

ABOVE THE CLASSROOM

By Douglas Evans

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“PARENTS SAY THE CLASSROOM IS HAUNTED,” Mr. Leeks, the custodian at Walter T. Melon Elementary, told us on the first day of school.

He leaned on his mop handle as if it were a crutch. He raised a bushy gray eyebrow and squinted an eye. His whiskers rasped like sandpaper as he stroked his narrow chin.

“And sometimes in the evening when I’m mopping the hallway, I hear sounds myself coming from that room—that room at the end of the hall,” he said. “I hear desks banging shut, and chalk squeaking on the blackboard. I hear creaks from the floor and scrapes from the ceiling. Gives me the willies, it does.”

Back hunched, the custodian took a few swishes with his mop. He stopped suddenly and stared at us again. The hairs in his nose quivered when he snorted and said, “And let me tell you, youngsters, I’ve seen things as well in that room—that room at the end of the hall. Take for instance just last night, while I was sweeping the playground. You know how the moon is extra round and bright on the evening before school starts? Well, let me tell you, youngsters, last night moonbeams shone through the classroom windows and fell like a spotlight upon the teacher’s desk. And there, as stiff as a flagpole, sat a man—a large, burly man with a bushy black beard. At first I thought he was a wax figure, some store mannequin, but when he raised a finger and pointed to a desk I nearly lost my teeth. Yes sirree, that’s all he did, raise a finger and point.”

Mr. Leeks swished his mop back and forth, back and forth, as he asked us, “Now tell me, youngsters, can you guess who that man was?”

We shook our heads.

Here the custodian stared over our shoulders. With a shaking, crooked finger, he pointed to a painting hanging above the front door of the school.

Now he spoke in a whisper. “That’s Walter T. Melon himself, I’m telling you. The very man I saw in the room at the end of the hall. They say he was a great teacher at

one time. They say he was the very best of them. But let me tell you”—and he leaned toward us so that we could smell his sour breath—”they also say that man died some twenty years back.”

The custodian wiped his thin lips with the back of his hand. Again he leaned on his mop handle and stared down the hall as if studying our classroom door on the far end.

“I’m telling you, youngsters, and I can’t put my finger on it exactly, but something odd, something strange, something peculiar. . .” He stopped and stared right through us. “Something extraordinary goes on in that room at the end of the hall.”

Mr. Leeks plunged his mop into the water bucket. “Now the bell is about to ring, youngsters,” he said, pushing hard on a lever to squeeze out the mop. “Hope you have yourselves a fine school year.”



It was recess time for the students in the room at the end of the hall. But in the back row Howard and Frances remained at their desks. Howard’s head lay on his desktop, his right ear squished against the smooth surface. Frances’s head rested on her fist; chin down, eyes closed, her head looked not unlike a marble bust in a museum.

So why were these two inside during recess with their heads on their desks? As you might have guessed, they were carrying out the famous punishment known in every elementary school across the country as putting your head down. So what crime, you may wonder, did this pair commit that deserved such a stiff sentence? Well, that morning Frances and Howard typed a message on the computer and stored it on Rosalie’s thumb drive. Afterward, Rosalie, who had recently lost two front teeth, came to the computer, inserted her disk, and read the message that appeared on the screen:

HELLO, JACK-O’LANTERN MOUTH

Two pairs of eyes in the back row watched as Rosalie jammed her finger on the delete button and spun around in her chair.

“You rats!” she hollered—which through the gap in her teeth sounded more like “You raths!”

How the tall teacher knew who the culprits were who wrote the message, Frances and Howard never figured out. But he instantly rose to his feet and glared right at them. Perhaps they had picked on Rosalie too many times before.

With ears bright red, the tall teacher condemned the guilty pair to remain inside for one entire recess, “With your heads down!” on their hard, cold desktops.

Now it was recess time, and the minute hand on the clock above the green blackboard had jerked forward only twice since the class had charged out the door. Meanwhile, Frances fiddled with eraser crumbs on her desktop. She also memorized the nasty words whittled into the back of the seat in front of her.

Howard used up the minutes winking his eyes left, right, left, right, and discovered how the bulletin board seemed to shift up, down, up, down.

Up front, the tall teacher also had his head down on his desk. He had been in that position, without moving, since the beginning of recess.

“Hey, Frances,” Howard whispered, despite the effort it took to talk with one cheek flattened.

“What is it?” the girl grumbled, having to lift her entire head off her fist to do so.

“I think the teacher dozed off,” said Howard.

“Looks like it,” said Frances. “He must be exhausted after the chewing-out he gave us.”

Another minute dragged by. Things were getting tremendously boring when a curious sound—a slow, steady *skritch-skritch, skritch-skritch, skritch-skritch*—drifted down from the ceiling.

Frances and Howard sat up straight. Both heads tossed back. As if counting every tiny hole in the acoustic tiles, they kept their eyes glued to the ceiling. In constant rhythm the sound continued—*skritch-skritch, skritch-skritch*.

Howard pointed upward. “Something’s above our classroom,” he said.

“Sounds like it,” said Frances.

“Could be a burglar prowling around up there,” said Howard.

“Or worse. Could be some wild animal planning to pounce upon a helpless kindergartner,” said Frances.

A smile flashed across Howard’s face. Turning toward Frances, he said, “I think someone should investigate that sound.”

Frances grinned in the same manner. “I feel it’s our duty to help the school.”

Without another word, the pair slipped from their seats. After a reassuring glance toward the teacher’s desk, they stole to the back of the classroom and opened the door of the coat closet.

Inside the dark closet, high up on the ceiling, was a square trap door. For years this door had been the object of curiosity for students in the room at the end of the hall. What was it for? Who ever used it? Where did it lead to? Howard and Frances were about to find out.

First, Frances climbed onto the empty coat hooks. From there she stepped up on the shelf that held the lunchboxes and tennis shoes. Now she could reach the trap door. With a push it swung open.

A chilly cloud of dust showered down on her as she gazed up into the square of black emptiness. The smell was of mold and oldness. She gripped the edge of the doorway and hoisted her slender body upward. After two kicks, her legs vanished into the black hole.

“How is it up there, Frances?” Howard called out.

“Come on, come on,” a voice drifted downward.

With all his muscle, Howard hauled his portly body onto the shelf. He grabbed the doorway with both hands and pulled. His feet pedaled air until Frances reached down and yanked him up beside her.

The pair sat side by side on the dusty floor of an immense attic. When their eyes adjusted to the dimness, they found themselves surrounded by a remarkable assortment of junk—pyramids of old desks, stacks of chairs, ancient globes, an abacus, a model of a giant tooth, two grinning skeletons, a flag bearing forty-eight stars, and filing cabinets teetering on top of one another like so many baby blocks.

A layer of silvery dust shrouded every object. The dust caught an occasional sparkle from a light hanging somewhere in the distance.

“Listen,” Howard whispered.

Skritch-skritch, skritch-skritch.

“It’s coming from the direction of the light,” said Frances. “Come on.” And she headed off between a stuffed raccoon and an aluminum Christmas tree with Howard close behind her.

The two explorers made their way past stacks of old books. These leather-bound encyclopedias, textbooks, and dictionaries stood in long, tall rows, arranged in such odd angles that they formed a twisting maze.

Frances and Howard walked slowly and silently. The book-stack labyrinth led them left and right, forward and backward, zigzagging into dead ends and around in circles. At last, when the light shone nearly overhead and the *skritch-skritch* sound was quite clear, the maze ended.

A final turn brought the pair into a large dusty room formed by four more book stack walls.

“Apples,” said Howard, upon examining the room. “Everything is covered with them.”

“Looks like it,” said Frances.

Indeed there seemed to be an apple stitched, stenciled, or painted on every object in the place. Watercolor paintings of apples hung from the walls. Apples were carved into the legs of a wooden chair and table. The cupboards bore paintings of apples and a quilt printed with apple designs covered a dusty bed. The dusty light hanging from the ceiling wore a shade in the shape of an apple, and the pigeons fluttering in the rafters overhead occasionally dropped a white spot onto an apple-shaped rug.

Frances and Howard took this all in before their eyes fell upon a rocking chair with its back bent into the shape of an apple. *Skritch-skritch, skritch-skritch*, it went each time it rocked back and forth.

In the chair sat a large, burly man with a dusty black beard. His eyes were closed and his chin rested on a red bowtie above his broad chest. A rim of frizzy black hair circled a bald spot on his head like a bird’s nest. A dusty book lay open in his large lap. The man’s bearded face, his rumpled tweed jacket, and the wire-rimmed spectacles ready to drop off the end of his nose were familiar, for this was the very man whose picture hung above the doorway of W. T. Melon Elementary School.

“It’s Walter T. Melon,” Howard whispered. “W. T. Melon himself.”

“It looks like him,” said Frances. “But I thought he was dead or something.”

The man’s eyes opened. He raised his head and pushed back his spectacles with a finger. Noticing the visitors he smiled through his whiskers.

“Ah, wonderful ones,” he said. “What took you so long to get here?” He snapped his book shut, and a spout of dust shot upward. “Frances and Howard, come in. Come in.”

Frances and Howard exchanged glances. Not until a pigeon dropping smacked the floor behind them did they step into the room.

“That’s right. Come in. Take a seat,” said Mr. Melon, gesturing toward a sofa. “Don’t stand on politeness. Please sit down.”

The two third-graders sidled across the room. They sat on the edge of a sofa upholstered with an apple pattern. Their eyes remained fixed on the large, dusty man slowly rocking in his chair.

Finally Howard ventured to say, “Can I ask you something?”

Mr. Melon locked his fingers together across his ample stomach. “Certainly, Howard,” he said. “Questions are an excellent way to learn something about anything.”

“How did you know we were coming?” asked Howard. “How did you know our names?”

“Ah, another excellent way of learning something about anything is by listening,” said the man. He cupped a hand behind his ear. “And when you live above a classroom as I do, you learn many important things. Now listen.”

Frances and Howard sat perfectly still. Sure enough, they could hear the tall teacher’s raspy snores coming up through the floorboards.

“You see, wonderful ones,” said Mr. Melon, “I hear everything that goes on in the room at the end of the hall—every question and every answer, every moan and groan, every grind of the pencil sharpener and squeak of chalk, every snicker, song, whispered secret, hiccup, cheer, and every word your teacher says, softly or shouted. Of course I overheard his ranting and raving this morning. So tell me—I’ve been waiting all morning to hear—what message did you leave Rosalie on the computer?”

Frances and Howard grinned together. Perhaps here was someone who could appreciate a good practical joke. As they told the story, Mr. Melon rocked in his chair

and stroked his beard. When the story was over he slapped his knee once, sending up another spout of dust.

“Very creative,” he said. “How did you ever come up with such a clever idea? Originality is also an excellent way to learn something about anything. Now how about a snack? Help yourselves to an apple.”

Mr. Melon’s guests reached for two shiny red apples in a bowl on the table. In unison they took large, juicy bites. No apple ever tasted better.

While munching, Frances studied the tall book stacks that formed the walls of the little room. She swallowed. “Looks like you do a lot of reading, Mr. Melon,” she said. “Isn’t reading another excellent way to learn something about anything?”

“Mr. Leeks, our custodian, told us you were once a great teacher,” added Howard.

Mr. Melon’s smile doubled in length. “Once a teacher, always a teacher,” he said. “Indeed, I was one of the original teachers.”

“Original teachers?” said Frances.

“You mean there was a time before teachers?” asked Howard.

Here Mr. Melon rocked forward in his chair until his visitors could see twinkles in his black eyes. “Oh, no, wonderful ones,” he said. “There were always teachers. But there was a time before teachers lived on this continent. And I was on the first boat that brought them here.”

Frances froze with her apple near her lips. “But where were the teachers before that?” she said.

“Yeah, where do teachers come from?” Howard asked.

Mr. Melon leaned farther forward. “Apple Island,” he said, lowering his voice. “An island far out in the Atlantic Ocean. Even the most clever satellites in space have yet to detect our island. A thick layer of chalk dust shrouds it most of the year.”

Frances and Howard again bit into their apples at the same time. They looked at the burly man with eyes that said, “Go on, go on.”

“Now, I’m sorry to tell you, for centuries Apple Island was divided between the teachers in the north and the teachers in the south,” Mr. Melon continued. “The south, you might be interested to learn, is where only crabapples grow. That’s where crabby teachers come from. I lived in the north, filled with marvelous meadows, splendid coffee plantations, and orchards of those delicious apples you are eating.”

“But why did you leave?” asked Howard.

“Sounds like a wonderful place,” said Frances.

Mr. Melon’s smile disappeared. “The northern teachers and the southern teachers had a squabble,” he said solemnly. “Not unlike some of the squabbles I hear down below in the room at the end of the hall. Neither side would give in. Neither side would say I’m sorry. Not even our leader, Prince Apple, who lived in the Office Palace at the foot of Chalk Mountain, could solve this dispute. So the northern teachers built an ark and left.”

“And you sailed to America,” said Frances.

“And built schools,” said Howard.

“Precisely, wonderful ones,” said Mr. Melon. “And we built classrooms in the fashion of our former houses. And next to each school we built a miniature version of the Grand Playground that ran for miles across Apple Island.”

Frances and Howard champed on their apples as they tried to picture a mile-long playground. A splatter of pigeon droppings woke them from their daydreams.

“But what are you doing up here?” said Frances.

“Why do you live above our classroom?” asked Howard.

“It’s time to show you something,” said Mr. Melon.

Here the man rose to his feet and stepped over to a dusty shelf on the back wall. He picked up a large vial filled with purple smoke. When he pulled off the stopper, Francis and Howard caught the scent of something familiar, the aroma of a classroom on a Monday morning—part Janitor floor wax, part Magic Marker, part smelly tennis shoe.

“*Voilà!*” said Mr. Melon, swirling the glass container. The purple smoke spun like a tornado. “See. See what’s in there.”

Amidst the smoke Frances and Howard saw images of numbers and letters all whirling madly around the vial.

“What’s it for?” said Frances.

“Is it dangerous?” asked Howard.

“Perfectly harmless,” said Mr. Melon. “It’s a mixture of chalk dust, pencil shavings, eraser crumbs, and a special ink brought with me from Apple Island.”

“So what good is that purple stuff?” said Frances.

“What have you done with it?” asked Howard.

The burly man paced the room from one book wall to another, swirling his vial. “I’ve sprinkled this elixir in every school in the world,” he said. “My formula is what makes a classroom an extra marvelous place. After all, if boys and girls are made to spend one hundred eighty days a year in them, shouldn’t classrooms be the most wondrous of places?”

“I’ve been in classrooms since kindergarten and never found anything special about them,” said Frances.

“Me neither,” said Howard.

“Oh, wonderful ones,” said Mr. Melon. “Has your teacher ever called on you to answer a tricky math problem and suddenly you hear the answer from somewhere in the back of the room?”

“I suppose,” Frances admitted.

“And did you ever forget to do your homework and that turns out to be the day your teacher is absent?”

“Yeah, once,” said Howard.

Mr. Melon slapped the side of his pants, causing more dust clouds. “That is my Apple Island potion at work,” he said. “But of course those are simple tricks. My latest formula, here in this vial, is much stronger— new and improved. In fact, this latest potion is still being tested in my laboratory.”

Howard gave the room a quick once-over. “This is your laboratory?” he said, as a white pigeon dropping fell near his feet.

“Doesn’t look like it,” said Frances.

“But my laboratory isn’t here. It’s down below. My laboratory is your classroom—the room at the end of the hall. That’s where my strongest elixir is tested.”

Before Howard and Frances had a chance to ask what Walter T. Melon meant by this, the dusty man stopped his pacing and held a finger to his lips.

From below came the stomping of shoes and the sound of muffled voices.

“Recess is over,” said Frances. “Our class is coming in.”

“We have to get out of here,” whispered Howard.

“How quickly recess time can pass,” said Mr. Melon, returning to his rocker. “I’ve enjoyed our talk, wonderful ones. A good conversation is an excellent way to learn something about anything.”

Like two frightened mice, Frances and Howard darted from the room and through the book maze. At the trap door they peered down into the coat closet.

Directly below them, Rosalie was hanging up her jacket. She left the closet unaware of the two pairs of legs dangling over her head. The instant the closet door closed, two bodies fell to the floor, landing in a jumbled pile of legs and arms.

Howard rose to his feet, slapping the dust off his pants. “Now we’re in for it,” he said.

“Looks like it,” said Frances. “Just wait until the teacher catches us coming out of here.”

Upon emerging from the closet, however, the pair found the class sitting quietly at their seats. Up front the tall teacher’s head remained on his desk. His snores filled the classroom.

Frances and Howard smiled at each other. Without a word they raced to the computer. They found Rosalie’s thumb drive and inserted it into the USB port.

“What should we write this time?” asked Frances.

Howard pointed to the ceiling. “Do you believe all that stuff Mr. Melon told us up there?” he asked. “You know, about Apple Island and his special elixir.”

“Not a chance,” said Frances. “He was just a batty old man who has been up with the pigeons too long.”

As she spoke, the computer screen flashed. Frances and Howard shot back in their chairs. They gawked at the large words appearing on the screen.

THANKS FOR THE VISIT.

COME AGAIN SOON.

W. T. MELON