

PRINCIPAL

A PERSONAL HISTORY

CAROLINE TOMPKINS

We hope to find our work, our growth and our commitment within the institutions of our country, and in fact that is where, to some degree, we do find them—only to discover that as we do so, we are more and more extruded, or if we are not, we grow to distrust ourselves.

—James Herndon, *How to Survive in Your Native Land*, 1971¹

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This book is for Mom

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NAMES AND DETAILS



THE NAMES AND PERSONAL details of many individuals, including children, parents, and teachers, have been changed to maintain the confidentiality required of a public school educator. Only one teacher, Ms. Burnett, has been composed from individual elements of several teachers at both of my schools.

Events from the more distant past are rendered as accurately as memory allows, and in some cases, following consultation with others who were involved. Where dialogue has had to be reconstructed many years after the events took place, it is faithful to the personalities and situations.

PREFACE



“FIFTY-FOUR SEEMS too young,” Linda said. She and I were sitting in her living room a few days after Christmas of the year 2000, eating tamales from plates we held on our laps. I’d known Linda longer than anyone who was not part of my family, and we hadn’t had a chance yet to talk about the job—the career—I was leaving in just a few months. I had no idea how to respond.

In the years I’d worked in schools and Linda had worked as an urban planner, I’d heard her grumble about educators she saw working less than a full year, only six hours a day, and with all those long vacations. She didn’t see how jobs in schools could be very hard. I didn’t tell her that two principals I knew had simply cleaned out their desks and walked away on days that were not even Fridays, let alone ends of semesters. How

could I tell her that after fifteen years, my job had come to feel like a game of pinball, one where I was the ball? I sat silently for almost a minute before Linda asked, “Do you think it’s *futile*?”

Surprised at her use of this word, I put my fork down on my plate and said, “No! It’s not futile. *I* just can’t do it anymore.”

Growing up in the second half of the twentieth century, I had regarded capital-P Progress as a sure thing. My post-war generation would pitch in to move America forward and by 1967, I’d decided to do my part by teaching school. I’d make sure kids could read, write, and compute, and I’d also inoculate them with peace and justice. I didn’t plan on, or even imagine, being a principal.

Thirty years after I chose to teach, the era that raised me had run into trouble. Racial justice and gender equality grew, but peace did not last. Prosperity became a more elusive goal, less a value of community than a contest to be won by individuals. I didn’t imagine that by the end of the last century, public education would no longer be everyone’s favorite democratic institution.

In the middle of my final year on the job, an editor at a national publication encouraged me to write a thousand words about a principal’s day. I began to collect artifacts and keep records. I wrote extra notes in my daily calendars, planning to show the events and conversations that any principal might face. I saw quickly that a thousand words

wouldn't take me beyond the first half hour of a typical day. And each event and each conversation was only the latest knot in the tangle of threads that wound back through my entire career as a principal, my work as a researcher and teacher, and my youth as a determined schoolgirl.

As I worked to sort out the strands of my personal history as a principal, I found a complex story that demanded a more intricate structure than I had planned. In the present work, the happenings of a single day during my final spring on the job are braided with stories from my years leading two Tucson elementary schools as well as from my own life as a learner and a teacher, in and out of school.

Most of us know that there are things we don't know and, more importantly, *things we don't know that we don't know*. We might imagine that we would figure these things out during our first few years on a job. Through the years I've spent digging up and sifting the details of my life in schools, I have never stopped encountering shards of *what I didn't know I didn't know*. There is no real end to the possibilities that arise in such a search. I can only hope that the prism of memoir allows the reader to become smarter than the writer, not a bad outcome for a story such as mine.

PART I

LEARNING HOW TO JUGGLE



At a high school reunion a few years ago, I ran into Sandy, who'd edited the school newspaper when we were seniors. Even though we hadn't been close friends, we had always liked each other, so we sat down to trade short versions of our lives since graduation. When I told her I'd recently retired after fifteen years as a school principal, she said, "Oh! But I always thought you'd do something really important . . ." Then she blushed and changed the subject.

CHAPTER I
BIRTHDAY CAKE



Today, 7:40 a.m.

I HAVE BEEN PRINCIPAL OF Brichta Elementary School in Tucson for nearly seven years, and I will retire in fifty-three days. I smooth away the remnants of a scowl, not an angry scowl, but the wrinkles that form between my eyebrows when I concentrate. Before I step out of my Honda sedan, I gather up my briefcase, lunch bag, and purse. I take a few seconds to make sure I have the three sharp-edged keys that I need to enter classrooms now that more doors are locked in the wake of the tragedy at Columbine.

Using one of the keys, I open the private entrance to my office. In this first moment, I leave the lights off and make do with the March sunlight coming through

square windows on the south wall. As I open the door that leads from my office to the school's lobby, I tug at the side of my longish skirt where it has ridden up a little, and I settle on a medium smile. As I move around the corner into the secretaries' area, a tangle of children's voices hits my ears.

Three fourth-grade girls stand at the office counter, competing to be heard. Mary, our school's grandmotherly attendance clerk, stands across from them, saying, "Calm down, you all. I can't tell what you're going on about."

Like any principal, I've faced thousands of decisions about jumping into or staying out of events taking place in front of me. In the second or two I have to make up my mind, I can't always tell whether my help—the *principal's* help—is needed, or if I'm over-working my role. When my job threatens to overwhelm me and I lose track of priorities, I chance jumping into what I should delegate and handing off what should be mine. Now, if I had any sense, I would back up and let Mary tend to this.

The girls see me and one of them calls out, "Hey! Principal!"

Mary raises her eyebrows at me and retreats to her desk. I keep my smile hovering.

"What's up?" I ask.

One girl, a spindly brunette with flyaway hair, shushes the other two and announces, "The bus driver wants to see you. About Ricky. He was trying to make her crash the bus. She's really mad." She tops this off with a big grin.

If I try to avoid the bus driver, she will just stay parked at the curb until I get there, then blame me for running late on her middle school route. The girls want to be deputized, to join the posse that will haul Ricky in. I don't work that way, so I tell them, "Thanks. Thanks for your help. Go on to breakfast now. I'll take care of it." I don't move until they back away and start walking toward the cafeteria.

When I turn back to tell Susie, the office manager, that I'll be outside with the driver for a few minutes, she's picking up the phone. She looks up and signals me to wait, then tells the caller, "She's busy right now, Mrs. Bingham. Can she call you back in a little while?" Then, "OK, it'll be about 15 minutes." She looks at me to make sure I've caught this, and I nod. It's Mitchell's mom and I'll call her back when I finish hearing what Ricky's bus driver needs to tell me. I hurry out to the street.

The driver waits by the bus and I join her at the curb. She's blonde and fortyish, maybe fifteen years younger than I am. Her blue nylon jacket displays the AFSCME union logo. As if it will ensure that I'll listen, that I'll hear her, she stands closer to me than I like. I stop myself from echoing her crossed-arms stance, and I smile enough to suggest that I'm paying attention. I struggle to remember her name—Mona?

"I want him off my bus," she says.

As she spits out today's Ricky story, I work hard not to step back. I nod at what I hope are the right moments and do my best to show sympathy. When she seems to have

finished, I inch backward and pronounce the principal's mantra, "OK, I'll take care of it."

I glance at her ID badge: *Myrna*.

About forty kids get on and off the bus at Ricky's apartment complex, any one of them a possible player in Ricky's daily drama. Lots of kids board the morning bus half-asleep, but Ricky does his best to wake everyone up. The driver would have to make two dangerous left turns instead of one safe right to pick up the apartment kids last instead of first, so Ricky can scout for trouble first thing.

Most days, Ricky perches on the edge of an aisle seat about a third of the way back so he can scan the new arrivals to see who has a loose edge he can work. Bus drivers hardly ever accuse Ricky of fighting or hitting anyone. They describe him as a promoter. If other kids start squabbling, Ricky jumps up and amplifies both sides of the argument until someone shoves or hits.

My calendar for today does not look crowded. It holds two teacher observations, one at 9:00 and one at 10:00, each for the required half hour. After lunch, the desegregation committee member who keeps track of Brichta is coming by to meet with me. Before she gets here, I have to look over the report I sent in a while back but do not recall in enough detail for our meeting. I also need to puzzle out how \$1,200 went missing from our substitute teacher budget and see about getting it back. Before I go home today, I'll

draft an agenda for tomorrow's faculty meeting and write up two teacher evaluations. Nothing out of the ordinary on this list, a medium day as these things go. To my mental calendar I now add finding Ricky and calling the mom who phoned as I was walking out the door.

Turning away from the bus curb, I cross the triangular concrete slab that covers a patch of ground between the street and the chain link that fences our schoolyard, but does not secure it. Intentional gaps remain at several points in our perimeter fence, gaps that are framed by metal poles to which gates could be attached, but are not. In front of me, a basketball bounces into the parking lot through one of these openings and a boy chases it. I start toward him, but before I call out, he grabs the ball and jumps back inside the yard. I zag back to my original path.

By longstanding custom, visitors who don't come in by the school's front door enter the playground through one of the gaps in the fence. Next, they pull open one of the eight unlocked doors to walk into the school building. No gatekeepers, no security cameras. The righteous among our visitors head to the office to obey the school district's check-in rule. But plenty of parents privilege themselves to bypass the check-in and then get snippy when one of us asks them to get a visitor badge from the office.

Not quite two years ago, a pair of high school boys in Colorado killed twelve fellow students and a teacher, wounded twenty-one others, and then killed themselves. Since then, my principal's burden of life and death sits

heavier on me. As if my large urban school district has not just ordered up safety plans from all the schools, tradition welcomes the world onto our campuses. Two years after Columbine, openings in Brichta's chain link fence remain unaddressed by the centralized authority of either Buildings and Grounds or Risk Management.

Scanning the playground for Ricky, I enjoy for the thousandth time the view of the jagged natural horizon sketched by the Tucson Mountains a few miles to the west. Just south of the schoolyard fence, across a strip of new pavement, a row of stuccoed houses sits where mesquite and greasewood grew when I first arrived here. Brichta's original 1959 brick building, slightly downhill from the playground, had a classroom each for grades one through six. In the decades that followed, eight more permanent classrooms and a cafeteria were added, followed more recently by several wooden "portables" that hold four of our classes. In a more recent upgrade, the school district leveled two basketball courts and a grassy soccer field into the uneven ground just upslope from the buildings.

From the schoolyard, anyone can walk up the metal ramps and pull open the unlocked doors of the portables. Locking them against intruders would just complicate getting kids back into class after they visit the restrooms inside the school building, the only restrooms available to them. I notice again the woodpecker hole high on the east wall of Mr. McElroy's portable. Recent bee updates tell us that holes like the one on Mr. McElroy's outside

wall invite the whole colony to set up camp. We are told that the bees can become fiercely territorial if we don't get them out within a month or two.

With bees, I usually get help right away from the district's safety office. But my questions about ungated entrances and free access to the portables only cause my bosses to change the subject or tell me to "figure something out." We are supposed to pretend that we're in control, that safety comes from policies and committees and plans.

Through most of my career, I've wondered if I would run toward the armed intruder, rush up the metal ramp, and shield children against a peppering of bullets. Could I obey this unwritten rule of principaling, the one that obligates me to play the hero/martyr when the need arises? I like to believe I'd cover children with my body if there is hope of saving one, but it remains an abstraction. Killer bees, pushy parents, overworked teachers, and even kids like Ricky were all on the long list of things I believed I could handle when I moved from Miller School to Brichta seven years ago.

I can *do* something about bees. I take the small yellow pad of sticky notes out of the bag where it sits with my keys and scribble Woodpecker hole. McElroy. East side above breaker box.

I scan the playground for Ricky, but when I don't find him in the next couple of minutes, I change course. Seeing him about today's bus disturbance is important, but not urgent. I pull open one of Brichta's unlocked doors and

enter the hallway next to the library. Coming toward me is a third-grade boy who hugs a basketball he'd be bouncing on the tile floor if he hadn't seen me coming. As I move on, a teacher steps outside of his classroom to tell me the heating is on the blink and it's freezing in there. I tell him I'll take care of it, and I hope I'll remember this promise by the time I get back to the office.

Ricky

Even after last fall's arrival of two deeply troubled kindergartners, fourth-grader Ricky has remained my number one customer, in my office at least three times a week. Before he showed up at Brichta to join our first grade a few years ago, Ricky had bounced around in foster homes for years. By the time I met him, his mother was completely out of the picture.

When Ricky was six, his dad re-entered Ricky's life, graduated from job training, went to work in a welding shop, and found Marcia, a girlfriend of solid character. This reassembled family now rented a three-bedroom apartment in the new complex across the ravine. Still missing his mother, Ricky was adjusting cautiously to life with his dad and Marcia.

Even though he was repeating first grade, Ricky was no taller than his classmates. To further complicate his life, Ricky's face still bore remnants of a red birthmark that had once spread from his left ear into the middle of his cheek. His previous school had gotten a children's

specialty hospital out of state to work at fixing this. Even though laser treatments had made the mark nearly invisible by the end of his first year at Brichta, Ricky stayed touchy about the small patches that remained.

From the beginning, just to be distracted or entertained by his blow-ups, kids poked at Ricky about his birthmark or about his missing mother. As a result, I saw Ricky a lot, which led to a comfortable familiarity between us even when he was in trouble. By the end of his first year at Brichta, I knew Ricky's home phone number by heart, something I never managed with any other student.

Ricky reached fourth grade still behind in his school work. He had trouble sitting down and paying attention, but bubbled with ideas when it was time to be creative. His powerful writing voice and colorful descriptions jumped far ahead of his spelling and punctuation. Because he was fast and agile, kids would choose Ricky for their teams, and then regret it when he changed the rules in the middle of the game. Phoning home about Ricky would usually bring his dad's girlfriend Marcia to school within half an hour.

In the early days, neither his parents nor I knew if Ricky had an attention problem or whether he was just reacting to the trauma of his early life. Ricky's dad and Marcia weren't sure kids should take drugs for attention deficits, but they went ahead and asked their doctor about it. Before the end of his first year with us, Ricky

took a pill at home in the morning and another one at school. All of us, including Ricky, thought we noticed a difference. The meltdowns, bus performances, and playground brawls diminished but didn't stop entirely.

Today, 7:56 a.m.

On my way back to the office, still without Ricky, I notice a red-haired woman just ahead of me carrying a large white bakery box, the kind of box that usually holds a decorated sheet cake. I realize that she is the mother of the third-grade girl just ahead of her carrying a plastic bottle of caffeinated cola in the crook of each arm.

I stop myself from telling her that a whole cake takes too much time. Cupcakes don't require plates, forks, a spatula, extra work for the teacher, time lost from a science lesson. Cupcakes can be handed out in the last few minutes of the day. Parents, even whole families loaded down with gifts and balloons, do not always set up these classroom birthday parties ahead of time. But I lift the corners of my smile a little to hide the party-poopier attitude. I start to say, "Hi, Mrs. Go—," then realize I don't remember the last name she started using when she got married a few months ago. So I shift to, "Good Morning! Is today someone's birthday?"

I feel like I'm imitating dialogue from a poorly written movie. Here I go, with that high voice that I hate, the one with the tense undertone, a school fakery I try to avoid. The girl flashes a birthday-girl grin and reddens a little

as I fuss over her turning nine. Hoping to sound more friendly than principalish, I add, “It’ll help the teacher a lot if you’ve got a knife and spatula.”

Just then, the teacher opens the classroom door and invites mother and daughter inside with a “Happy Birthday, sweetheart!”

2000, Brichta School

The year before I retired, I was working at my desk after lunch one day when the fire alarm blared. As the official overseer of fire drills, I knew I had not planned this one, that it was not our monthly practice in which Susie pulled the alarm from the office while I waited outside, timing the evacuation and checking for snags in the mass exit. I have hated the blast of the fire alarm since the red horn shrieked during my first month of first grade. As a principal, I always found a legitimate way to be outside when it went off.

That day, as I left the building and headed for the far basketball court, I had no idea what was happening. Every teacher and child, office and cafeteria worker, and a few visiting parents stood with me while fire trucks roared up to the bus curb. It took nearly an hour to establish that there was no fire, but it took us longer than that to find out that the false alarm had not been a prank.

A fifth grade class, with a couple of parents helping out, had planned an after-lunch surprise party to

celebrate their teacher's birthday. Too many of the forty-something candles burned too near the smoke detector, and Ms. Kincaid didn't blow them out fast enough to keep the automatic fire alarm from emptying the building.

About an hour after that surprise explosion of sound and motion, the time wasted standing outside in the sun, the afternoon's lessons for 350 children ruined, I marched into the classroom and said in a voice loud enough for everyone in the room to hear twice over, "What on earth were you thinking with all those candles. You could have started a fire, and now look what happened, you made the whole school go outside and miss class for over an hour." The kids and adults in the room just sat there, wide-eyed.