

Attacked: The Strange Struggles of Public Education

The day started like any other: The pledge of allegiance, announcements, students taking their seats and getting out their assignments. Connor came in late asking “am I late?” John was not there because he slept in most mornings and missed English when we had it first period. They were all groaning over the day’s writing assignment. I was looking away from the class at my computer when it happened.

I heard it before I saw anything. A loud crash followed by screaming. Shrill teenage girl screams and booming teenage boy cursing. Part of the ceiling had caved in by the air conditioner intake, near the windows on the far side of the classroom. Broken tile and insulation hung woundedly from the ceiling. I kept looking at it to see if the whole thing was going to cave in on top of us, it seemed as though it wasn’t, but screams were getting louder and tears were beginning to well up in Jillian’s eyes at the back of the row of desks. I beckoned to her and everyone else to get out of the room. Many had run to the hallway already. I remember thinking that they were making too big of a deal, high school melodrama at its best. It was not until most of the students were outside in the hall and I was making my way to the door when I noticed the cause of my exploded ceiling. It was a raccoon.

Once outside the classroom I took a few stabilizing deep breaths. I don’t remember what I said. Then I went back in. For a moment it was just me and the beast. We were both too surprised to think rationally.

Looking back now, I can see the perfect hilarity of the event. I laugh at Connor's dramatic, childlike exit; I laugh at Matt's uncharacteristic, exclaimed curses; I laugh at the fact that I inexplicably went back into the room.

The animal tried to jump out the closed window. I just walked slowly in its general direction. At least I think that is what I did, because when two other teachers entered the room I was halfway across. Then the raccoon careened around the room trying to find a way out. There was none. I told the other teachers to open the door to the outside and open the windows too. We were on the ground floor; it needed to be out in the wilderness where it belonged, was my first thought. Mr. Barton approached the door to the outside.

Mr. Barton is a long time substitute teacher who was once, many, many years ago we all thought, an actual teacher. The thought was comical. Mr. Barton was hard of hearing and seemed to all students and faculty members alike to be losing his grip on reality. He walked down the hallway muttering sentence fragments, occasionally walking into things, and never seemed to really recognize you when he saw you. He only recently, after four years, started calling me by the correct name. He will often enter my classroom in the middle of class after wandering outside it for a few minutes, pondering whether he had the right place, school, town. When he did make up his mind to come in it was usually to inform me that I had a meeting, one that I new did not exist. He came in to my room this time to handle my raccoon problem. I remember thinking afterwards that he must have had extensive experience with raccoons.

Mr. Barton approached the door about the same time the raccoon seemed to understand that that was his only way out, if he could get it open. Raccoon's are very clever when it comes to opening things. I can remember this from my childhood.

My family and I were camping, I have forgotten the location. I woke in the night, terrified. There were noises outside. Noises outside are the chief concern for a child camping. They can be anything. Any ferocious beast could be out there making that noise. There is only a thin layer of tent nylon to protect you from wild monsters outside. This is the end of sleep for the child-camper and it was the beginning of a night of terror for me, even though my family had recently upgraded to the somewhat increased security of a tent-trailer. Pots were falling over, everything outside was being thrown about, it sounded like. My parents were talking and telling me to be quiet and go back to sleep. Back to sleep! Frustration added to my terror. It was decided that my father would go to check it out. Nervousness replaced my frustration. Not nervousness that my father would be harmed, but that he would let whatever was making the noise inside to get me. So, my father dressed for battle: bright red sweat pants and an old white tee shirt. He took up his weapon: a small beach umbrella, the kind you clamped onto the arm of your beach chair, not the javelin/canopy type things you stick in the sand which would have been much more intimidating. He went outside to find a family of raccoons feasting on the remains of our food stored in our now unlatched cooler. Despite the fierce waving of the beach umbrella and my father's loud imploring for them to "get out of there," the raccoons did not budge. Not right away at least. They waited until they had picked out a suitable snack to take with them from our cooler and made off slowly to the edge of our campsite to finish their feast. Had I remembered this when the raccoon fell into my

classroom I might have tackled the animal and tossed it outside, with a touch of vengeful violence even, to repay its kind for that night of camping horror when I was a boy. But, instead, I watched in astonishment as Mr. Barton began speaking to this raccoon while I stood a good eight feet away near a window I had just opened.

The raccoon had now climbed halfway up the door's side molding where Mr. Barton was standing. The raccoon blocked the door handle, but Mr. Barton kept moving his hand towards it. The other teacher in the room yelled at him to be careful, but he did not seem to hear. As he reached for the handle the raccoon reached its head back and looked up at Mr. Barton, following his every move. He said "its okay little guy; I know you want to get out. I'm just gonna open the door here for ya. It's okay." The raccoon did not seem to think it was okay at all. Instead, after looking deep into Mr. Barton's thick glasses covered eyes, darted to the other side of the room where it turned itself, momentarily, into a pinball and bounced all over the room, or so it seemed to me. I just keep looking in every direction and the raccoon always shot past behind me, making me flinch. Mr. Barton was undeterred. He opened the door and eventually the raccoon found its way out.

The aftermath of the raccoon event was nearly as poignant as the event itself. This day and age, one would assume that a raccoon invasion would result in a lawsuit, or the shutting down of the school. None of these things happened. What did happen was and still is a surprise. As can be expected, the students were in a frenzy to know about the story, hear it told from survivors themselves. I told the story and fielded many questions, dispelled the rumors, made jokes and playful parodies. I could embrace the trauma with my classes so that we could move on with our work. The school itself was

not ready to move on, however. There were mementoes posted around the building zoning certain areas as “Raccoon Crossings.” Numerous raccoon pictures were also attached to bulletin boards and classroom doors. The school newspaper immediately ran a story. Principals were making jokes, playing along. T-shirts were made and ordered by the hundreds: “attacked from above” with a picture of a raccoon’s head emblazoned on the front. Hundreds of these were sold. The randomness of the event made it truly ours, no other school had a raccoon fall through its ceiling. How could it?

Looking back now over the last few months since the event took place I cannot tell what the lasting impact of the event will be, if any. I do not know if graduation speeches will retell the event (as I have here), claiming ownership, celebrating the unique things that help each graduating class identify itself. I do not know if current students will bring this up at their ten year reunion, amid laughs as the story is put together piece by piece. I do not know if the story will be lost altogether. We are getting a new school built over the next two years. This story may be forgotten, collapsing like the broken building around it. What I have realized is that even though at the time I did not know why I walked back into that classroom after the raccoon fell into it, I now know that in my mind I went back in wearing red sweat pants and carrying a beach umbrella, telling my students that everything would be OK.