Brighteye

Whenever I find myself weary of the sniffling and complaining, whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp drizzly November with half my students down with the flu and the others whining about the car not starting or the roof a-leak, I tell the story of Brighteye.

I teach adults at a community college, and at the beginning of class as I place my texts and roll sheets on the desk top and get out a pencil and the lesson, I will hear a shuffling of papers, a few greetings, and a murmur of side comments obliquely directed at me.

“How did you do on the biology test?”

“Hated it. Hope we don’t have a quiz in THIS class!”

“No. Mr. Thompson is a nice guy. He wouldn’t do that, would you, Mr. T?”

“Nice tie, Mr. Thompson. Can we go home now?”

“Yeah. Half the class is sick anyway an I have a sore elbow where I fell on the ice.”

“Yeah. An this essay was stoopit!”

This essay was my favorite and it requires a strong moral principle not to suggest that anybody who tattoos themselves above the collar is stoopit and deserving of a sore elbow; but instead I draw a deep breath, look down at my hands, and slowly, haltingly. in a voice quieted by suppressed emotion—a voice which, coming from one as normally ebullient as I, lays down a hush like a Nyquil mist or a firecracker in a swamp full of frogs—I tell the story of Brighteye.

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He wasn’t always called Brighteye.

In kindergarten I used to talk to the kids next to me, constantly. When the teacher tired of this she would send me to the office. When they got tired of me they would send me back. I was hyper, and the teacher finally stuck me in the closet at the rear of the room.

In the closet were her coat hanging on a large peg near the door, her lunch, and shelves on three sides with rulers and crayons, paper and blunted scissors, dog-eared *Dick and Jane* readers, sponges to mop up after us little kids, chalk, erasers, and piles of stuff that nobody had used for years. A light bulb hung from the ceiling, with a string dangling just above my head. By jumping up and down I could switch it on and off, which I did once in awhile to let the other kids know I was alive.

I was not a mean kid—just hyper, and I would have talked all the time if there had been anybody in the closet with me. I talked to dogs then and I still do. My dog avoids me at home, and looks out the window in embarrassment when I talk to her in the car. I would have talked to a stone.

That’s one reason I teach -- they have to listen to you—and my favorite class of all time was in the prison with half of them lifers. It was never scary, because you figure they have the wild maniacs in maximum and those guys can’t take classes; while the lifers mostly killed somebody once and are a lot more anxious to prove they are decent human beings than the average cat who works for a corporation. Which is why I prefer their company. But then I did a lot of time in a closet when I was five.

My parents took me to Doctor Danishek to see if he could slow me down. When I was three we lived in Sauk City, Wisconsin and Mr. Yudelhoven lived next door. Old Jake Yudelhoven was my buddy, and when he went to work at four A.M. I’d open my window and shout back and forth with him, then stay up until breakfast, playing with my toys. Needless to say, my folks didn’t get much sleep. But Ritalin didn’t work, so I ended up in Mrs. Jepsen’s closet after we moved to Seattle and I went off to school.

By fooling around with the light cord I broke the switch and the light wouldn’t work anymore, so after I got out of the closet for good behavior Mrs. Jepsen would send me in if she needed anything. I had memorized everything in the dark and could find my way around by touch.

Then just before the end of kindergarten there was an accident. One of our classmates had been pushing another on the swings and pushed him too high. The pushee screamed to the pusher to stop, but the pusher instead pushed higher and higher. The kid on the swing let go, fell off, hit his head, and went into a coma. The pusher felt very bad when he came to school; but nightly our teacher would visit the hospital, and each morning she would bring in hopeful news. Then one day she told us Tommy had died. The pusher didn’t return to class—his parents moved or something and we never saw him again. I wonder if he ever got over it, or if, on a drizzly November day, with half his coworkers sick, he might look out the window and hear Tommy pleading for him not to push so high, just as…

… Sometimes I must stand before my class and confess that there was a hamster named Brighteyes that my first grade class bought and we took turns feeding. Mrs. Kelly was my first grade teacher, and I was being good, talking less, and all was rosy until fall deepened into winter, and in the drippy Seattle chill we cast lots to see who got to baby-sit Brighteyes over Christmas. And lo, the lucky one was me! I was a proud little kid carrying Brighteyes’ cage home to my house at 3316 Northeast. This was one job I could handle. I loved that hamster, symbol of my turnaround in school, my redemption, my luck.

But we are born to sorrow as the sparks fly upward. The thousand injuries of my older sister Janice I had borne as best I could, but when she ventured upon insult two days before Christmas I threw my cap gun at her. And in my memory, crystallized like Miami in one of those tacky paperweights with the snow, I see Jan across the dining room table sneering at me, me with cap gun in hand, warm reek of spent caps, smooth grownup utility of the plastic grips in my hand, and Brighteyes, fated Brighteyes, between us in the middle of the table munching lettuce.

The blow barely hurt him; in fact it didn’t even knock him off the table. It was just a freakish quirk that the cap gun I threw at my sister dislodged one of his namesake beady eyeballs, which rolled toward Janice, who screamed.

When I returned the shaken but otherwise unhurt, and wiser—though lacking depth perception—Brighteye back to class I explained: “I have, ahem, something to tell you all. We need to rename our hamster.”

Mrs. Kelly never let me forget that one moment. Of course it was my sister’s fault. But even after Brighteye died when Eddy Cummings let him out of his cage and he ran off and dehydrated behind the radiator next to the gym, Mrs. Kelly acted like it was because he was suffering from post-eyeball-loss stress syndrome or something. Anyway, she managed to mess up my NEXT school year, too.

It was late into a promising fall of my second grade year that Mrs. Kelly struck. We little kids were busy cutting stuff up and pasting it on something else, and I was so busy I wasn’t even thinking of talking, when I felt a cold draft and noticed Mrs. Kelly engaging my new teacher in one of those hissy whispering sessions that elementary teachers adore. Shortly, Ms. Powell, a phony leer lighting her lacquered lips, leaned over me.

“Mrs. Kelly has asked me if you could come to her room with her for a few minutes, She has a nice surprise.”

As we walked down the hall I tried to keep my spirits up by humming softly. If she opened that closet door I was bolting as fast and far as my Keds would take me. Maybe I could hole up with the swing murderer and then sneak across the border to Vancouver after dark. Maybe she was gonna give me brownies. I was turning on the spit and she was loving it.

As we entered Mrs. Kelly’s room the first thing I saw was the cage Brighteye had fled to leave his poor desiccated one-eyed carcass behind the radiator that shrank him up like some freeze-dried backpacker hamster jerky. My eyes beginning to tear, I saw it then—a strong young hamster rookie on the wheel our late Brighteyes had trod!

Dizzy with dread, I heard Mrs. Kelly as through the fog at the top of a ski run, when you’re worrying about who is in front and behind you, trying to keep your skis straight and not get run over or kill somebody else, and you’re hearing muffled voices on all sides but can’t tell distance or speed, while everything rushes so fast you seem to be standing still.

“Class, this is JERRY. You remember how, when we did the unit on cap gun safety, I told you how Jerry put Brighteyes’ starboard eye out, and about how Brighteye later dehydrated himself behind the radiator in chagrin—we covered that in our unit on self-esteem, when we learned that maybe Jerry’s disfiguring him might have provoked Brighteye’s Hamlet-like demise?”

“Well, Jerry,” she continued in her singsong phonysweet teacher trill, “I told the class about you, and they decided to name our new hamster… Jerry!”

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“And you shit a kidney with joy!” deadpans Emmy Ferrara, my student who sometimes comes up with the perfect expressions for moments like this—me telling my writing class the most embarrassing moment of my life.

And I sometimes wonder what the Hell that woman was thinking; because I presume somehow she intended this naming ceremony to be beneficial—a “learning experience”—for me and the rest of those little kids. Just as Mrs. Jepsen intended by putting me in the closet to – what?

Actually that moment in Mrs. Kelly’s class had a lot to do with my vocation, because I do feel called to teach.

And despite the hooks and arrows, the maddening stupidity of forcing energetic young people to sit quietly and listen through the years of their greatest physical high spirits, until in later life they must pay big bucks and go through acute pain to burn off the lard they might not have packed on had they been allowed to run around like they wanted—despite the long hours and the poor pay—I hang on.

I hang on.

I keep going because of the Mrs. Jepsens and the Mrs. Kellys and others like them. And in this cold world, if I can find one solitary, lonely kid, confused and scared, mixed up and feeling alone, and make her feel GUILTY, too, Brighteye will not have died in vain.