

Bashed

by

Barbara Marquardt

For all the slandered teachers

copyright 2009

Chapter 1

Jean Kosciuszko stood waiting outside her door, monitoring the hall as all teachers were expected to do during the four minutes of passing time between classes. It was the last period of the day on the last day before a two week Christmas break, and the hall was empty and quiet. No other teachers stood on duty, but that was not unusual.

The silence suggested that the whole school might already be empty of students. Even on normal days, eighth period seemed to exist to be cut, but the halls would still be full of kids at their lockers or on the roam, looking for trouble. Today the absence of a single sound was almost eerie. Jean wondered if the other teachers were even around, or if they'd found some way to leave early. Since the school had stopped using signatures for attendance, she'd often noticed some teachers running more than one ID card through the machine that took attendance. Since she didn't join the cliques that went drinking after school or partied on weekends, she was, like other loners on the faculty, out of the loop when it came to knowing how practice differed from policy.

Leaving early was dishonest, but in her mind it implied nothing about how hard a teacher was working; everybody put in many hours at home, giving evenings, weekends, vacation time, always looking for something that would work better. Nobody could survive in the classroom

without preparing lessons and grading papers, and not turning in the reams of required paperwork, of no use whatsoever in actual teaching, would lead to a low rating for the year and probable job loss, with seniority no protection.

Monitoring rule or not, on quiet days like this one the halls required less attention. On normal, chaotic days, the four minutes of time for passing from class to class could fly by without a teacher even making it out into the hall. The problem was that students lingering in the classroom and entering for the next class also required attention, not only to prevent mischief but because they had questions and comments. In the hall, students you didn't know wouldn't show their ID's, which might not be their own anyway, so that when they broke rules or cursed at you, your supervising couldn't accomplish much in the way of consequences. At least inside the classroom, a teacher knew the names and would eventually decide who would pass and with what grade, although some days it seemed no one cared much about that.

The bell rang for classes to start, and, sighing with relief that no one had shown up, and she would not have to see her difficult eighth period class again until January, she went back in her room, not bothering to close the self-locking door as she normally would.

Fifty minutes till freedom, she thought. She was more than ready to go. She had already taken down the few holiday decorations that had not been vandalized, and her brief case was packed with papers to grade and materials to plan January's lessons.

One of the fattest folders was for paperwork supposedly showing teacher accountability by way of forms on which every moment of every day was to be coded to match goals and skills, with every detail described. There were two sets of goals, one for the city and the other for the state, and unfortunately they overlapped but did not match each other or the available textbooks and materials. Worse, they could not match what went on in class, since the poor attendance provided a different set of students each day, none with homework and all needing individual help to catch up. In her Biology class, for instance, state plans for a genetics unit might include a very interesting lab related to Mendel's work, and that is what her lesson plans would have to

show. But the school didn't have the materials for the lab, and it was very likely that fewer than half a class would show up for a lab anyway. Of those, maybe two or three would have read the text or attended previous classes on genetics or Mendel. So teachers had formal plans and contingency plans, trying to offer whichever students showed up some kind of profitable lesson that would give them some understanding of the subject. That was if they would listen. All too often students who could not read or write well enough to handle the class would disturb and distract, gaining a different kind of esteem by making the class laugh at what were essentially gangster tactics.

The multiple and unfortunately conflicting forms were the brainchild of a reforming superintendent named Saul Callas, much admired for supposedly ferreting out bad teachers, considered by the press and much of the public to be the root of all evil in the educational system. What the Callas measures really did was divert teachers from actual teaching by burdening them with clerical work which simply could not fit reality. Callas had also earned praise for closing schools and making everybody reapply for their jobs, and —surprise! surprise— it always turned out that the innovational or “hard” teachers were bad and lost their jobs, while the teachers considered good enough to keep their jobs were those who just happened to be friends with influential administrators. This is the reason why teachers have always been suspicious of merit pay and cling to unions and civil service employment conditions; they know that in most schools politics and favoritism would decide who earned merit pay.

Jean sighed and tried and shook her head, trying to clear it of anger and frustration. She, like most other teachers, saw no solutions. It was not a question of too low expectations but of working at the highest level possible under the circumstances. It had been better, at least for teachers, before the best students had been skimmed of the top and sent to special schools. Those good students began to excel, which was great, but back in the classrooms of their former schools, poor students were now at the top, and disruptive students too often decided what happened in class. Without a core of normally achieving students to set standards and possibly

reach high expectations, motivation to do well in classes seemed to be missing.

Ah well, Jean thought, sighing, at least she could do what was possible, and at the moment that meant putting some order into the place where she worked. The classroom was untidier than usual because today she had not gone around and picked up the garbage students left stuffed in their desks or on the floor, mostly junk food wrappers and soda cans, some overturned and dripping out their sticky, sweet contents. The school sold the stuff in machines, to make money, and would not back up any teacher who objected to eating in class. Some kids would at least clean up their mess, but with others it was not worth starting a confrontation that could escalate into something worse. So she asked them not to eat and cleaned up after them when they did it anyway. Telling students it would affect their grades was useless when she was having trouble getting them to care enough about grades to come to class and do some work.

She picked up some candy wrappers, and threw them out, then stopped herself. The room was supposed to get a major cleaning over the holidays, which meant it might at least get some kind of cleaning, and so this once she left the mess. She was tired.

She sat down at her desk and looked at a pad of paper. On the first sheet she had written, "To-Do's for the Vacation." Several lines had been skipped, and then she had written "#1. Figure out how much I can afford to pay for Alice's gift and write down ideas about what to buy," and then on the next line, "#2. Go shopping for the gift on the way home from work." After some thought, she skipped another line and wrote, "#3. Call Alice and make sure she still wants to do Christmas together at her place on Christmas Eve."

Alice was her 25 year old daughter, and their relationship was better than it had been during Alice's high school and teen years, when Alice had gone from sweet to mean-spirited and rebellious, but it could not be called warm or close. They loved each other, and polite consideration was the rule for their interactions. But they shared few tastes or interests, which made it hard for Jean to think what to buy. Alice worked on Public Relations for a chemical corporation and made much more money than Jean. She bought herself anything she wanted,

making gift-buying still harder.

Jean had started the list at lunch but had gotten nowhere. She would have to look around when she got in the stores, but she didn't even know where to begin.

She had been a little nervous all day because she had more cash in her purse, stashed in the adjacent equipment storeroom, than she liked to bring to school. She intended to make a lot of small purchases after school, as well as to shop for Alice's present, and she didn't want to have to write a lot of checks or max out her credit cards. She was not always good at remembering to write down debit card purchases and had already forgotten to note two checks in her checkbook, just in December. She hadn't been able to balance the thing in months. She needed to get it right before she got herself overdrawn. She'd like to change banks to one offering a debit card, she thought, but she was afraid of forgetting to mark down those purchases too. After teaching, she always felt stressed, unable to focus and get herself to work on common tasks. All she wanted to do was escape into books or music or television, any activity in which she could forget about herself and her life. But during the break, she promised herself she would balance her checkbook. Her goal was to avoid more fees for being overdrawn, hard when her expenses almost equalled her income and her records were usually inaccurate in some small way that could cost a lot.

She sat staring into space, elbows on the desk, head propped up in her hands, unable even to decide what store to go to first to find a gift for Alice. She often felt like this at the end of a school day, too tired to move or think. She thought about a magazine article she had read on clinical depression, the kind of article where you could check yourself for symptoms and causes. She had them all, as far as she could see, fatigue and headaches, crying jags, recent negative life changes. Within the last year, her divorce had become final, after a long separation and a court battle over property. And her daughter had rented a place that was a long commute away, adding to the mental and emotional distance between them, as well as the miles. And she had gotten this job transfer, which was supposed to be an improvement over the last teaching assignment,

but which was getting even more unbearable than the one she had left. She sighed again.

She felt that every time she tried to do something to make her life better, it turned out to be making her life worse. Even completing her college degree and becoming a teacher had not put her ahead financially, or in any respect, of a friend at her first job after high school, a friend who had stayed at the same corporation and never gotten a degree. She would be getting together with Darla sometime during the break, but it would not be as much fun as it would be if Jean could stop comparing their lives. Darla had gone from being a secretary to being a director of sales, at a company whose chemical products hurt the environment, and she made twice as much money as Jean. She had a very happy marriage as well, never divorcing, while during the same time, Jean had failed in two marriages. Darla deserved to be happy and successful, Jean thought, in spite of the poisons she promoted, but did that mean that she herself did not deserve to be happy and successful? Or was life just a crapshoot, so that deserving something, whether rewards or punishment, was irrelevant? The American dream of achieving success and happiness through hard work was something she had observed in people like Darla but had never personally experienced.

The sound of someone coming down the hall broke her reverie. Don't be someone for me, she thought. If just one kid shows up, I'll have to make an attempt to do something constructive. But the kid won't want to. They all have makeup work to do, all need individual help, but she had already spent the day trying unsuccessfully to go that route with the few kids who showed up. Even more than the other days, this one was set aside for goofing off.

The footsteps stopped outside her door.

Damn, she thought, I should have shut that. It might not even be one of my students. She thought about the day before the Thanksgiving holidays, when a tall male who didn't necessarily appear to be a student and who was wearing a ski mask had come into her room during this same period. She had had only about four students out of 20 in the room that day, all looking as frightened as she was. The next week she had found out who it was, an 18 year old

freshman, fresh out of jail, and she had written up the incident, but there was no follow-up from the discipline office. There never was. At least his home room teacher had chewed him out after Jean described to the teacher what had happened.

Thinking of that, as the footsteps paused outside her door, she stood up, annoyed and a little nervous.

Tom Roberson, the student who walked in and stood smirking at her, was the last person she expected or wanted to see. Everyone called him Tom Cat, because he was always putting the moves on some girl.

Anyone who saw him for the first time would be surprised he was still in high school. He looked like a man, not a boy, partly because of a mustache and deliberately heavy stubble, combined with a shaved head covered with tatoos. And, in fact, she had heard he was almost nineteen years old, not quite a senior because of all the times he had dropped out and come back. Three of those breaks had been spent in jail, always for selling drugs.

He was well over six feet tall and surely weighed more than 200 pounds, seemingly all muscle. He had been on the football team briefly, and the girls seemed to go ga-ga over him. The rare times he came to class, even girls who were otherwise good students would stop their work, change their seat to be closer to his, and spend the period flirting with him, totally ignoring everything Jean said to them about the effect this might have on their grades. She chalked it up to hormones and pheromones controlling good judgment, something she had often observed in her own self, and not just when she was a young girl, either.

She had been told that as a freshman he had hung around with blacks, who called him "Redneck." Then he had become a skinhead who had to be told to keep Nazi swastikas out of the school. Nowadays he came on to black girls, Latino girls, all girls, sweet talking them all until somebody said something he didn't like. Then he treated the young ones the same way he treated Jean and other older female teachers who tried to get him to do what he didn't want to do, namely, his schoolwork. They were all bitches to be abused and threatened.

Tom apparently felt that it was his birthright to do as he pleased, anywhere he was, and at the beginning of the semester, before Jean had learned that it was useless, there had been some pretty frightening scenes between them, as she persisted in trying to teach the class without allowing him to disrupt it.

He claimed that she had ruined his chance for a football scholarship by giving him an "F" in Biology after the first ten weeks. In fact, he was barely literate, not, Jean thought, for any lack of intelligence but simply because his truancy and disruptive behavior in class had usurped all the time when he should have been learning, probably from the early grades on. He claimed Jean's class was the only one he wasn't passing, which could even be true, since teachers were under constant pressure both to give sports stars a break and not to fail too many students of any kind.

If he was capable of doing any kind of college work, or even acceptable high school work--make that *elementary* school work, he had never demonstrated that ability in her class. If he came at all, he was late and disruptive. He had either not taken or failed every test, and he had turned in maybe five percent of the work, tops, probably copied and sometimes not even in his own writing. His papers done under her eyes were unintelligible and seemed at perhaps third grade level. He had ignored all opportunities to make up work and tests. He rejected tutoring help. Yet he still blamed her, and not himself, for the "F." And why not, given that the public and press also blamed teachers for student failures—not that he knew that.

She knew very well that others passed students like him, especially if they were sports stars. She was always in trouble for failing too many and was baffled by the conflicting requirements to give good grades and at the same time have high expectations and standards and teach the normal curriculum. That only worked if students worked. And she knew very well, from talking to other teachers and from walking down the hall during her prep periods and seeing empty classes, that other teachers had the same problems with attendance and poor student work. What she didn't know is how they justified passing grades, what they wrote in

their attendance and grade books. Her own subject matter intensified the problem, since Biology was no longer a relatively simple matter of nature study but a challenge to the most diligent and talented students, with topics like cell chemistry and DNA.

When Jean tried to get Tom's mother involved, to get some work done and improvements in behavior, so Tom could pass, his mother just shook her head sadly and said that she had not been able to control him since he got in with a bad crowd in grammar school. His mother seemed to be a caring and conscientious person, someone who did a lot of volunteer work for her church. She said she prayed for Tom every day. I'm the one who needs the prayers, Jean thought when she heard that, trying to deal with Tom in class. But no, obviously the praying wasn't yielding results anyway.

She had written him up and buzzed for Security--who rarely responded--maybe a dozen times, when his abusive language and threatening manner demanded that she try something to get help. But the Security buzzer rang in the office of the football coach, who wore both hats and who was not on her side, to put it mildly.

Tom usually just laughed and slapped his thighs when she hit the buzzer. He had taken on both the mannerisms and the speech of the black thugs he had once hung around with—although he used them inconsistently, when he was trying to be cool, and it was a strange thing to see in a probably racist skinhead. "They not gonna do nothin'," he'd say, "I told them you prejudiced against football players." And sure enough, whenever she went down to the Security office in person, they'd told her there were complaints against her for being unfair to team members. The kids tried that method of negating the work of every teacher, white or black, who demanded civil behavior. "She don't like me," was the first thing a kid in trouble said. Any kid who used that defense in class got groans and laughter from his classmates, who knew the ploy for what it was, especially when racial prejudice was claimed. Sometimes black students even accused black teachers of being prejudiced against them. It was the equivalent of "My dog ate my homework," but unfortunately, in this school, the Security people believed it. Or maybe they

didn't, but found it a very convenient way to rid themselves of disciplinary work, as more and more teachers gave up calling on them. Security people, who if they were also teachers were generally athletic coaches, bought into the public's idea that if a student did poorly, it was because the teacher didn't motivate or teach well or wasn't fair. "She don't teach us nothing," was a common claim of students who worked as hard as they could to create classroom chaos that would prevent any teaching.

Much to her relief, Tom had stopped coming to class after getting the "F." Now here he was. She was pretty sure he hadn't come to get help or wish her a Merry Christmas. She eyed the Security buzzer, which was closer to him than to her.

Tom followed her glance and chuckled to see her looking at the buzzer.

"Go ahead," he said. "The coaches having a little party today. That office all locked up. Not that they would ever answer *you*. They know you prejudiced."

"Are you going to start coming to class?" she asked, knowing that he was not. "Would you like to know what you would have to do to pass?"

In any school system with normal standards, his "F" at ten weeks, his 40 or so absences, and his failure to do work or take tests would have made passing impossible. But in the public schools of the city of St. Richard, the pressure on teachers to pass kids never let up. Jean herself had been forced to change many "F's" to "D's"--considered by many students a fine grade. Under pressure, she had changed grades at other schools and passed kids whose faces she wouldn't recognize, they had come to class so rarely. It was the same here. Lots of teachers didn't have this experience, because, more realistic than she was, they knew what was wanted and inflated the grades the first time around.

So it was actually possible that Tom would pass this Biology class, that his coach would pressure to get his grade changed, by the administration if not by her, whether he did makeup work and tests or not.

Tom didn't bother to answer her question about trying to pass. Instead he started walking

around the room, picking things up and throwing them back down.

"If you're not coming back, you should turn in your textbook, so that a bill won't go on your record," she said. As if he cared, since, like so many other students, he had probably run up a huge tab in unreturned texts. To graduate, he'd have to pay up, but most of those who routinely failed to return books also failed to pass their classes.

He laughed again, then picked up a book someone had left lying on the counter in front of the windows. "Wanna book?" he asked. He threw it hard toward her, knocking over a cup full of pens and pencils on her desk. It all clattered to the floor, the book cracking away from its cover. A plant had been tipped over as well, and dirt spilled over the top of her desk.

She moved toward the Security buzzer. She had to give it a try. There was nothing else she could think of to do.

"Press it, " Tom said. "Be my guest. I can wait."

She reached it and pressed it hard, over and over, so that if anyone was there they might get the idea that this was urgent. Although there was nothing unusual about a student threatening a teacher--it happened every day, and on some days it happened almost every period, and in the halls in between classes as well--the lack of witnesses today made it seem more frightening. Come to think of it, though, witnesses usually backed up kids who were lying, not teachers; it was safer for them that way. The "hard" teachers were the most frequent victims. The more diligently a teacher worked to keep order and engage students in the subject matter, expecting attention and work and trying to deliver appropriate consequences, the more students tested and maligned them.

Tom perched on a desk, relaxed, his arms folded, enjoying himself. He had a big smile on his face. It was obvious that he knew from the way she was hitting the buzzer that he had her scared.

Jean stared at the intercom, waiting for it to crackle and respond. Nothing. Minutes passed.

"Okay," Tom said, standing up, not smiling anymore. "I came to get something you took away from me."

She thought she knew what he meant. It was his ID card. But she hadn't actually taken it away. He'd left it, and she'd given it to someone in the Security office, who must have given it back to him. Otherwise--at least in theory--he couldn't enter the school through the door that had a metal detector, the door all students were supposed to use. Of course the high school had about a dozen other doors that were locked to outsiders and were not used as entrances or exits. Except, that is, all day long when kids sneaked out of them or opened them for someone outside. The school knew but didn't have enough guards to cover it all.

"I told you I gave your ID to the Security office, and you must have gotten it back or you wouldn't be in the building," Jean said, keeping up the pretence that things functioned as they were supposed to.

"Bullshit," he said, kicking over a desk. "Anyway, what I'm looking for is a hat you made me take off. I don't know why I ever did what you told me to."

She thought about that and then remembered. There was an unenforced school rule not to wear hats inside, but she left it alone, preferring to concentrating on enforcing behaviors more related to learning. He had taken off his hat when he got hot and then forgot it. "You left it here," she said, "and I put it in the Lost and Found."

"Bullshit," he said again. "That was my special hat." He picked up a chair and tossed it in her direction. It fell within a foot of her shoes.

"That was six weeks ago," she said. "I kept it in the room for two weeks, but you never came back."

"Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit," he yelled, knocking over or throwing everything he came in contact with, constantly getting closer to her.

He was between her and the door into the hall. She backed away, thinking that surely there must be some teacher left who could hear the commotion and investigate. She thought

about trying to run past him. No, he'd be sure to grab her or hit her. He played football, and she was a graying slightly overweight empty-nester with back and knee problems. Her only hope was that when he was done trashing the room he would leave.

She edged backward a bit, toward the storeroom door, suddenly realizing that it was not padlocked as usual but standing wide open. She had left it that way when she took down the Christmas decorations and put them in there. Her purse was in there too, with all her Christmas money, a few hundred dollars, and her briefcase containing things like her grade book.

Tom was keeping his eyes on her, waiting, she thought, for her to react to his violence, to scream or cry. She tried to look calm, not wanting to give him the pleasure of seeing her any more fearful than she already looked. But she was trembling, and the more she thought about that storeroom the more frightened she became.

The door to it could be shut from the classroom but wouldn't lock from that side without a padlock, which was currently sitting on top of her desk. It was dawning on her that there were more things in that room than her purse, or the grade book, that she didn't want Tom to see, things like strong acids and other chemicals, animals in formaldehyde for dissection or display, dissecting tools, ancient stuff from decades back, when the school had actually functioned as a school. She had not been able to work with any of it with her students, except to do demonstrations, because it was too dangerous and it required at least one working sink in the room, something she didn't have.

If she had dared to try labs or demonstrations under these teaching conditions, she could have used the sink in the storeroom, but even then she wouldn't have wanted to allow kids in that room. Besides the dangerous supplies, and ones that would tempt them to do stupid things, like the animals preserved for dissection, there were a lot of personal things in the room, like her radio and hot plate and coffee pot, and all the personal stuff and food in her desk there, squirreled away for the breakfasts, lunches, and prep periods that she took in the storage room, for lack of a better place.

The storeroom, which kids were curious about anyway, used to connect to a lab in the room to the west of hers. This room where she tried to teach was smaller and packed with portable desks and chairs, more of a lecture room. The connection to the former lab, now another teacher's classroom, was now blocked with storage materials, and the entrance into her classroom from the storage room functioned like an outside door. If you were in the storage room with the door closed, you needed to use a key to get out, or else have someone in the classroom open the door for you.

The key, however, was lost. She had found all this out one embarrassing day when she wanted to prepare a demonstration lab while another teacher--who had to find other rooms to use after a kid started a destructive fire in her room's wastebasket--was using her classroom. Jean had shut the door for privacy and then realized she couldn't get out and started pounding on the door. Luckily, the other teacher heard the noise just as she was leaving the room. Jean's face was red, but both teachers thought it was pretty funny. No kids were present at that moment, thank goodness; they had gotten tired of waiting for the passing bell to ring and had walked out on their teacher a minute or two early.

After that, she was careful when she went in the storeroom to put something like a book in the doorway, to prevent the door from closing. She glanced at the doorway. Yes, there the book was, a fifty year old and now shockingly incorrect earth science text still stored on her shelves.

Tom had noticed her edging toward the storeroom and was starting to move toward it himself. If he goes in there, Jean thought, I'll kick the book out of the way and slam the door. With him safely locked in, I'll call 911. He'll mess with things, but he can't go anywhere with them, and he'll know he won't be able to deny anything he does in there.

As soon as she thought it, she realized it probably wouldn't work. Tom would do tremendous damage, maybe even accidentally kill himself with the chemicals and alcohol in there. He often said that he didn't care all that much if he went back to jail, where he had a lot of

friends, so he would do whatever he felt like, with no thought of consequences. But when the police came he would lie and accuse her of assault. Ludicrous as it was to think someone her size could physically overcome someone his size, without using a weapon, the school would back him up, not her, and she'd be out of a job. Right now, being out of this job didn't sound so bad, but it would when she didn't have any money.

Besides, her purse was in that room, with all her Christmas money, her credit cards, her driver's license, her paycheck stub. He could copy her information, even if he didn't steal, although she doubted he'd think of it. He could burn the place down if he started messing with the chemicals. Then she'd probably get charged with manslaughter.

She walked as calmly as she could over to the storeroom and stood in the doorway. "You know," she said, "I'm going to go straight to the police to report this, not to the school. Are you still on probation?"

"None of your fuckin' business," he said, but he stopped throwing and kicking things and stood looking at her.

"You know what I think?" he said next. "I think the bitch has something in that room she don't want me to see." He walked up close to her, face to face, except she only came up to his neck. He looked over her head into the room, then laughed once again. He was thoroughly enjoying this whole thing.

"You worried about that cheap little purse, bitch?" he asked. "Nothin' there I want. I got more money than you anyway. I make more in one night dealin' drugs than you make in a month. I seen what you drivin'. No, I don't want that little plastic bag. What I want is my special hat." He gave her a little shove, so she was part way in the room. "Maybe it's in here."

"It's not," she said. "I told you, it's in the Lost and Found. I know it's still there because I took something else there this morning." That bit about this morning was a lie, but just on the off chance he really wanted the hat, she tried it.

"Naw, you not gettin' rid of me that easy. I can't leave you alone for the holidays, can I?"

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

