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An Exercise In Discipline

I SHOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN IN THE LINE UP IN THE FIRST PLACE. I was only five. It's just that when I saw my brother, two years older, but two inches shorter, standing in that long queue and looking apprehensive, I felt I just had to join in. It was Tuesday morning, and a reluctant line of school children were shuffling a slow, sad path to the girls' bathroom, or, as my knowledgeable class-mates informed me, "De Girls' Lavatory", to be flogged. What had we done to deserve this? I don't know about the others, but my brother and I had been absent from school on Monday, and we had not brought in a written excuse. The headmistress was very particular about breaches of the school rules such as these.

I was breathing fast. I had never been flogged by the headmistress before, but I had heard many awesome tales about the strap. It was black, it was brown, it had stripes, it had dots, and, when it moved through the air, it would whistle. I started rubbing my hands up and down the sides of my navy blue tunic. You see, having joined the line because I felt if he was going to be punished, I should be as well, having committed the same crime, I was now having serious doubts about this thing. Actually the real reason of my fear was that I was about to be flogged and I had not had time to prepare.

The preparation was one of the school's best kept secrets. From the eldest pupil to the youngest knew that a strategically placed exercise book would significantly lessen the effect of a heavy strap on a juvenile behind. This procedure was far more successful with the boys in their, in most cases, tight khaki pants. The girls, who had to wear huge puff-legged bloomers to match their tunics, had to be careful in case the exercise book shifted elsewhere in the voluminous folds, thus defeating the whole purpose of the exercise.

We were there, the line had fused into a huddle in the confines of the "girls' lavatory", with its dreary yellow walls, cold concrete floor and variety of smells doing battle with Jeyes Fluid. The headmistress, Miss Barrett, was already in position near the pipes, waiting for us. "A woman's got to do what a woman's got to do," is what she said.

The ritual was the same. One of the sentenced would emerge from the knot and face the judge. The judge was prepared. "And what did you do?" she would drone. The order was always the same. Silence. Then the strap, as predicted by the veterans of this procedure, would whistle through the air and find its quarry. The number of stripes depended on the severity of the crime.

The practiced eyes and ears of the prisoners who had not yet received their sentence could tell who and who had not had time to sneak in an exercise book. There were two clues: one, the particular sound of the thwack when it landed, and two, the degree of pain on the face of the freshly chastised.

"And what did you do?"

"Mumble, mumble."

"Turn round and bend down."

THWACK. Dismissed.

"And what did you do?"

"Mumble, mumble, mumble."

"Turn round and bend down."

THWACK, THWACK.

It was the "THWACK, THWACK, THWACKS" you really felt sorry for.

The headmistress was carrying on a brisk trade on that particular morning. Our confessions in exchange for her "THWACKS". The gang diminished, soon it would be my turn, but just then, a short stocky boy named Antny crept forward. I gasped. Antny, in his natural state, already had a pre-padded look, and the older boys took delight in landing swift kicks on his round behind. I had witnessed this myself at break and at lunch. But today something was wrong. We who remained in the diminished group nudged each other and whispered frantically as we caught sight of Antny's altered rear end. What on earth did he think he was doing? He stood there face to face with the cleanser of sins, and she could not see what was obvious to our amazed eyes. Antny's round derriere was square. Our whispers grew more urgent. "Quiet, please," barked Miss Maycock. Miss Maycock was second in command to Miss Barrett, in case the chief's iron arm gave out. The whispers ceased, but the nudging went on. How could we suppress our emotion when our secret, our only defense against Miss Barrett's strap was about to be exposed? We were barely drawing enough breath to remain conscious. We could feel our hearts beating. I, for one, could actually hear mine: THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP.

Barrett: "And what did you do?"

Antny: "Mumble, mumble, mumble."

Mumble, mumble, mumble.

Mumble, mumble, mumble.

Barrett: "Turn round and bend down."

Prisoners: "Ahhhh!"

Antny turned around and bent down, and peeping out through the frayed khaki cloth of Antny's school pants was a picture of the Queen of England. Miss Barrett's arm stopped mid-strike. She went into shock. The arm still raised, she bent over, left fingers spread wide, and pushed firmly against Antny's short pants.

She then did something unprecedented in the history of the school. Miss Barrett hooked her forefinger in the elastic waist band of the khaki pants and pulled, peered inside, and bent down to get a better view. We stood as still as statues and breathed as one.

Without relinquishing her hold on the elastic, Miss Barrett reared up, back ramrod straight. The pressure on Antny's crotch must have been unbearable. "Miss Maycock, come over here". Miss Maycock came. "Please pull out these exercise books". Miss Maycock pulled. Antny had stuffed in seven. All blue, with pictures of Her Majesty on the front and the times tables on the back. Single lined and double lined, squared, old, new, but all warm and squashed were hauled out to the light of day and tossed on the concrete floor. SMACK, SMACK, SMACK, SMACK, SMACK, SMACK,SMACK.

You would have to have been made of cast iron not to feel sorry for Antny that day, even though, by this back-up venture he had effectively spoilt things for the whole school. Antny not only had on a frayed khaki pants but he, like a lot of other school boys, was not wearing under pants. What? Shirt, pants, shoes, socks and under pants too? Many mothers could supply only the bare necessities. Some children did not even have school socks.

We witnessed another unprecedented event. Miss Barrett's arm actually grew tired with the amount of THWACKS she laid on Antny's bottom that day. I believe he would have preferred a life sentence. But that was not all. She stood there massaging her right shoulder, her eyes locked with Miss Maycock's eyes, and then simultaneously her optic organs fastened on us, the accused.

No words were needed. They moved as one towards the prisoners left in the dock, as we stepped backwards slowly and pressed our bodies against the cold yellow walls.

The avenging angels drew closer. Miss Barrett stuck to her tried and tested formula. "Turn round and bend down," she thundered. We obeyed.

Bottoms presented we waited while our elasticized bands were pulled and a thorough search ensued. Out came more blue exercise books with Queen Elizabeth on the front and "Thirty Days Hath September" on the back. They were tossed away contemptuously, and landed in various undignified positions on the concrete floor. SMACK, SMACK, SMACK and then THWACK, THWACK, THWACK. Thank goodness I had not had time to prepare because all the padded behinds got an extra dose.

A new rule was added to the already weighty list and read to us at prayers the next morning. "All pupils will be searched before being flogged. Any exercise books, or any other padding, found in school uniforms will be confiscated, and the punishment will be doubled."

Antny made himself scarce at break and lunch for weeks to come because the whole school knew who was responsible for this new rule. After the last encounter with the strap, which broke his tender skin, he was in no condition to be exposed to the bigger boys' shoe leather. 🐾