

On sacred ground

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Miss Collings's School cultivated formative minds in a spacious Queen Anne surrounded by enormous beech trees in Newport. It is where I first attended school, beginning in Transition and continuing through Third Grade.

Miss Collings did not believe in anything so babyish as nursery school and didn't offer it. Nor, apparently, did she want to have anything to do with kindergarten. She was interested in progress. She was interested in Transition, a sort of advanced placement program for five-year-olds. I was interested in Transition, and even at a tender age felt delight being in transit. Also, since I was raised Catholic, Transition had to me Purgatory overtones, so I wanted to make sure I did well and moved up the ladder—not get stuck there, forcing my entire family to pray me out and into First Grade!

Miss Ada Collings was scrawny, British and unmarried—I remember my parents using the word "spinster"—and she owned two old homes she'd turned into schools on the same street, about a quarter-mile apart. The one I initially attended housed Transition through Second Grade, and the other, grades three through eight.

On the first day of school, my mother dropped me off with a minimum of fuss, and I climbed the broad, wooden front steps and mounted the circular porch, en route to the first classroom on the left, a former parlor.

I entered the room semi-confidently, as I knew how to write all numerals 1 through 10, taught to me by my grandmother on a chalkboard in her back entranceway. Especially memorable was the number 8, formed by making a headless snowman.

Miss Collings's was homey and I felt safe and appreciated. I enjoyed finger painting and learning to read, as well as playing musical chairs in the adjacent room that had a piano and was separated from our work room by the romance of pocket doors.

But, so much for Transition; transiting up and out to First Grade was what really mattered. First Grade, where you seriously got down to the business of going to school all day. First Grade was upstairs in a room that handled maybe 12 of us with our own desks and looked out onto the backyard, where there were swing sets and an area to play dodge ball and harass each other during recess.

I fell in love with my First Grade teacher, Miss Taylor. She wasn't very tall and had smooth and shiny dark hair and a shapely figure. She favored tight skirts and white blouses that buttoned up the front, which she kept tucked into her skirt. When she was sitting at her desk at the front of the classroom, I would think of excuses to walk up and ask her a question, so I could look down the front of her blouse at her cleavage. Is this normal for a 6-year-old boy? I do not know, but it was normal for me.

Miss Taylor liked me too. I could tell by the way she smiled at me with her small, red-lipsticked mouth,



and she often selected me to clap the powdery erasers clean at the end of the day, or race outside to take down the swings. All was well in my cozy little world, as I sidled up to her desk in my cuffed corduroys and nice shirts buttoned at the wrist, asking trumped-up questions so that I could stare down into the deep crease that was formed by her breasts pressing together.

Then she vanished, as did my childhood. Our family moved away, and I went to college and graduated and worked different jobs in different places and had relationships and other complications, and through the unexpected changes that life brings, ended up back in Rhode Island. Not in Newport, yet not too far away, as Rhode Island is, after all, the smallest state in the Union by a large measure—no more than a half-hour's drive from stem to stern.

By this time, my life had become a cord so tangled that every time I moved it seemed to grow tighter and shorter, and one night I was driven to get out and away—just get away and listen to some music and have a little fun. So I got in the car and drove down the highway and across the bridge.

I found a blues club and listened to music and shot some pool and did some drinking, and while I was shooting pool, I met a pretty girl with long brown hair who kept getting prettier and we agreed that I would follow her back to her place.

Her place, it turned out, was Miss Collings's School, Transition through Second Grade, which was now apartments.

I didn't say anything about it as we parked beneath where a beech tree had been...as we climbed the front steps and crossed the porch...as we marched past locked doors to Transition and up the stairs where she unlocked the door to Miss Taylor's First Grade room.

She was all excited and excused herself to go to the bathroom while I drifted to the window and pushed apart heavy drapes. The swing sets and play area were gone; it was just a harshly lit asphalt parking lot. A toilet flushed and she came back and sat down on a sofa bed that was where Miss Taylor's desk had been. She playfully held up a condom and said, "You're going to have to wear this funny hat."

What could I say? With a pained expression that could've meant anything, I told her I had to go. It would be OK. After all, it had just been bar-kissing with a stranger and an offer to wear a funny hat. She could simply chalk me up as a guy with problems.

I drove home with the window wide open, the cool night air with the smell of ocean in it blowing across my face. At least I hadn't added another knot to my life. And I imagined myself a spinster on a swing, watching chalk dust billow up as a child clapped together thick felt erasers. I was alone, but there was hope and I felt mercifully clean.