

First Grade in 1956

Pillows and Naps—We *dassn't* wake Ronnie!—Bathroom Disaster—A Little Negro Boy—
Sunday School—A Little Cart—Hula Skirts—Bare Naked!—Traditional Family Values

It was nap time in Mrs. Beata's first grade class at Louisville, Kentucky's Audubon School. We all lay our heads on the pillows that our moms had made for us and pretended to sleep. Of course, nap time was a pleasant fiction. We couldn't really sleep sitting as we were at our desks, our bodies bent three ways, but we played the game. Nap time was simply an attempt to get us to wind down and give the teacher a break.

This time, when nap time was over, Mrs. Beata told us all to be very quiet—very very quiet indeed. Ronny, it seemed, had fallen fast asleep during nap time and we *dassn't* wake him up. Waking him up would not be nice. The message was clear: we were nice people and we would never be mean enough to wake someone up—not someone who was fast asleep.

Mrs. Beata continued the class speaking softly so as not to waken Ronny, but all the while she kept a stealthy eye on the boy. She paced the room nonchalantly until finally she let out a colossal, "AHAH!"

"I SAW him!" Mrs. Beata screamed. "He wasn't really asleep. I saw him open one eye just to see where I was!" Mrs. Beata was shaking in fury.

"Look at him! Look at him moving his foot in and out of his shoe!"

I looked, and sure enough, Ronny's heel came up out of his leather shoe once or twice and then stopped. I reckoned that if I had shoes like that I would do the same thing. It looked as though my foot might feel real nice and relaxing lazily sliding in and out that way. I didn't have any shoes like Ronny's; they weren't my style—but I could relate.

Mrs. Beata continued to scream at Ronny, who just kind of shriveled up twitching and crying.

Now, being only six years old, Ronny nor the rest of us had any idea that Mrs. Beata's behavior was out of whack. But this episode passed, and if Mrs. Beata had to answer for it from Ronny's parents, we sure weren't aware of it.

I found that Mrs. Beata hated little girls. There was a bathroom in the classroom and the children all lined up to use it. One day, a little girl standing behind my brother said, "May I go in front of you?" To which, my brother responded, "No, you may not."

The door to the bathroom had a ventilation grate near the floor, and when my brother turned to come out of the bathroom, he saw through that grate a rain of urine. The rest of us got a better view. The urine showered down from her dress and spattered at her feet. The little girl stared at Mrs. Beata with a mixture of the most horrible shame mixed with what was clearly fear. She did not look to her teacher for help or compassion and her instincts were correct; Mrs. Beata reacted with rage. She screamed at the little girl and told her what a horrible person she was. Then she went into the bathroom, got a wad of paper towels, and made the child kneel alone and wipe up all of the piss in front of the entire horrified class. In front of all of us.

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Mrs. Beata told us that there wasn't a Negro within twenty miles of our school. She said that if we did have a little Negro boy in class we would be very nice to him. She also said that they had dumb names like "Ray." We didn't know the real reason we didn't have any little Negro children in our class. It was not because there weren't plenty around in Louisville. It was that the school was segregated.

As if she didn't have enough faults, Mrs. Beata was also religious. I remember how she told us all about Jesus. Perhaps there were no Jewish children there, but she didn't bother to ask. Why should she in 1956? I remember the story she told about how Jesus was called upon to visit the family of a dead little girl. Mrs. Beata told us of how the bereaved mother lifted the little girl's arm and dropped it, and how it fell so limply that there was no question that she was dead. "Well," said Mrs. Beata, "Jesus laid his hands on her and that little girl rose and walked again." She didn't say whether Jesus would have made the little girl wipe up her own piss.

My parents were devout atheists but if Mrs. Beata had to answer to them for proselytizing I sure wasn't aware of it. Every Monday morning the students were asked to tell what they did in Sunday school. Since atheists didn't go to Sunday school, I was left out of this part of the class and I was immediately annoyed at it. One Monday morning, when Mrs. Beata asked what we all had done at Sunday school, I got fed up and I raised my hand.

"Yes, Tommy," said Mrs. Beata.

"My dad says he's gonna build me a little cart!"

"That's very nice," she said. "But it has nothing to do with Sunday school."

"I know," I said.

Mrs. Beata's First Grade Class Hawaiian Show was a big event. All of the little boys got their moms to supply them with flowered shirts, and they made cut-off Levi's with the pant legs clipped as if with giant pinking shears so that teeth-like triangles of fabric formed the cuffs. They looked very Hawaiian that way. We all wore leis too. The girls would be dressed in grass skirts, rustling affairs made of endless strips of crate paper.

In class, a week before the show, the little boy next to me said, "Underneath those skirts, the girls are going to be bare naked!!"

I judged they wouldn't be naked, but from what I gathered it would be possible to see their underwear quite clearly and in the first grade, that was really something. We all looked forward to the Hawaiian Show. We learned some Hawaiian sign language and I was chosen to strum the autoharp. Mrs. Beata, you see, had an autoharp and I proved to be the best at strumming it as she pushed the buttons labeled: "C ... A minor ... F ... G... and so on.

I remember only snippets of the Hawaiian Show, but I remember in detail what happened afterwards . We all returned to our regular classroom, still in our Hawaiian wardrobe. Mrs. Beata looked at all the girls and said, "You girls DO understand, don't you?"

That served as the cue, and immediately, all of the girls exploded into action. Right there in the classroom, they tore their leis off and then their skirts until they were clean down to their underwear and nothing else! And then they dove desperately into their regular school dresses. All of them. Right there in class.

When it was happening I was stupefied with shock. My teeth were clenched. "They're all bare naked!" I said, and the boy next to me replied: "I know, but don't talk about it now!" His face and body were twisted with emotion.

Mrs. Beata could have had the girls take turns changing in the bathroom. Should could have got another teacher to watch the boys in another room. She could have done anything. Instead she chose to make the darkly subconscious and archetypal nightmare of showing up in class in your underwear a reality—a realty! She did that to all of them. Every single one. But if she had to answer to a single one of those little girls' parents I sure as hell didn't hear of it.

I have a feeling that in many ways my 1956 first grade class was closer to the rule than the exception than one might think. And so whenever I hear people longing for traditional family values (with a naive sigh and a maudlin flourish of trumpets) or hear them bitching about having to be PC and missing the good old days when they had the upper hand (with the blacks in the back of the bus and so much more), I think about Mrs. Beata.