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TEACHER'S PET

by

Yvonne Carpenter

The inside of a cat's ear, I remember thinking; Darrell had the greasy, unwashed look of the interior of a cat's ear as Mrs. Sluggs led him into the kindergarten room. She firmly held his limp arm as if it were an animal's lead rope. He carefully avoided contact with the woman; the arm was limp; he had disowned it. Its limpness contrasted with the excited jerking motions of his head. With his dirty jeans torn at the knee and untucked plaid shirt short a button, Darrell looked as if he belonged in a basement rather than my sunny new classroom.

Darrell looked at me out of the corner of his left eye and grinned foolishly. His eyes were so badly coordinated that this was the only angle from which he could focus them. One year ago the old Mrs. Sluggs had insisted that Darrell's optometrist wanted him to stay out of school another year for his eyes to mature. His eyes were no better; he wore no glasses; I realized he had seen no doctor.

"Don't think he is ready but I don't want trouble with the law." Food spots marked the largest rise of her double knit dress. Her dark hair was thick but flat to her head. Her knuckles and dimpled elbows were darker than the rest of her skin.

Darrell broke from her hold. He ran to the toy shelf and cleared it with one sweep. He picked up a blue wooden man with a red hat and held it to his nose as if to eat it.

"Here, please, complete this enrollment form. Did Darrell's doctor think he could be helped by glasses?" I saw Darrell push down another student but decided to deal first with the woman. I wanted her out of the room.

"I'm a poor woman, barely getting by. But I try to do the best that I can by Darrell and our foster children, sharing

what I have."

"Will you pick Darrell up, or is he to ride the bus?" The other twelve students gathered in the center to watch Darrell as he explored the perimeters of the room. They had arrived only minutes before this erratic sprite.

"I'll be at work. I'm an aide at the hospital to make enough money for food. That and our garden keep food on the table. Put him on the bus."

By the time Mrs. Sluggs was out the door, Darrell had dismantled all of the displays carefully set up for this opening school day and was pulling on the cabinet doors.

"Darrell, this is our fish tank. You may look at them all you wish. We do not put anything in the fish's tank." I removed the wooden block from the tank. "Can you see the big yellow fish?" I touched Darrell's arm to direct his attention to the fish. He jerked as if I had hit him. Both of Darrell's eyes were crossed; the left one looked to the right and the right eye to the left. To see the fish he turned his head and looked out of the corner of one eye. His dark oily hair stuck to his head; it looked like spikes on his forehead. His dark, unscrubbed skin had an underlying pallor

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which I attributed to malnourishment.

The fish entertained and calmed him as it was to do many times during that semester.

"Each of us will have a special desk, a place where we can keep our things. Darrell, this will be your desk." I directed each of the thirteen kindergarteners to a desk. I showed them their prereading workbook and we were looking through it.

"Mrs. Johnson, I believe you have lost something." Mr. Bradley, the principal, was at the door. He held Darrell, twisting and snarling, by the arm. "He just opened the door and walked in my office. See if you can't keep up with your students."

At playtime, I pulled Darrell off another student whom he was choking. As class ended he came to me and said, "I think I am going to like it here."

This pattern remained for the first three weeks. At the good times Darrell watched the class's activity from the corner of his eye while he sat before the fish tank or pattered in the playhouse. He could not see the work sheets; I gave him a wooden puzzle or a quiet activity to do while the other students worked with pencil and paper. He was fascinated by the books. He would slowly study each page of the large Childcraft books, his nose touching each picture. At the bad times he smashed toys and attacked his fellow students.

At all times he had to be watched constantly or he would slip out of my door and open any other in the building. Walking to the bus after school or to the playground at recess, I held his hand to keep him from wandering into other rooms. His violence lessened as he developed a transition pattern. He would come into the room and go to a corner. He

would sit there and observe, quieten and prepare for the academic world.

He came eagerly to school and he enjoyed talking to me. He told me how fast he rode the horse, about the ducks he saw at the creek or when his cousins were coming. It was as if he had not been allowed to say anything. He once told me his dogs liked for him to talk to them.

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Darrell's erratic head motions, lack of personal hygiene, and violence toward the other students led me to suspect some retardation as well as neglect. I had little hope of doing any more than taming this wild animal. He seemed to have experienced little contact with people and that little was negative. I resolved to give Darrell as much as I could during each 2½ hour session to help him to cope with his life. At the same time I had twelve other students, more civilized students, to prepare for first grade. I promised myself I would not take Darrell's problems home with me.

During the third week of school I began to doubt my first impression. I commented on the oil derrick being constructed in the field close to the school. Using technical words which I still do not comprehend, he told how his brothers put up an oil rig. He explained how they broke it down to add more pipe and how they prepared the completed hole for production. I knelt beside him to listen, not touching. His explanation did not fit the picture of retardation.

Using the resources available in a small town, I asked my neighbor about the Sluggs family. "They are bad ones, right out of the hills," she said as we shared a Saturday morning cup of coffee. "They brought a lot of hill ways with them. Nothing wrong with hard work for kids. But they treat those foster kids like slave labor. That garden she is so proud of, those kids work in it all day every day. Three acres of stoop labor under the summer sun. And that fat ole man, story is, he ain't no better than he ought to be with girls that get sent there."

"What about Darrell?"

"Nobody knows where he came from. He just appeared with the Sluggs woman, looked to be about 2½ years old, first time anybody saw him. Said they adopted him. Don't know where they got ahold of him, but I know it wouldn't bear too close a look into."

We had a daily milk break. I made sure Darrell got all of the chocolate milk that he could drink. He saw it pleased me when he drank the milk, and he liked to please me.

I talked with the County Health Department people about Darrell's eyes. Children's Hospital in the state capitol agreed to fix them free of cost.

I called Mrs. Sluggs. "We are poor people. We can't afford any doctor bills."

"I know. This is free. Just sign these forms. They can fix Darrell's eyes."

"This is all I have to do, sign these papers?"

"Yes, fill it out and sign it."

She worked through the statistics: Darrell's age, address, her name. She left blank his date and place of birth. Reaching the line to sign as legal guardian, she laid down the pen.

"I don't trust those doctors in the charity hospital. If we do something, we want to use the doctors in Amarillo."

"But they are very good doctors, the best children's specialists in the state."

"I don't trust state doctors. We will just wait until we can afford to pay our own doctor." She was adamant.

When I voiced my frustration in the teacher's lounge, Lydia Wrightman, the seventh-grade math teacher spoke up.

"Don't you remember? The state took a foster child from the Sluggs family. She will be very leery of any state programs. It was two years ago. Were you here then?"

That had been my first year to teach at Anthon. I recalled the story.

"Are you ready?" the teacher had asked the seventh-grade boy. It was a day in late December.

"I can't take it any more. I have to get out."

"Did he beat you?"

"Yes."

"Will you say that when I ask you again?"

"Yes."

She took him to the local doctor. The boy repeated his statement and his wounds were photographed. He told the welfare worker he had been beaten.

"If I leave, I will get a Christmas present. I just know I will," he said as they waited in the hall outside the doctor's office.

"What would you like, if you got a present?" his teacher asked.

"Some socks. I would like some new socks."

The boy did not return to his foster home or Anthon School. The State Welfare Department placed him in another home in another community. Remaining in the Sluggs home were another foster child, Carla, age twelve, and a preschool boy, Darrell, rumored to be adopted.

One of the activities I sent home for the students to do with their parents was an interest inventory. Knowing Darrell would not receive help, I called him to my

desk.

"And what is your favorite book?"

With no hesitation, he replied, "The Three Pigs."

"And why is it your favorite?" I asked expecting to hear how this violent child liked the wolf who huffed and puffed.

"Because it is the only one I have."

Shamed and shaken, I went on, "What is the thing you like to do best?"

"I like to get on Babe, the old horse, and ride as fast as I can. Butch and Pup, the dogs, run with us."

"What is your favorite time of day?"

"When I wake up beside Butch and Pup and before I go into the house for breakfast."

"You don't sleep with the dogs" I said in disbelief.

"Yeah, I do," he assured me while grinning his silly, cross-eyed grin. Was he teasing me?

I twice questioned Darrell's niece who had been in my class the year before. Both times she replied, "Oh silly! No, he don't. Nobody sleeps with dogs."

I dropped the subject but Darrell looked and smelled like he slept with the dogs.

Darrell came to my desk complaining of something in his hair. I looked and saw a fat, gray tick attached to his scalp. A tick is black until it has fed on its host and becomes bloated with blood. I soaked the tick with alcohol on a cotton ball and pulled the parasite off carefully to avoid leaving the head in his skin. To kill it, I stepped on it. The tick exploded with a sickening pop. Darrell's blood made a circle on the paper which had held the tick. He saw the tick upset me. So daily he would inspect himself on the way to school. He always proudly told me when he found ticks and killed them as I had shown him.

One December day, talk turned to Christmas and Santa. When someone finally asked "Do you believe in Santa?" instead of "is there a Santa?" I answered truthfully, "yes, I believe in Santa." I avoided the other question.

"That's how I am going to do it! Bang!" he said excited and pleased with himself. "That's how I am going to kill myself."

As Darrell watched and listened he became restless. The next morning, his transition did not work. He did not make the change from his outside world to the world of academics. He became increasingly agitated. He grabbed the girl beside him by the neck and shook her. He raced around the room as if he had never been here before.

At recess he refused to move. He lay on the ground beside me. At break time he would not drink his milk. He put his face at table level, his nose to the milk. Suddenly his arm shot out, index finger extended. "Bang" he said as the milk spilled on the table.

"Darrell, what is wrong? Why are you angry with me? Why are you trying to make me mad?"

"That's how I am going to do it! Bang!" he said excited and pleased with himself. "That's how I am going to kill myself."

"What!"

"I am gonna get the rifle from the closet and kill myself."

"But Darrell, we need you. We need you to help take care of the fish."

"I'll get the shell outa the drawer. I'll put the shell in the chamber, put the gun between my eyes and pull the trigger."

"Darrell, we would miss you so much. We love you and want you to be with us."

"You lied. There is no Santa Claus. He is not bringing you nothing. And he is not bringing me nothing. There is no Santa!"

Twelve pairs of young eyes watched us.

"It's like a game. Oh, Darrell, pretend. If you could have a present from Santa, what would it be?"

"A truck. The truck in Cassidy's window. With a little trailer and a boat behind."

"Let me dry your eyes. Let's clean this up and go back to class."

Darrell got his truck. He knew where it came from and I knew he knew. It was a silent joke between us.

Darrell's brothers, the Sluggs' natural sons, were arrested on drug charges. They were tall, swarthy men who resembled their mother. They had children the age of Darrell. A farmer saw them slashing the tires on the witness' car. He found his show pigs with their throats cut the day of the hearing.

I went to the local Lions Club, the Kiwanis Club, and my father to finance the operation for Darrell's eyes. People were reluctant to donate when they heard who the needy child was. I explained the assistance would go only to the child, not the family. I secured pledges for Darrell's operation with the out-of-state doctor.

I told Mrs. Sluggs the money was available. She was to bring me the bills and they would be paid.

Mrs. Sluggs brought Darrell in after his stay in the hospital. He was the cleanest I had seen him. He was wearing glasses.

"You know, they said he was seeing two of everything. Can you imagine that?" I could.

The Sluggs family did not use the funds to pay for the operation; they took care of it themselves. Not long after the operation, Darrell came to school one day with his glasses held together with tape. He was very upset. He had tried to repair with tape the damage done in his fall from the horse. Mrs. Sluggs asked for assistance replacing the glasses. That was all of the financial aid they utilized.

Coloring became Darrell's favorite activity. He scribbled like a child half his age, delighted at the visual process. He had to acquaint himself with a world he had felt and heard but not see.

I asked the students what was the smallest thing they could imagine. After seven years of teaching kindergarten, I expected answers like a mouse or a kitten. Darrell answered, "An atom." I asked what was the largest thing he could imagine. He replied, "The universe."

The service center psychologist tried to test Darrell. He scored too low to rank. He would chatter about where he was or what he saw but he would not answer the questions. Next year, first grade, he would be with an older, less patient, teacher and 25 students at once. I introduced him to the special education teacher.

Two afternoons a week he went to her room. He liked that. She gave him candy and he got to find out what was behind one more closed door.

In addition to seeing physical objects, Darrell now seemed to see clearly his social position. Before he had defended himself by seeming retarded. But it was a general defense. He didn't realize there was any life except the rough one he lived. With better vision and contact with other children, he knew for the first time that everyone did not live as he lived. He became angry.

In April Darrell developed sores around his mouth. I purchased impetigo medicine. When he arrived I would disinfect and medicate his sores. The lesions did not clear; they spread over his body. I called Mrs. Sluggs every other day until she saw I was as determined about this as I had been about his eyes. She took Darrell to the doctor.

Darrell was in the hospital for a week. Vague talk circulated of cancer, high blood count, and blood disease. He attended little school for the rest of the year.

I transferred to another school at the end of the school year. When I visited with my former colleagues during the next year, they commented how much they missed me. "We had to hire an extra teacher just to keep Darrell in class. That is a fulltime job." Darrell had taken up room inspection again, and the first grade teacher did not see it as a sign of curiosity and intelligence.

At the tri-county speech contest, a year and a half after I left Anthon, I heard of his death. Darrell was killed by a shot from a pellet gun. He and a ten-year-old nephew were said to be alone at the time.

He suffered no more abuse; he did not die slowly of cancer; he did not die of rot lying in the dog pen. Did he carry out his early plan? Or did his hospitalization finally raise too many questions about his condition? Details of the death, as of his birth, are very sketchy, but he knows is beyond one more door.

* * * * *

I now teach in a private preschool. All of the students are present on tuition basis; kids like Darrell don't attend. It is an unreal world, a sterile environment. Some of my students suffer from receiving too many things and not enough affection. Some of them have been roughly handled. But all of them have someone to look after their physical needs; they each have enough to eat and a place to sleep. Seldom do I go to bed worrying about one of them, and I do not dream about any of them.

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happen to love her best." Miss Mary said, "It may be apple sauce, but it keeps things clipping."

Miss Mary was known over the state for her leadership in the English Council which she served as Secretary. She was featured speaker at O.E.A. meetings, banquets, and graduation exercises. Among her other responsibilities were Latin council representatives and Harmon County O.E.A. President.

Oklahoma honored her Teacher of the

Year. Writing poetry was one of Miss Mary's hobbies. She was a member of several groups in this field. At a meeting of Burritt College alumni one of her poems about mountains was read as a surprise to her. "That received more applause than did Riley's 'That Old Sweet-heart of Mine'," Miss Mary laughingly said. In fact she always laughed when she spoke of her poems.

A portrait of Miss Mary hangs in the Hollis High School hall as a gift from the Hollis Alumni Association.

A community-wide event was held in Miss Mary's honor upon retirement; there was standing room only. This was honoring Miss Mary and Miss Sallie; they were presented a silver service from the Sallie Gillentine faculty and pupils. Whether teachers are born, not made, or vice versa, the Gillentine sisters qualified on either score, pupils agreed.

(adapted from PLANNING THE ROUTE, publication of the Harmon County Historical Society.)