

## My War With Miss Tiergas - *Blackie*

In grades 4 and 5 I attended the Franklin School on Engle Street down the hill from our house. Englewood was arranged in socioeconomic tiers with the rich up on the hill, the poor in the low-land, and the middle in the middle. Of course, I walked to school. There were two highlights. The first was the goldfish pond on the manicured grounds of the house of one of the hill's grandees, and the other was Al who ran the body shop in Dunwoody's Chevrolet dealership. Al was always good for a few grunts of recognition.

At lunchtime I walked home. On one of my first days in Franklin School, exiting the school grounds while having a one-person catch with a tennis ball, a big arm reached over my shoulder to snare my tennis ball. It was Miss Tierney's arm and hand, Miss Tierney the Principal, who from that day forth has always been to me, Miss Tiergas, or just plain Tiergas.

Still holding my tennis ball, Tiergas pushed me to her office. There she opened wide her closet door. Behind the door there was a barrier three feet high, and behind the barrier, a collection of play-yard balls confiscated by Tiergas. She stood back from the closet; then she one-bounced my tennis ball beyond the barrier. Lost. She told me I was excused. But Tiergas had not seen the last of me.

The back of Franklin School was fenced, and Tiergas said that no student should touch the fence. There was one exception. If in a game of softball the ball was hit over the fence, an elaborate system had been created for retrieval of the ball. One player would formally ask the permission of the playground supervisor to open the gate to enable crossing over no-man's land to repossess the ball. This procedure was so much more diverting than the official game that it became everybody's objective to hit the ball over the fence. Officially a ball hit over the fence was a grand **out** which retired the side at bat, but the players had their own scoring system in which the team which caused the most disruption by hitting the ball over the fence was considered the winner. The best hitter was a lanky black girl by the name of Barbara, so we'd all conspire to get Barbara up to bat as often as possible; it did not matter for which team.

The fence was sacred territory.

It happened that my good friend Joe Saliba had an uncle whose property adjoined the back of Franklin School. In the backyard of Joe Saliba's uncle there was a flat-roofed garage. From this roof one could jump onto the property of Franklin School without ever touching the fence. Joe Saliba's uncle said he didn't care if we jumped from his garage roof.

Every day Joe Saliba and I would get to school by jumping off Joe's uncle's garage roof. When Tiergas became aware of this outrage, she made up a new rule which was that we could not **fly** over the fence even if we did not touch it. To enforce her new law, Tiergas would hide behind the school's tool shed, pouncing forth just as Joe and I hit the ground.

Many mornings I sat in Miss Tierney's office as punishment for jumping over the fence. I've always wondered what lessons I missed because of these hours of detention. Maybe I'd know Brazil's leading exports or even have reliable control of the mid-section of the alphabet if I had been in the classroom for those many hours. The only truly painful part of the punishment was knowing that my tennis ball was only a few feet away in the closet.

In order to relate the last and dramatic episode in my war with Miss Tiergas I must digress. Every evening, Monday through Friday, it was permitted by my mother to listen to **one** 15 minute adventure on the radio. The choice was agonizing, *because Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy, Hop Herrigan, Terry and the Pirates, and Superman* all told their adventures at this time. The choice of one was agonizing. I admit, with shame, that when mother was not vigilant, I would forget to turn off the radio when the one program was over. The one radio in the house was a complex shortwave set on my father's desk. He had purchased this set so he could listen to Edward R. Murrow's broadcasts from London and follow the European news. The radio sat on one corner of his grand desk behind which was a stately leather-covered swivel chair. As I listened to my program, I would swivel around at top speed.

One day on a slow swivel my eyes caught the titles of the New Jersey Statutes. (The Congressional Statutes were on the other side of the library.) There in front of me was the bound compendium of New Jersey's Statutes on Education. I thought to myself, "This is me; I should know what's in here." I took down the black-bound volume and

checked the index. Most of the subjects looked frightfully boring, but one stood out—*toilets*. I had no idea my father had books on such interesting topics.

I perused the Toilet chapter where I discovered that the state of New Jersey had a formula requiring a certain number of toilets per student population. The next day my investigation revealed that the Boys' Room of Franklin School did not comply with the New Jersey State requirement. We did not have a sufficient number of toilets.

Now, back to Miss Tiergas. A few days after my toilet discovery, Miss Tiergas apprehended me flying over the fence from Joe Saliba's uncle's garage roof. In a scene which we'd enacted many times, Miss Tiergas dragged me to her office and plunked me down in one of the straight-backed chairs for recalcitrant students. She was about to turn to go into her private office, when I let her have it. Glorious retribution! "Miss Tierney, we do not have the required number of toilets in the Boys' Room."

The strange thing is that I have no recollection, absolutely no recollection, of what followed. Did I faint? Did Tiergas hit me? Did a host of angels appear singing *The Hallelujah Chorus*? I just cannot remember.

But there is one small post-script. My teacher from Franklin School came once a year to have tea with my mother. Did the teacher visit the mothers of all children in the classroom or just the mothers in the grand mansions on the hill? I don't know, but I have my suspicions. The tea was formal. A maid would bring the tea set in on a tray to be placed on the round tea-table supported by the three legs of carved elephant heads with tusks. Mother would carefully pour the tea through the silver strainer and inquire about the guest's desire for a lemon slice, sugar, or milk. Then, the discussion would begin.

I heard enough to know that **this** discussion, the one following the toilet episode and the innumerable arrests for fence-jumping, was very serious. My mother would never criticize a teacher in my hearing, but neither would she ever try to tell me to conform to injustice. So mother never said a word to me about the teacher conference of that year. But the next year I went to another school. I believe my mother knew that Miss Tierney's ineptness and injustice bordering on cruelty to young children could not be tolerated.

A second quick post-script. In one of my last days at the Franklin School, some reprobate youngster wrote a very bad word about Tiergas on the side of the school. The

word was so horrible that it was covered by a sheet and a policeman stood guard as we entered the school. Often, as an adult, I find myself wondering what that horrible word was. Did the author of that outrage own a confiscated tennis ball in Miss Tiergas's collection in the closet? I just don't know. But **I did not write that horrible word** about Tiergas, and I'm not even certain that in the fifth grade I had a vocabulary of words so horrible that a policeman had to stand guard all day.

