

## HOW MISS PLOVER HANDLED BOXER POOP

*without using gloves*

Miss Plover continued lecturing as she circled the classroom on pointy little legs that held up a stout body. "Pimwe wanted to go hunting eggs with his mother and his sister, but why couldn't he?" We listened for the answer. Stevie Whickens and I were the last two fourth graders in the last two seats in the last row – next to the row of shelves mounted over the clattering heaters, next to the first-floor windows.

A few seconds went by before Stevie raised his hand and, unbidden, asked, "Can I go to the toilet?" – which Miss Plover answered with a glare, interrupted as she were in reliving her pre-historic American life with Pimwe, maybe as his sister, I wasn't sure. She broke off her own reverie, momentarily, and answered Stevie with a question: "Is that the way we ask, Steven? What is it that you really want?"

"I just want to get cooled off," Stevie answered truthfully.

"I think we all would like that, wouldn't we, class?"

The class, including Stevie and I, mumbled acknowledgment. I glanced outside toward the playground, not wanting to appear too anxious to be anywhere else, but wanting it just the same. My glance was too long, though, because, as Miss Plover was circling and asking about Pimwe's wish to go egg hunting, I missed the fact that she was directing the question at me.

"David?"

I spun around on my smooth, hardwood seat, expecting to see her abreast of Row One, for I knew she had continued circumnavigating the room. Instead, she was now nearly directly behind us all, her voice thrown by the maze of free-standing wall panels in the rear corners of the classroom. I spun further as she continued to prowl.

"I want to get cooled off too," I answered, reversing direction in order to face her when she shortly came

alongside my desk.

"Why couldn't Pimwe accompany his mother and sister?" Miss Plover bore down on me from behind, then placed her bejeweled hand on the back of my seat, one protruding diamond digging into my shoulder blade. Stevie was turned full around, facing me expectantly. Miss Plover widened her eyes at him, which meant "Face front!" He did.

Why couldn't Pimwe go egging with the women? I thought of my mother and sisters, and of the things they sometimes went off to do together. I could never imagine wanting to go. I thought of my dad, scraping and hammering and sometimes cussing in the basement night after night, and I thought, That's where I'd rather be. Sometimes, when he occasionally had a bottle open and didn't see, I'd get to sniff his beer. At other times I'd learn a verse of a sea chantey.

I could see why Pimwe might want to stay home, but I couldn't guess why he was made to stay home. I shrugged. Miss Plover left my side and, turning her back on the class, leaned far over the shelves covering the heater. She grasped a window handle with a glittering hand, turned it, and yanked the pane inward on its lower hinge pins. As she leaned, Stevie shot a glance up the backs of her legs and rolled his eyes toward me after I'd seen where his eyes had been.

It was a "Ha-cha-cha!" look that he gave me, for neither of us at age ten was interested in the upper thighs of a forty-something sausage like Miss Plover.

The teacher missed his signal altogether. She must have, because she never let anything pass without at least a silent critique.

She continued her tour around the room. "Sylvia?" she asked, meaning to insult me, her second brightest student – er, pupil, as she called each of us – by making her brightest pupil show me up.

Sylvia answered something which I have long since forgotten, but it had been correct. I didn't even look at her. But I smelled her, two seats up and two rows over. Sylvia usually smelled like pears, which was and still is

my second most-hated fruit. If anything more continued coming out of Miss Plover's mouth I wasn't aware of it for a couple of minutes, and then, in front of me, Stevie began to shiver.

I don't know how I understood it then, but it was clear that Miss Plover had calculated this result. For it was late March, 1961, on the eastern plains of the upper Midwest, in a school with some sort of centralized heating system that wasn't turned off until May and could be regulated only by precise use – and not overuse – of open windows.

Miss Plover was probably a very good teacher, one like we need more of today. A very good disciplinarian she certainly was, but also an effective marshal of ten-year-olds, a sternly even-tempered lady, and, in fact, a friend and confidant to a few pupils who truly needed her for that, for instance, Cheryl, who cried a lot.

So Stevie was shivering, and I, closest to the window but dressed warmer than he, was amused but also growing alarmed that it could become cold enough to affect me, too. I darted furtive looks at the open window, estimating whether I could find a way surreptitiously to shut it part way. One of these glances caught a movement on the gravel playground. A large, yellow-brown dog, short-haired and with a pushed-in face, was angling purposefully toward the once-grassy, now-muddy berm around the building. Its sideways gait reminded me how stupid dogs are, especially any with an ugly nose and no tail. The dog paused only a second or two to raise its head and probe the fecund, moist air with a crumpled black nose, as it identified the people sounds from the classroom window.

I followed all of this in my excellent peripheral vision while holding Miss Plover's gaze, her eyes glued to mine, over a period of several long seconds. She was still holding forth about Pimwe, the loincloth-covered boy our age who didn't have to attend school because eight hundred years ago they had no schools in America.

I wondered whether I'd care to trade my school for a loincloth. I rather doubted it. My imagination conjured a scene with Stevie and me in loincloths, showing our butts from the side and risking even more exposure in the crisp March wind, standing barefoot on the gravelly school playground but with the building totally

vanished, and with Cheryl and Sylvia and half a dozen other girls facing us and snickering. Of course, they all wore the chest-covering, knee-length leather dresses, albeit sleeveless and unadorned, that were depicted in our book. If they too were made to wear loincloths, that would have evened things up a bit. They probably would never come outside, then, because... well, because I couldn't quite picture Sylvia that close to naked. Not when I was ten, anyway. By eighth grade I was much better at it, and I even tried pears just once that year.

Finally Miss Plover released me and locked on Larry, across the room. That's when the first hint of a disturbing odor wafted under my nose. I must have been first in the room to smell it, and I turned automatically toward the window, uttering "Unh!"

"Miss Plover!" I went on impulsively, cutting her off in what amounted to an unforgivable faux pas. "Can we clo...?"

"Enh! Dog poop!" Stevie interjected too loudly.

The class broke up, some laughing, some sucking in breath as if offended, and every pupil present looking all about and then at Miss Plover to see what she'd do to control this outburst.

"Yes!" said the teacher pleasantly but more loudly than anyone else. "Yes, it is! But we have a more polite way to refer to something even as unpleasant as that."

By this time I was on my feet and making for the window.

"David, leave the window alone!" said Miss Plover, but not quite so I believed she meant it, I guess. I kept on. And then the voice of authority spoke: "David! Leave the window open. We need the air. You and Steven may go to the boys' room and get the supplies you'll need to go outside the classroom and clean up the feces. While you're gone, we'll finish our social studies lesson and you can both stay after school to learn what we have covered."

I had lived since September in awe and admiration of Stevie Whickens. He had a derisive laugh that stung you at first and then included you almost immediately afterward. He was the first with the one liners. A pretty

good pupil, and sickeningly polite sometimes, he was never caught (by the wrong people) making those sly comments of his under his breath. He was lithe and quick, the best over-the-fence kicker in kickball, and the only one who could completely climb the elm tree on the corner of the school property.

But Stevie's greatest talent was the ability to tuck the tip of his tongue behind his upper incisors and spit, at will, from underneath it, a silent, fine, powerful jet of saliva. I once saw him nail a fly with it in the air, I swear!

Until this day I had always suspected that Stevie simply tolerated me. The acknowledged class clown, he could choose his friends. He seldom sought me out directly, but never objected to my presence. I was always honored to be in his company, and I considered it an enviable distinction to be in the seat next after his in class.

The two of us exited the classroom by the rear, denying the others the opportunity to stare at us as we left. In the boys' room Stevie was nearly in tears at the prospect ahead. Neither of us owned a dog, but it was my own experience that I always owned the kind of shoes that had radar for finding the freshest dog droppings. "I know I'm going to throw up," he told me, giving me a thrill I had not known before, that is, being brought thus into his confidence at such a point of weakness.

"Don't let them hear you through the open window," I said in all seriousness, but that made him laugh. We collected wads and wads of toilet paper, then headed outside without jackets. The chill made us jittery. And, both apparently moved by the same instinct, we crouched as one alongside the building, moving toward the pile of poop, in order to avoid having our heads bobbing along next to all the classroom windows, especially since at least one portal for each room was open.

Ours was the last room before the corner of the building, and as we slowed, heads bowed, approaching our bounden duty, a baritone voice boomed "Boys!"

We both popped up, and Stevie was the first to see the impending disaster. "Mister Fitzsimmons! No!" he cried. But it was too late. The principal had advanced toward us and placed one maroon wingtip shoe in the

unbelievably large, gooey, orange-brown, still-steaming pile.

Apparently Miss Plover had closed the window to us before we'd made it outside, so when we reeled on it to plead for her assistance, all we could see was a reflection of neighboring houses, overhead wires, parked cars, and our three selves. That single pane cut off all sight and sound within.

Mister Fitzsimmons evidently realized that he had the same sort of shoes as mine, for before his foot had quite flattened the pile he stepped back and looked from us to it and back again. Even though the window was closed, he seemed to get the picture. He had really released the full stink, too, causing all three of us to gag.

The principal leaned against the building and made us use our toilet paper to clean his shoe, aided by water from a nearby puddle. He let us drop the paper, bit by bit, to the ground as we used it on the shoe. Then he led us inside and provided us with a flat shovel. "When you've finished, I'll see you in my office," he declared and turned us loose.

We didn't know what to do with it once we'd scooped the smear, plus the wadded paper and a great deal of mud and gravel into the shovel, so, with Stevie at the outer end of the handle and I next to the load, we carried it back into the boys' room and let the whole mess slide into a toilet. I flushed, and we rinsed the blade of the shovel in the toilet with a couple more flushes, which took all but the heaviest gravel down... down to hell, for all I knew. Next we tried wiping the blade dry with toilet paper, but it remained stubbornly wet. We were unsure what to do after that.

I guess it was one especially pulpy handful of sopping toilet paper that gave me the idea, but, with all else accomplished, I tossed the mass hard, straight up, and it stuck to the high concrete ceiling with a "Slurp!" Before we knew what came over us we were both standing at the sink, soaking wads of toilet paper in the steadily running water and bombing the ceiling with pulp.

This must have gone on for only two or three minutes. We may have succeeded in landing twenty or so blobs on the ceiling in that time. The running water may have echoed a bit loudly. We may have been laughing,

because, as he flung thick globs skyward, Stevie was saying: "We have to hurry back and see what happened to Pimwee-wee! Wim-wee-wee-pee-pee!" and so on.

The shovel was propped against the door, for no reason at all, but it made an awful clang, and the door an awful wobbling sound after both hit the wall together when Mister Fitzsimmons burst in. My last bomb must have been under-propelled in mid-launch by the terrorizing intrusion, for it didn't hold and instead came heavily to the floor in a sort of reverse "prulS!"

I remember watching Mister Fitzsimmons's face go from us to the ceiling, redden, come back to us, then turn to the shovel lying crazily across the floor. When he bent to pick it up I seriously considered trying to escape past him, for I was convinced that if I didn't, the blade of that long-handled implement was going to land against the back of my head. Stevie gripped my arm and held me behind him like a farmer shielding his wife from Indians.

I remember the highly-polished, undulating, green and white tile floor that passed slowly before my downcast eyes as Stevie and I were escorted to the office. I remember watching as Stevie was met by his mother in the office not long afterward. She was a fancy woman, who cast an accusing scowl at me before she led her son away. He cast me a grin that said, We had us some fun, eh?

My mother taught school, so I sat in the office, on the cold, slippery, navy blue, cracked leather of an institutional couch for at least two hours with nothing to do but look at the wood grain of the high desks before me. My mother was not pleased to be diverted in her after-school routine but said little as we made for home. She commented, though, that she and my sister had been thinking of going out to get some eggs and some decorating supplies, in order to make Easter eggs, and I brightened when she said they originally thought I might like to go along. Under the circumstances, though, she continued, I would not be allowed to leave the house until we had discussed my behavior after supper. I was left to stay home with Grandma and the little kids while Mom and Ann made the trip to get... to get eggs.

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