

Cottonwood Winter (Pages 63- 65)

Classroom Communication System

Even though Danny and Jase are seated a distance from each other in their sixth grade classroom they have their own unique system of communicating with each other.

The last bell sounded just as we entered the room. Quickly we stowed our wraps in the cloak closet and placed our wet mittens and gloves on the radiators under the windows. Soon we could expect the acrid smell of scorched leather and grilled wet wool to fill the air. Not to worry though, the recess bell would ring just before we all died of asphyxiation.

After the morning rituals, Miss Sparks posted the names of her new Teacher's Helpers on the blackboard. These would be the two teacher's pets who stayed after school to wash the blackboards and clean the erasers by going outside and whacking them against the side of the school's brick wall. The new names were Dilbert Dinkins, the nose picker, and Sally Horvath, the pigtail sucker.

I looked back at Danny to ascertain his reaction to this pair of appointees. He screwed up his face, crossed his eyes, and stuck out his tongue. I gathered he was not impressed. I couldn't have agreed more with his assessment.

Fortunately for Miss Sparks, Danny and I were seated a distance apart. Nonetheless we spent the better part of each school day during fourth grade exchanging non-verbal signals in the form of grimaces, smirks, frowns, winks, or other appropriate facial distortions.

Because Danny was seated behind me, I delivered my signals by facing the back of the room. So naturally Miss Sparks could not see these signals. Unfortunately Danny's responses were plainly visible from her desk and could easily be interpreted as negative reactions to something she had just said.

But Danny cleverly covered his culpability by masking his signals in a flurry of apparent mini-attacks of nervous ticks, jerks, and spasms. For a while, this tactic provided an excellent cover. Finally an exasperated Miss Sparks sent my spastic best friend for a consultation with the school nurse. The good nurse confidently declared Danny to be quite normal because he had succeeded in sitting in her examining chair for 45 straight minutes with nary a quiver. By the way, that Danny sitting-quietly record still stands and is forever etched in the annals of Hamilton School.

This unconditional bill of good health allowed Danny to resume transmitting in the clear so to speak. That is, he simply reacted normally to my signals.

Even though Miss Sparks observed his grimaces and winks, she steadfastly refused to take any action to curtail them. Danny and I speculated that she was reluctant to do anything that might cause him to relapse to that regrettable state of infirmity that necessitated his first visit to the school nurse. To us fourth-grade boys, teacher guilt was a powerful force for freedom.

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