

The Across the Tracks Girl



Hessville, *Shepland*, was across these tracks

Jerry Woodfill

“Why couldn’t I like a Brantwood girl?” There were plenty of Brantwood sixth grade girls at Lincoln Grade School. But only one girl attracted me...a ravishing blond, beautiful before the time when girls should look like movie stars. But she wasn’t from Brantwood. Though she lived only a block beyond the tracks bordering Lincoln School’s campus, she was definitely from across the Monon Railroad tracks.

I was eleven years old, solidly in the years of parental consent so that I couldn’t drink, drive, join the army, or marry without it. But I was a dutiful child. For me, the legalities of parental consent extended far beyond the courts. Mom’s influence, though unspoken, put Catholic and Democrat women off limits. (She was both a rabid Republican and Missouri Synod Lutheran.) I wasn’t sure about her thoughts on non-Brantwoodian girls. Conveniently, I wouldn’t ask about it.

Now the dilemma was that which vexed all courtships, “I like her, but does she like me?” Only Adam was free of such uncertainty. God made an offer Adam couldn’t turn down...it was the only one he had, Eve. But I had options, even among the Brantwoodians. And later I would come to my senses and date only Brantwoodian women. For now, no girl on the planet equaled the girl from across the tracks. I don’t recall how I showed my admiration, but somehow it was known among my sixth grade classmates.

My primitive courtship techniques make me think I’d been better suited as a spy rather than a NASA engineer. Here’s why: To gather evidence that my “across the tracks” girl liked me, I devised a test. The basis for the test was whether a girl looked your way more than other competitors. I examined myself. Didn’t my eyes track her every move because I liked her. Of course, I’d been careful to only glance, lest she know of my admiration. Likewise, she should be looking my way more than others.

If I could collect data confirming my theory, I would have sure evidence I was her favorite. With such proof, I would have the confidence to ask her for a date. (At NASA we call such a feasibility study, i.e., arranging two trial scenarios.

In this case, the options were: Does she most often look at me or other boys in the class?)

With a 2006 video cell phone, the assessment would have been quite easy. But in 1955, the closest means of clandestine surveillance was a make-shift rear viewing mirror. Actually, it was the paring knife Mom packed with my lunch. Its purpose was for peeling my apple, but I had other more useful plans. The knife was ideal, having a shiny three quarter inch wide blade. I practiced orienting the blade’s pitch, roll and yaw with respect to my classmates’ seats. Only desks behind and in adjacent rows could be viewed.

The initial scan was sobering. The third row to my right, four seats to the rear sat a massive sixth grade girl. The term now used to describe her is “morbidly obese.” Her eyes bored into the back of my head like the cross-hairs of an assassin’s rifle scope. She definitely, by my hypothesis, liked me.

“Better beware not to encourage her affections,” was my thought.

Applying a thirty degrees yaw to my left captured a classmate mining for a “booger” in the recesses of his right nostril. Apparently, the excavation was an arduous task. This was the kind that came out only by a vibratory, rotational, jack-hammer-like, scrapping using the little finger as a combination awl and flat blade screw driver. It so repulsed me that I immediately pitched my periscope-like blade 30 degrees downward. His shoes came in view. He was sock-less. “Probably one of those southern interlopers,” I’d heard about them moving into the trailer park across the tracks.

“Where was the object of my surveillance? Yesterday, her desk had been at the far side of the room, the door side, about eight to ten seats from the blackboard. Since I was toward the front, in the third seat, an orientation control operation equal to any performed by astronauts in route to the Moon would be required. Having made two scans, I feared my intent would be obvious. Stealthily, I slid the knife-blade under my Redman Yellow lined paper pad. I would try again later.

Another opportunity was not to be that day. That afternoon the event which brought inexplicable fear into each of my classmates for years to come happened. It had to do with the after lunch recess. One would think that fifteen minutes of semi-controlled riotous uproar would be insufficient to merit a major playground felony. Perhaps, the extended half hour recess would be ample time for such crime. But fifteen minutes? Only misdemeanors could be perpetrated in so brief a period. Yet, that day, wild lawless confusion reigned on Lincoln School grounds.

It is a fact of male/female maturation that sixth grade girls are more than equal physically and in every other way than males of like age. Biology ordains the age of a sixth grader as sort of a peaking in girls’ heights overall size, strength and innate craftiness. This characteristic led to sort of a gang culture among my classmates, the girls versus boys, a pair of gangs composed of 30 eleven and twelve year old playground fighters.

The carnage remains memorable even now. I was captured by the enemy, a gaggle of five Amazon-like-female fighters, the morbidly obese one among my pursuers. My comrades, incensed by the five to one mismatch, rallied. Tossing my captives down, pulling their hair, even hurling playground rocks (hauled on site from the depths of the Wabash River bed) at the ravenous pack of she-wolves freed me from incarceration.

My recollection was that each army of 15 had a place of incarceration for captives. Ours was the ten foot tall iron “jungle gym”, a maze of iron bars, not unlike the Lake County Jail. Theirs was a covered open sided porch-like room in the side of Lincoln School. (I guessed it was designed to shield students from rain during recess.)

The school principal was returning from lunch at exactly the moment my comrades launched that counter attack which extricated me from savage feminine tortures. (One boy said he’d been kissed on the cheek while imprisoned.) Seeing the rock throwing, throw downs, and hair pulling of those abused girls was his only evidence of misdeeds. He had not witnessed the ten fold greater violence wrecked upon our numbers earlier. Immediately, he concluded the male gang must be punished to the fullest extent of 1950s style corporal academic punishment.

The principal delegated our teacher as judge and jury. After informing him of our charges, the principal assigned him the punishment determination as well as the execution phase of the process. Well I knew of these types of judicial juvenile academic proceedings. In the past, I was often the subject of swift retribution from a cranky teacher. (She had skipped her morning coffee.)

My weasel-like yips and chuckles in at least two instances aggravated a female educator beyond her limit. She would forego a gentle request of, “Please be quiet, Jerry?” Both teachers responded with the usual in my case, a cutting slash of the palm of their hands against the side of my face. Of the two slapping blows in subsequent years, the second might have been fatal. It was administered by a woman twice the size of that actress who played the lead roll in “Throw Mama Off the Train.” The blow caught me unaware. It had the impact of one of those karate chops which would become popular in America twenty years later. Fortunately, I slumped in my chair, sort of like a drunk driver who survives an automobile accident because his muscles are relaxed and pliable when the jolting impact of a collision occurs.

She swung that open pork-chop (actually more the size of a beef-chop) hand extended from her outstretched arm like Sam Sneed swung his driver on a 600 yard par five. It caught the left side of my face, from behind the ear to the tip of the chin. My slumped, limp 120 pound body recoiled upward and toward the aisle. Only the cross arm of the desk supporting the writing surface kept me from flying into the aisle atop Eddie Catchet, my friend across the aisle.

But this day’s punishment promised to, at least, equal my karate chopping teacher’s. Our judge and jury of one offered a plea bargain. Those who repented by offering both an apology and confession of the name of the “ring-leader” would receive a suspended sentence. Proudly, not one of our magnificent fifteen warriors stepped forward.

“Alright then,” he grinned the smile of the actor who played the Boston Strangler and continued,

“All of you boys line up shoulder to shoulder facing the blackboard.”

Each of us fought off irrational fearful thoughts as to the extent of the punishment. These were the days of the Korean War. We all knew of the death marches, the water tortures, not to mention psychological punishment called “brain washing.”

Perhaps, brain washing might yet be administered for one of us to “rat”

on a friend.

Apparently, all of us would receive the same punishment. I looked around the room. No paddle in sight. No “cat of nine tails.” Fortunately, my knife remained hidden under my writing pad. The blackboard pointer rested against the chalk ledge, but it had a rubber tip. It would do little harm as a device for corporal punishment.

Then I saw the torturer’s weapon, the terminator’s enforcer. This would not be easy to endure. Our executioner spoke, “Each of you extend your arms, elbows at your waist, forearms side-by-side, palms of your hands facing the floor, *knuckles up*.”

“Oh, no! It’s the awful knuckles-rapping-ruler torture.”

Only the suturing of an open wound compared with the pain felt from the wood ruler knuckle rap. No fleshly buffer protected the knuckles as did the fatty tissue covering the nerves of the buttocks.

“If only that three foot plank used by my third grade teacher had been available,” but it wasn’t.

Anger welled up within the deep recesses of my spirit, “Those evil girl savages deserve this not me.”

“Each of you will receive three raps for your offense.”

The trite clique followed,

“Let this be a lesson to you.”

My thought was, “How can this be a lesson? A lesson of injustice? No judge and jury of our peers? Our gang should be freed as NOT GUILTY!”

I was the middle felon in the line of the fifteen guilty. The greatest trauma came to those who imagined the pain as administration of the ruler-knuckle-rapping began.

The teacher, perhaps, fearing doing too much damage began with modest blows to the knuckles. When his victims failed to at least grimace, choke slightly, clench teeth, or let out a brief cry, the subsequent blows became more fierce in lashing force. As a result I couldn’t tell whether subsequent victims felt pain commensurate with their screams or were bluffing. My assessment? It was a little of both.

However, most disconcerting were the chuckles, smiles, grins, mock screams, and general obnoxious sounds from the gallery of fifteen she-devil onlookers. I relished the thought of our next encounter. We’d lock the lot of them with chicken-wire mesh behind the jungle-gym bars of our playground prison. Eddie was receiving his “raps of correction.” My time had come. I looked into my teacher’s face as he raised his weapon of destruction, my boney knuckles naked in the path of the twelve inch guillotine.

Suddenly, I saw it, if only for a fleeting moment. His right eye lid sort of winked at me as he brought that ruler-like-machete down in macabre fashion. (It had a 12 inch long metal ribbon inserted in a slot along its length.)

I don’t know how to explain what happened next except to liken it to those late night wrestling matches seen on television. The combatants strike with blows that, by all appearances, might kill a normal person, yet are endured with such resilience that their only impact is a grunt or scream. I always wondered if those wrestlers were really wrestling or were behaving like movie stunt men acting out a stunt.

I think my teacher had the skill of those wrestlers. Every one of his

ruler-knuckle-raps swung downward like Lash LaRue’s snake whip, but felt no more painful than a rubber ruler. I, like my comrades, let out a horrifying death-like guttural groan after each blow. Was I alone in receiving the reprieve, or, did others? I would never learn.

But what happened next had to be a Providential act of the highest order.

With his most serious voice, he said,

“Now in order to prevent such fighting on the playground in the future.”

This would be added punishment for our transgressions...

“I am rearranging our room seating. No boy will sit next to another boy. No girl will be beside another girl.”

And then,

“Jerry, I’ll begin with you. Sit in the seat by the door.”

Then the miraculous,

“And beside you I’m seating Sherry Jones.”

“Wow, no more knife needed, the *across the tracks girl* is my seat mate.”

And best of all, her smile said it all. She wanted to sit by me as much I wanted to sit by her.

Weeks later, the *across the tracks girl* was to be my first date ever.

That was the best punishment I ever had...

Audio Dramatization as a Reading Comprehension Enhancement Tool

by Jerry Woodfill

What value does listening to an oral recitation have for reading and writing? Does retentive listening benefit rhetoric? Perhaps, the most obvious proof is the use and abuse of pronoun forms. Children raised among parents and siblings whose conversation *butchers* the use of “I”, using it as an object or “me” as a sentence’s subject, do likewise. Hearing correct pronunciation along with proper word usage tends to replicate itself among hearers.

Who has not cringed hearing a friend say, “Me and my brother went right home.” Or the pastor deliver a Sunday morning sermon with the appellation, “That snake fooled Adam and Eve, both of them, he and she.” The following dramatic reading has two goals: to acquaint the student with vocabulary words in the context of a narrative while encouraging retentive listening skills. Both aims are reinforced by testing the extent to which the hearer listened.

Actually, the test augments retentive comprehension, both by knowing it will be given and through recollection as each question is addressed.

The Across the Tracks Girl offers such a two fold exercise, i.e., a spelling vocabulary list as well as a retention test given immediately following the oral dramatization. To demonstrate the value of oral-dramatized reading, another group can be given the same test after silently reading *The Across the Tracks Girl*. And taking the test. Test scores can then be compared.



“Cross the Tracks Girl”



Members of the Lincoln Gangs

Audio Dramatization as a Reading Comprehension Enhancement Tool

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The Across the Tracks Girl Comprehension Questions (Enter answers on the line to left of questions.)

- _____ 1. Jerry's girlfriend was a neighbor.
(T)rue or (F)alse
- _____ 2. Jerry's Mother thought "mixed dating" was? _____
a. dating a girl across the tracks
b. dating a Catholic or Democrat
c. dating someone from another school
d. dating someone of a different nationality
- _____ 3. Jerry was repulsed by a classmate's____?
a. Belching
b. Vomiting
c. Spitting
d. Boogering
- _____ 4. One of the girls who captured Jerry was:
a. morbidly obese
b. a junior lady wrestler
c. Mary Poppins
d. 13 years old, she'd failed twice
- _____ 5. Jerry tried to discover whether a girl liked hm by _____.
a. asking his friends to ask her
b. having his mother call her mother
c. counting the times she lined up for lunch near him
d. secretly watching her reflection in a mirror-like device
- _____ 6. Why did Jerry and his friends receive a punishment?
a. They had been tardy returning from recess.
b. Someone had seen them harm girls on the playground..
c. They had posted inappropriate graffiti in the teachers' lounge.
d. A *Whoopy Cushion* had been placed in the teacher's chair.
- _____ 7. How did Jerry discover his teacher was bluffing?
a. The knuckle rap didn't hurt very much.
b. His friends let out frightening unnatural screams.
c. He knew corporal punishment was forbidden in 1950s grade schools.
d. An eyelid flickered.
- _____ 8. Why did Jerry survive the slapping blow inflicted on him by his teacher?
a. He'd seen a wrestling match where the combatants stiffened their bodies.
b. He used his Geography Book as a shield.
c. He was a junior black-belt in Karate.
d. His limp body was held in place by his desk.
- _____ 9. With what did Jerry compare the punishment?
a. The Indiana electric-chair.
b. A hangman's noose.
c. A guillotine.
d. A mouse-trap
- _____ 10. What did the teacher additionally do to prevent classroom disorder?
a. Assigned one boy to "tell-on" talking girls and one boy to tattle on boys. .
b. Turned all the chairs around to spy on students from behind for mischief. .
c. Played the radio program THE SHADOW KNOWS to frighten the class into proper behavior.
d. Alternated seating so that no boy sat beside a girl and visa-versa.
- _____ 11. What were the "raps of correction?"
a. Slang for (*w*)rappings of ribbon about the wrists in "handcuff" fashion for punishment
b. Blows to the knuckles
c. A snare-drum beat made famous by a prison band
d. Gentle pats administered by a parent for "Fs" in conduct
- _____ 12. Sam Sneed was a _____.
a. Golfer
b. Rock'n Roll lead singer
c. Famous radio star of a detective series
d. A cartoon character akin to a fox who always sneezed
- _____ 13. What did Jerry NOT think about his punishment?
a. Is was just.
b. The girls' gang, he deemed as the "She Devils," should have been punished instead.

- c. The verdict of the school honor court, a jury of his peers, was unjust.
- d. The teacher had chosen an altogether humane punishment.

_____ 14. What punishment did Jerry equate to the teacher's?

- a. water torture
- b. whipping
- c. stitching an open wound
- d. paddling

_____ 15. Jerry yelled aloud because _____.

- a. the pain was severe
- b. he wanted his friends to think the blows hurt
- c. yelling before he was struck might cause his teacher to ease the blows
- d. his stomach cramped as a result of the school lunch he ate before recess

_____ 16. Why was Jerry slapped by his teacher?

- a. She was a robust woman practicing Martial Arts.
- b. Jerry was mistaken for his friend, Eddie Catchet, the actual talker.
- c. Jerry's talking in class required punishment.
- d. The teacher missed her coffee that morning.

_____ 17. Who of the listed cowboy actors below reminded Jerry of the punishment?

- a. Tom Mix

- b. Hopalong Cassidy.
- c. Lash LaRue
- d. Roy Rogers

_____ 18. What evil criminal did the teacher remind Jerry of?

- a. John Dillinger
- b. Goldfinger
- c. The Boston Strangler
- d. Charles Manson

_____ 19. Jerry's plan for revenge upon the girl gang was to...

- a. lying that the girls were seen smoking behind the janitor's shed
- b. put a fake grass snake in their lunch sacks
- c. incarcerate them with "chicken-wire" inside the playground jungle-gym.
- d. put chewing gum on their desk seat.

_____ 20. To what did Jerry compare a student's act of "booger-removal" _____.

- a. a surgical procedure requiring extreme dexterity.
- b. a doctor's prostate examination
- c. removing a scab from a sore
- d. mining with a screw-driver.

Word List

1. primitive	crude, coarse, simple
2. dutiful	obedient
3. clandestine	secret
4. feasibility	doable
5. scenario	situation
6. adjacent	next to, beside
7. obese	overweight
8. vexed	troubled
9. surveillance	secretly observe
10. misdemeanor	minor misdeed or petty crime
11. felon	crook, lawbreaker
12. maturation	growth, age
13. ravenous	zealous,
14. incarceration	imprisonment
15. retribution	revenge
16. irrational	not logical, crazy
17. obnoxious	distasteful, unlikable
18. machete	large heavy knife used as tool
19. resilience	elasticity
20. guttural	throaty, harsh