

A Parcel from the School Board

RUTH MCQUIRTER SCOTT

Today's classrooms are not the closed fortresses of earlier times. Teachers are used to principals, parent volunteers, and an assortment of support staff dropping by their rooms at any time. When formal visitations do occur, students are seldom aware that anything unusual is going on.

This was certainly not the case when I was growing up in a small Ontario town in the 50's. It was always a special day at Regent Public School when the inspector from the school board made his annual visit. We would hear a firm knock on the classroom door, and a tall, dignified man in his late forties would enter. On cue, all thirty students would jump to their feet and sing in unison, "Good morning, Mr. Ellis." His deep, baritone voice would answer, "Good morning, boys and girls."

Mr. Ellis was a man of mystery. I couldn't imagine he had a life outside of school, even though I knew he had a daughter my age. We were both fascinated and frightened by his right hand, which was always covered in a thick brown leather glove. Hiding a hook, we had heard. Someone said he had lost his hand in the war. Others thought it had been hacked off by a table saw. In any case, this feature made him seem other-worldly, a fifties version of the Bionic Man.

We liked Mr. Ellis because he had the ability to transform our teachers in miraculous ways. Even the meanest, most vindictive of them would become gentle and courteous in Mr. Ellis' presence. Our third grade teacher, Mrs. Luke, surprised us the most. This mountain of a woman, always dressed in a black, shapeless gown, her long white hair twisted into a bun on top of her head, positively radiated kindness during Mr. Ellis' visits. Instead of marching students to the cloakroom on a daily basis for strapping, she sprinkled her instructions with a cheery "please" and "thank you."

After spending some time perusing the teacher's day-book, Mr. Ellis would walk up and down the aisles, stopping to ask students for their notebooks. He would check to make sure the printing was neat and the date had been recorded before each entry. My classmates were relieved when he had passed their desks. They believed the lie the teachers had told us - that Mr. Ellis was there to inspect the students.

I knew the truth, that it was the teachers who were under pressure. My inside source was my mother, who taught fourth grade at the same school. Even the most experienced teachers dreaded the inspector's arrival, because a poor report could mean dismissal. The staff had created a secret code, a type of Early Warning System. As soon as Mr. Ellis was seen walking up the sidewalk, a teacher would send one of her students to each classroom with the following message: "A parcel from the school board has arrived." The deciphered version meant, "Red Alert: Mr. Ellis is in the school."



My mother was a respected teacher, but she was not a fan of mathematics, especially the "New Math" of the 1950's. It involved strange symbols and a different orientation to mathematics instruction. "I'd sooner retire than learn that nonsense," she declared to our family. As luck would have it, when Mr. Ellis arrived in her classroom that year, it was just in time for her mathematics lesson. To make matters worse, she knew that Mr. Ellis had taught math in his earlier life as a classroom teacher. A less seasoned teacher might have crumbled under the pressure, but my mother was known for her survival skills. As she told us that night around the dinner table, "I had two choices. Either to teach the old way or fess up and offer to have him take over. So I said, "Mr. Ellis, you know more about this New Math than I do. How would you like to show the children how it's done?"

My brothers, my father and I all gasped. "And you got away with it?"

"Sure," she answered. "Mr. Ellis just grinned, picked up the chalk, and got to work. I think he loved being back in the classroom."

My mother retired the next year, still oblivious to the New Math, but no longer concerned that "a parcel has arrived from the school board." ★

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