfather around the class to let you see close up how the charcoal drawing was done. Yes, that’s right. The artist used a piece of charcoal to do the drawing.”

“Didn’t they even have pencils in those days?” asked one of the girls.

“Of course they did. But you know, artists still today like to use charcoal because it has a nice clear black and white effect.” He handed the drawing to Tich who sat at the front of the row in his desk that he shared with Dog. “You want to look at it?” he asked Dog.

But Dog barked and scratched around at something on the floor under the desk.

Mr. Potts moved around the class checking the arithmetic, giving help, and praise where deserved. He was half way through, when there was a what might be called a quiet shriek from one of the girls.

Mr. Potts looked up. “Now girls, that’s enough chatter. What’s going on there?”

One of the girls held up the drawing, waving it around. “Now! Please be careful with that drawing, it is a valuable work of art!” ordered Mr. Potts, “and a family heirloom.”

“What’s that?” asked the girl.

“Something very special that is handed down from one generation to another.”

“What’s a generation?” The girl started to giggle and gave the drawing to one of her friends, who declined to take it. “Oooh! I’m not taking it. You’re not going to blame me for it!” she cried.

“What?” asked Mr. Potts, “blame for what?”

The girl held the drawing up to Mr. Potts so he could see it. There was a huge splash of ink that covered a good part of the drawing.

Mr. Potts almost leaped over the desks between him and the drawing. He almost cried, ‘O my God,’ but managed to hold it back. “Give that to me! Who did this?” he demanded.

A deathly silence descended on the class. Even the barking of Dog ceased, though his scraping feet did not.

“Come forward who did this!” he demanded once again.

But not one child came forward. All looked down and sideways at each other, dying to see who had done this terrible thing.

“I will ask one more time. Come forward who did this. Come forward this minute!”

Silence. Now all looked down, none wanting to be seen as either having done it, or knowing who did.

The morning recess bell sounded. The children squirmed in anticipation.

Mr. Potts looked at his watch. “All right, then,” he said, “you will all stay in until the person who did this terrible thing owns up.”

Morning recess came and went, but still the class sat, with no one owning up. Dog put up his hand and asked, “please sir, can I go to the toilet? Please? I couldn’t before because we didn’t have recess.”

Mr. Potts relented. After all, Dog had seemingly learned his lesson and his request was reasonable. Besides, it would give the class a chance to point the finger at Dog who, of course, was the prime suspect.

Dog left for the toilet and soon returned. He had met the

principal in the hallway who had asked him where he was going and why didn't his class go out for recess. Dog said he was going to the toilet and didn't know why. The principal shrugged and walked off.

Dog returned to his classroom which was deadly silent. Mr. Potts had ordered the class to sit still and read. And if anyone was tired of doing that he made them do the sums from the board all over again. But still, no one owned up to the terrible deed. Mr. Potts began to walk backwards and forwards in front of the class, his hands clasped behind his back. Finally, he stopped and faced the class.

"One last time!" he said, clearly on the edge of a breakdown. "If no one owns up, I will have to keep the whole class in as punishment. No lunch time, and at the end of the day, you will be kept in for an extra half hour."

The class stirred, and the noise of shoes scraping the floor rose to a crescendo. There were loud whispers of "that's not fair" and "but I'll miss my bus," but Mr. Potts was adamant.

"I have told you. This picture of my grandfather was extra special. It is a terrible thing for someone to have done. Horrible! Horrible!" There was even a slight trace of water in his eyes. He turned away from the class so that they would not see it. And when he turned back, the class became suddenly silent.

One of the girls from the back had raised her hand. "Sir?" she called out, a very serious look on her face.

"Yes?" answered Mr. Potts, hoping for a resolution. Even he had to admit to himself that the punishment he was dishing out to everyone because of the misbehavior of one individual was certainly unfair.

"We all know who done it, Mr. Potts. It was Dog!"

Other kids eagerly chimed in. "That's right! It's always Dog."

Tich looked down and saw Dog rummaging around under the desk. He had been there most of the time all morning. He doubted if it were him. But he said nothing.

"Dog? Get up from there. Come on! Stand out in the aisle. Let me see you! Come on!"

But Dog remained where he was, emitting his usual barking

noises. Tich leaned down to him and whispered, “you better come out! Mr. Potts is mad as hell!”

Dog stayed where he was.

“Dog! Come out!” called Mr. Potts. He was now more certain than ever that it had to be Dog. On the edge of losing it, he darted forward, pushed Tich aside, and grabbed Dog by the arm. “Come on, you little devil! Out you come!” He dragged him out of the desk and to the front of the class. Dog went limp and then when Mr. Potts let him go, he just plopped to the floor and would not get up. Just stayed there rubbing his nose and eyes, red in the face. He had been there many times.

“Did anyone see him do it?” asked Mr. Potts, immediately regretting it.

The class remained silent, each looking at the other. Then a shy girl who sat at the front of the class away from the other girls slowly raised her hand.

“What is it Gladys?” asked Mr. Potts.

“I saw him do it, Mr. Potts.”

“Are you certain?” asked Mr. Potts, now the fair and impartial judge.

“I saw him. He was trying to write something in his workbook and he dipped his pen in the inkwell and the nib caught on the lip of the inkwell and it pulled the inkwell out of the hole and the ink went all over the desk.”

“Where was the picture?” asked Mr. Potts.

“I was just handing it to Dog,” answered the shy girl, glancing around furtively, the rest of the class looking on as though some awful secret was about to be revealed.

Tich stood up, excited. “Sir! I don’t think that could be right. There’s no ink on our desk.”

The shy girl spoke up, certainly with some difficulty. “I cleaned it up while Tich was over in the corner sharpening his pencil.”

The waste paper bin was in the corner of the classroom at the back of the class. It was a special pleasure of every kid to go there and sharpen their pencils on the sharpener attached to the wall above.

Mr. Potts, wanted very much to get this over with. The



simplest solution to this nasty situation was to believe what the girl said and get the punishment over with. He walked across to the shy girl and leaned over to look in her eyes. "You're sure of this?"

"Yes Mr. Potts," she whispered, looking down.

He returned to stand beside Dog who was sitting on the floor, morose, his cheeks puffed up and red, his eyes though, steadfastly fixed on the shy girl.

"Dog, stand up this minute!" demanded Mr. Potts.

Of course, Dog did not comply.

"Come on! Stand up! I've had enough of you!" He walked across to his desk and withdrew his leather strap, which he was proud to say he rarely used. But his time it was absolutely necessary.

A great hush descended on the class. The girls at the back strained their necks as high as they could so that they would see everything.

Mr. Potts stood facing Dog, dangling the strap in front of him. Dog cringed, raising his arm as though he were about to be slapped all over. He did not and would not stand up. He liked being on the floor. There was something comforting about it, though he wished it were under the desk as well. In fact, he started to crawl for his desk.

"Stop right there!" commanded Mr. Potts.

Dog crawled forward, but then Mr. Potts put his foot down, literally, on Dog's fingers as he crawled. Dog stopped. He could no longer move forward.

Now, Mr. Potts was faced with a very difficult and dangerous decision. Dog was stuck in a typical crawling position, his bottom sticking up just crying out to be smacked. Mr. Potts, an upstanding gentleman of the community, and accomplished teacher, knew very well that the regulations of the Victorian Education Department allowed the strap to be applied only to the hands and lower legs. And it was limited to six strokes at any one time. He jiggled the strap a little, as though to loosen his wrist. Then with a flick of his wrist, the strap whizzed upwards as he lifted his arm in a swift motion so that the strap, like a writhing snake, leaped up then down, slapping Dog's bottom with a sharp

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crack.

Dog screamed so loud that it frightened all the kids in the class who looked on dumbfounded.

“Let that be a lesson to you,” said grim Mr. Potts, looking around to the class, so it was not at all clear whether he was talking just to Dog or to the rest of the class as well.

Tich looked on in horror. He looked across to the shy girl who looked away. He knew that it was she whose pen had caught in the inkwell.

*Moral: Punishment is the negation of fairness.*

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