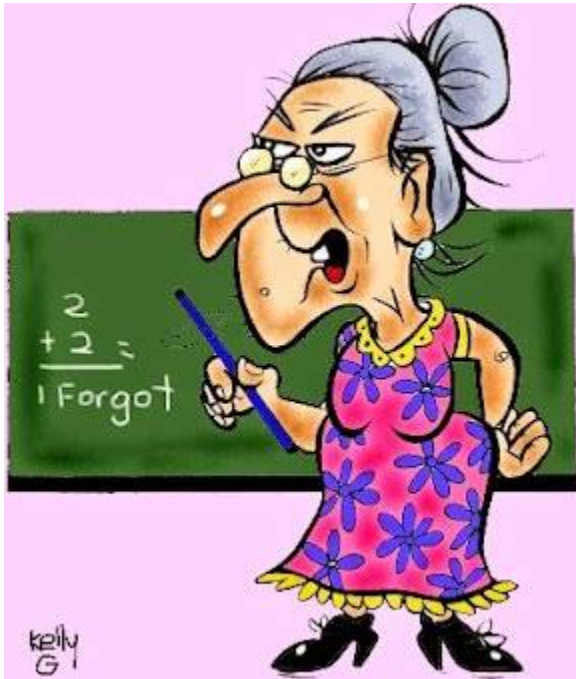


Miss A



Entering the third grade meant many things to Gordon, beginning with the fact that he was to celebrate his 9th birthday on September 10th, 1943, the second day of school that year. Another was that his class' teacher this year was Miss Apfelbaum, a firm fixture in the school's pantheon of task mistresses.

Miss A, as she was known to teachers and students alike, was of solid German descent and indeterminate age with a penetrating gaze that warned those in her presence to mind their Ps and Qs. Additionally for the sake of possible biographers, Miss A eschewed drinking, smoking, or smiling except when safely sheltered within the confines of her tidy one-bedroom home next to the hamlet's Memorial Park. There she exhibited a different persona.

If Miss A had a first name, Gordon nor anyone else had ever heard it spoken. Nor was the destination of her frequent Friday afternoon Greyhound bus trips southward to somewhere on the far side of the Tehachapi range known, though there was much time wasted throughout the community in speculation.

Miss A had no use for a great number of modern conveniences, automobiles at the top of that list. Instead she kept a blue and ivory Schwinn Hollywood bicycle hanging on pegs on the wall of her garage, "just in case," she told Randy, the feral cat who showed up each evening in time for the day's leftovers and saucer of milk before attending to his duties as solacer of lonely felines in the fen by the railroad siding. Miss A marveled at the fact that Randy could prowl night-after-night the evil haunts possessed of bobcats, coyotes, kit foxes, and the occasional black bear, and live to tell the tale. ~~Luckily for all in the community, whatever cataclysmic events might cause her to fetch her doomsday device from the pegs were few and far between, no one more thankful than Randy who depended on the source of nourishment that allowed his nightly activities.~~

When satisfied she had completed her daily tasks, like her revered papa, Herr Doctor Alphonse Apfelbaum, professor emeritus of Agronomy at the Northern Branch of the College of Agriculture at Davis, she'd pour herself a generous snifter of Teacher's Highland Cream, fire up a fat Cuban cigar, and settle in for an evening's study of faraway places.

All of this was, of course, of no consequence to Gordon and his classmates as they awaited in silent anticipation the beginning of the school year, announced by the strident clamor of the 8 o'clock bell, followed immediately by the unmistakable thumps of Miss A's intent footfalls in the short corridor that led from the faculty coffee lounge to the line of classrooms, theirs being number 4.

"Good morning, students," she greeted her new class before she was halfway into the room in a voice leaving no doubt in anyone's mind that summer foolishness was over.

The first order of business as Gordon and his classmates had learned from her former students was baseball, or more particularly the Pittsburgh Pirates, or even more precisely how a certain shortstop, Gunther Apfelbaum had performed at bat and in the field against the St. Louis Cardinals in the previous Sunday's double header.

Gunther Apfelbaum—known around the league as Gunner for the way he could make the little horsehide ball sing on its way from the left side of the diamond to its target at first base—had gone three-for-five with a double and triple in the first game and two-for-three with a triple and stolen base in the seven inning nightcap...an above average outing for the shortstop who sported a 297 batting average, 443 slugging rating, and a 633 onboard percentage. At 36 but sporting a damaged left leg that made him run with a sort of hippity-hop gait, Gunner had been pronounced 4-F by his draft board, allowing him to avoid military service, a situation some thought a bit ??? considering he might be better suited tossing hand grenades than moving down base runners.

Of course everyone knew that Miss A used this daily exercise from April to October each year, to glorify her cousin, everyone but Mr. Chalmers, the school principal who watched these proceedings with great interest. Hidden from the rest was that Miss A thought baseball a silly pursuit for grown men and a terrible waste of Gunther's intellect. Nonetheless, she saw it as an almost perfect tool for sneaking such advanced subjects as statistics, geometry, and national tradition into the curriculum without her students or the State School Board being any the wiser. Ditto her use of world geography to provide a basis for understanding the factors that knitted one group of people into a unified whole, at the same time putting them at odds with other groups.

Such visions came from the venerable r. Apfelbaum—Alfie to his cohorts--who thought such subjects should be taught to kids while still in their nappies. "A shame they have to wait until high school," he complained to his unsympathetic companions at Anthony's Study Hall, a comfortable if a little seedy watering hole on the west side of Sacramento frequented by an eclectic assemblage of academic castoffs. The lackluster town—blazingly hot in the summer and agonizing cold in the winter with an alleged fortnight of endurable weather at the either equinoxes—was for some unknown reason the state's capitol, "a waste of good farmland" in the pious opinion of most longtime residents. Tax payers in other parts of the

state considered it a reasonable place to stick the state's political scum-suckers who had managed thus far to avoid the offer of free room and board at San Quentin or Alcatraz.

The more probable reason for its selection as the state's throne, and the one Miss A, passed on to her students, was that since, unlike its predecessors to the title—Oakland, San Francisco, and Monterey—Sacramento was land-locked and therefore of little value to anyone wishing to take the jurisdiction over by amphibious assault.

Though she would never show it, Miss A looked forward to this year's fourth grade class more eagerly than was her wont, an expectation rooted in the regard of the group's prior teachers, that there were some of Miss A's *Specials* in its ranks. The terms *Specials* was not necessarily one of approbation, indeed quite the opposite in many of her colleagues' minds, referring to students who made things difficult for those of an authoritarian bent, a fair representation of whom could be found in the teachers' across the hall.

Top of the list of annoyances was that the group, as the district's psychiatrist, Helen Durkee was fond of saying, was "spring-loaded to the *why* question." While it could be argued that most of the kids weren't necessarily interested in learning the answers, it was just that the likes of Nancy Goldsmith, Bonnie Alvarez, and Gordon Talbott in this new batch of hooligans were greatly admired by their peers for their ability to rattle their teachers' cages with their persistent demands for more information.

Miss A, however, reveled in such disruptive behavior, looking forward to matching wits with minds that were still open to nearly everything, and not ashamed to question simple authority. She saw in their youthful enthusiasm the opportunity to turn the table on the bright ones, asking them the *whys* underlying their questions and thoughts, a technique she put into practice within two minutes of the start of the school year, neglecting the exploits of her brother on a manicure grass field 3,000 miles

to the east where the leaves were just beginning to take on their autumn colors.

"What is it that you want to know about why school begins at eight in the morning?" she responded to Bonnie Alvarez's challenge, putting the little fireball on the hot seat for a moment.

"Because my family begins its day at 4:30, my father and brothers tend the farm before going to work at the Kern Canyon Hydroelectric Project. They have to be there at 6:45 and don't get home until nearly six in the evening."

"That's important work, Bonnie" she skillfully guided the subject along a more fruitful path. "Do you know why?"

"They keep power going to this whole area."

"Do you know how it works?"

"It uses water in the Kern River to turn huge...uhh they call them dynamos...to generate electricity that is then transmitted to power stations around the area." Bonnie words were reminiscent of those found in the electric utility's handout.

"It sounds as if you know quite a lot about the system," and turning to the class as a whole, "Does anyone want to ask Bonnie some questions?" And right from the start the rest of the morning or afternoon as was the case would be taken up on topics such as this introduced by students.

Miss A loved watching the students get into such things, thinking that with her *specials* like Bonnie, Nancy, or Gordon, she really didn't have much to do in the way of lesson planning. Moreover, as September passed into October, the number of *why* questioners had grown to where there were only three of her 30 charges yet to find the thrill of challenge the status quo.

Miss A was careful in conducting discussions on current events—the war in particular—convinced that the majority of information passed to the public by the radio, newspapers, and especially magazines was doctored to fit the agenda of the Washington bigwigs. So when Jimmy Hartley made the flat statement that “All the dirty Japs in the country should be taken out and shot,” his reaction to a piece in Time magazine about atrocities in the Pacific Theater, she was on the verge of shutting down discussion of the topic when Gordon spoke up in rebuttal.

“Jimmy,” he said firmly but without rancor, “there may be enemy sympathizers among the thousands of Americans of Japanese descent, but they aren’t a threat to the nation. Most, are like the Nakanos; honest citizens who are being treated as criminals for no good reason.” Jimmy as well as the majority of the class sat silent waiting for Gordon to continue, which he did after looking at Miss A for a reaction that was not forthcoming.

“Every other month or so, my father and Pastor Jacobs make the trip to the other side of the Sierras to visit them at Manzanar, taking items like soap and toothpaste and cold weather clothing for them and their friends. My father calls Manzanar a concentration camp no better than some our soldiers are forced to endure while in enemy hands, yet George’s older brother, Ralph Jr., signed up with the Army and is now somewhere in Europe fighting for us, not Japan. We all ought to be ashamed of ourselves.”

Silence. More silence. It was as if no one in the class was even breathing. Finally Miss A got things moving again.

“Anyone like to respond to Gordon?” No, she thought. He had stepped out from the curtain behind which he had hidden since the beginning of the school year and in so doing proved to be the most special of the *specials*.

“How many of you remember George Nakano?” she asked, challenging the class to take part in a discussion she hoped they might carry with them for

the rest of their lives...a watershed challenge to the empty beliefs that surrounded them, she opined, her blood warming to a hoped for battle. Ragged at first but within a half dozen seconds all but two—maybe three—hands were in the air.

What do you think, Nancy” she put the onus on another of the specials to kick-start some discussion.

“My father says the same thing,” she said, kindling the fire. “He says that after the war is over, the President is going to have a lot to answer for.”

“Yes, but what do you think?”

Nancy frowned for a moment before continuing.

“My mother thinks that we’re a lot safer with the Japanese locked away where they can’t attack us in the middle of the night.”

“Yes, Nancy, but I’ll ask again. What do you think.”

“I don’t know,” she said, looking as if she were about to cry. “We hear all these terrible things about their soldiers. What’s to say that the Japanese who are here are not just as bad?”

“Yeh,” called Peter Randolph from the back row. “My Uncle Bill was wounded at Guadalcanal. He says that the Jap soldiers are fanatics, willing to die rather than be captured. They’re different from us.”

Back and forth the discussion wove along various pathways, veering this way and that but always coming back to Jimmy’s condemnation and Gordon’s defense of the Japanese being held in relocation camps with no consensus looking to emerge. Finally Miss A felt it time to step in.

“Tell me Jimmy, how about Americans of German descent like Nancy Goldsmith, or Greta Steinberg or me. Should we be hauled away in trucks and put into relocation camps?” No answer from Jimmy.

"How about Paulo Frascatti, or Joey Rossi? We're fighting the Italian army. Should they and their families be incarcerated so the rest of us will be safe?"

"Well...no," Jimmy began haltingly.

"Why not," Miss A pounced, but certain where this would lead."

"Well they're like us."

"And Japanese like the Nakanos aren't? Why's that?"

"Because...because..."

"Because what? Because their skin is a different color? Because they are racially different? Is that what you have in mind, Jimmy?" She let the challenges hang there in mid-air until she sensed that she had gone far enough for the time being.

"I'm sorry Jimmy. I need to apologize to all of you, but I want to make sure you understand the terrible risks we run in stereotyping." After several seconds in which she allowed for the change in direction, she continued.

"We are all afraid of differences. Terrified of things we don't understand. These are normal and rational reactions to a world filled with threats as well as opportunities; mechanisms that have allowed us to survive throughout the ages, yet move forward. Do we fight or flee? Or do we hang out to see if there are better options? There are no simple answers here, rather questions that I hope you'll spend time thinking about and discussing with others for the rest of your lives.

At home that evening Gordon discussed the classroom situation and his stepping in to counter Jimmy Hartley's solution to the Japanese-American issue.

"I don't think Jimmy really meant what he said about shooting all the Japanese here in our country, particularly because he and George Nakano

were good buddies before the war started, but still I felt I had to say something.”

“Did you talk with him after school,” Claire asked. She was sensitive to the way things sometime got blown out of proportion.

“Uh-uh. We were late getting to the bus and he was sitting way up front by the time I got there.”

“Well look,” she suggested, “how about taking him aside first thing tomorrow morning to tell him you weren’t picking a fight with him, that you wanted to remind everyone there about the Nakano family and the suffering they and hundreds of others are exposed to through no fault of their own.”

Gordon took the suggestion and he and Jimmy discussed the matter before school, Jimmy admitting that he was really talking about the internees like the Nakanos, but the soldiers and secret spies who were capable of the most vicious behavior found anywhere on the planet. And by day’s end they walked to the bus arm in arm...best buddies. Miss A, looking through the classroom window had to smile.

But things were not so clear to Gordon when he and Pastor Jacob made the bi-monthly trip up over the Tehachapis, across the broad expanse of the Mojave Desert, then up the Owens Valley to Manzanar...six hours coming and going in the sturdy but noisy 1937 Buick that its dealer, Mr. Phelps, swore would outlast the war no matter how long it took to send Tojo and his cohorts to their just rewards. Joe had begged off, saying he had work to do on the farm before winter weather arrived, so the trunk and rear seat stuffed with food and clothing donated by the congregation, the two set off while at 5:30 a.m. it was still dark, the sky brightening as they hit the mountain range.

They were met at the camp gate as usual by Sergeant Piper, a slightly pudgy forty-five year old man who had gone to France in 1918 at the ripe age of 19 and gotten as far as Paris when the Armistice was signed. He

stayed on, first as part of the ceremonial detachment during the peace conference, then in a unit overseeing the treaty provisions in the Rhine River Valley, where he hunted deer in the thick forests near Strasbourg, acquired a taste for sweet German white wines at Koblenz, became fluent in both German and French, and before returning home in 1932, married a pleasingly plump Alsatian girl half his age who made the best strudel anyone in his battalion had ever tasted. He and Charlene were stationed in New Jersey where he made translations of ridiculously dull messages between German commanders taking part in field exercises east of the Ardennes Forest. Then one day in 1937 he was reading a message from an engineering unit notable for its bridge building prowess describing an area that he remembered as being in Belgium, not Germany. Bringing his concern to the attention of his superior, he found to his dismay that his services were no longer needed in the intelligence branch, and that he would be shuffled off to an ROTC unit in Nebraska where his talents might be better appreciated.

Then came Germany's attack on Poland followed by the declaration of war by Britain and France, neither of whom was willing to make a serious effort to confront the Nazis in the period known later as the phony war. Then the Germans struck, not through the lowlands as anticipated by the allied planners, but through the Ardennes over a hastily constructed bridge across the Meuse River, giving access to the undefended area of France by the German Army Group A with its 1800 Panzer tanks. The battle for France was for all intents and purposes over the minute the tanks emerged from the Ardennes, but no one but Sergeant Piper had divined the coup.

The army's manpower shortage cancelled Piper's intended retirement and in July 1941 he was sent to Internment/Resettlement Training School in North Carolina, graduating in November as Internment/Resettlement Supervisory Non-Commissioned Officer. He received orders posting him to Manzanar on December 22nd, three months before the resettlement program for Japanese-Americans was enacted.

was not until November that PF joined Gordon's fourth grade class, the odd circumstances of his arrival marking him for special attention by the thirty-one class members, most of whom had been together since kindergarten. As fate would have it, PF arrived during the mid-morning recess when nearly all of the primary grade school's students were out in the playground, free for a half-hour to indulge their mortal desires in mindless play.

As if to add an exclamation point to those whose lives were still immersed in the last desperate throes of a decade-long depression, the sight of a chauffeur-driven Packard grandly gliding up to the front of Arvin Unified School, K—12, was enough to stop even the most intense game of dodge ball as the entire student body, silenced for the first time since the eight o'clock bell, pressed forward to the fence for a better look. What they saw was to Gordon's eyes even more exciting than the magnificent black vehicle; a stunningly attired goddess whose grace and beauty stirred up painful memories of another time when his mother, dressed in a shimmering silk gown, fairly floated her way past him on the way to the Navy Ball. But the vision disappeared with a jolt as his focus was arrested by a pallid--nearly translucent--boy of indeterminate age who accompanied her up the steps to the school's entranceway.

That PF was different hardly sufficed to do justice to the impact his appearance had on his gawking schoolmates who almost to a person stood close to the rough-and-ready border when viewed in relation to boys and girls of their age elsewhere in the country. It was the farm work, and even for those whose families were engaged in other commerce activities, hoeing, weeding and especially harvest time jobs provided spending money along with the good outdoors exercise that made for strong healthy bodies.

For PF, one was being generous to hail him as soft and wanting, his slight frame hosting a body both gelatinous and caved in. To Gordon, PF's

appearance was both enticing and disgusting, just the thought of ???
revulsion.

Three minutes later, the woman returned to the automobile where she was handed into the front seat polished mahogany steering wheel, brought the behemoth to life, and put it into motion...a set of actions that to Gordon's rapt attention to detail, seemed to evolve according to some sort of master plan, ending out of sight beyond the train station.

Rhabdomyosarcoma

Alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma (ARMS)

As a fifth grade teacher, Miss A couldn't catch kiddies still in their nappies, but she figured she might be able to jumpstart the situation by a few years.

No one, least of all Miss A and Gordon, knew how or why the two instantly drew together and bonded, but in all probability the magic lay in his search for knowledge and her pent up desire to share what in her lonely existence had provided the spark to share all that she lived for.