

COCKSURE

Mordecai Richler



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BOOKS BY MORDECAI RICHLER

FICTION

The Acrobats (1954)
Son of a Smaller Hero (1955)
A Choice of Enemies (1957)
The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (1959)
The Incomparable Atuk (1963)
Cocksure (1968)
The Stree (1969)
St. Urbain's Horseman (1971)
Joshua Then and Now (1980)
Solomon Gursky Was Here (1989)
Barney's Version (1997)

FICTION FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang (1975)
Jacob Two-Two and the Dinosaur (1987)
Jacob Two-Two's First Spy Case (1995)

HISTORY

Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!:
Requiem for a Divided Country (1992)
This Year in Jerusalem (1994)

TRAVEL

Images of Spain(1977)

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Shovelling Trouble (1972)
Notes on an Endangered Species and Others (1974)
The Great Comic Book Heroes and Other Essays (1978)
Home Sweet Home: My Canadian Album (1984)
Broadsides: Reviews and Opinions (1990)
Belling the Cat: Essays, Reports, and Opinions (1998)
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About the Author

DINO TOMASSO BRAKED BEFORE THE HIGH, FAMILIAR gates with the coupling snakes woven into the wrought iron. It was not necessary for him to show a pass, but he had to wait, drumming his three-fingered left hand against the steering wheel, while the armed, black-uniformed guard threw the lever that opened the gates and waved Tomasso's AC Cobra 427 through. Tomasso turned into the winding, cypress-lined driveway, whistling happily until he spotted Laughton sitting by the poolside.

Laughton, one of several doctors attached to the Star Maker's medical unit, was drinking with Gail, a pretty nurse in a bikini. "Time for a quick snort?" he asked.

"No. Sorry," Tomasso said, his voice wobbly.

"How you keeping?"

"Lousy. *Honestly.*"

"Hold on a minute." With a wink for Gail, Laughton whipped out an eye chart from under his towel and pointed a swizzle stick at the fifth line: U F J Z B H Q A. "Let's go," he said.

Tomasso reached for a tissue and wiped his forehead and the back of his thick, pleated neck. He squinted. "I'll try my best. J," he said, "T Y Z B ... um ... S ... N ... How am I doing?"

"You're faking, you bastard."

"You mean," Tomasso said, radiating innocence, "I may need glasses?"

Gail shrieked with laughter.

"You're a card, Dino," Laughton said, "you really are."

Tomasso laughed too, but ingratiatingly, without smiling. "How's tricks?" he asked.

Laughton indicated the blinking red light and locked doors of the mobile operating theater. The Star Maker's defrocked priest stood alongside, commiserating with one of the spare-part men.

"Oh, no," Tomasso said.

"Don't jump to conclusions. It's all because of the new nurse."

"Miss McInnes?"

"Bitch hadn't been told about the deep-freeze."

"*She defrosted,*" Gail squealed.

"Holy shit!"

With trembling hand, Tomasso flicked the AC Cobra 427 into gear and sped toward the beach house, pursued by their laughter. My God, my God, he thought, sliding out of the car favoring his right leg, which was artificial.

The ageless, undying Star Maker reclined in his customary wheelchair. Behind, sending a shiver through Tomasso yet again, there loomed the familiar portrait of the pernicious Chevalier d'Éon, at once the Star Maker's hero and heroine.

"Do you know why I sent for you, Dino?"

When Tomasso was summoned from Hollywood to the Star Maker's mansion in Las Vegas he calculated, not unreasonably, that he was at last to be designated crown prince of the empire. After all these years of sacrifice, he thought, unstinting labor and operations, he would be officially recognized heir apparent.

“No,” Tomasso lied hopefully.

“We hope to acquire a publishing house and a film studio in England. I want you to go to London and look after my interests there.”

Oh, no, this wasn't making him crown prince. This was even worse than a demotion. It was banishment.

Tomasso, who had been raised in the motion picture business, knew that London was not where you sent an heir apparent to be tested – it was the place whereto you shipped schlemiels to make son-in-law movies.

Son-in-law movies were produced by a studio chief's cousins, uncles, and sons-in-law, who had to be given something more than their fingers to twiddle: otherwise it wouldn't look nice for the family. Once, Tomasso remembered, these retarded relations were put in charge of the popcorn concession or distribution to ozoners, but that became too big; then they were allowed to sell rerun rights to TV, but then that became too big too; and so finally they were sent to England with blessings. A new breed of remittance men. In London, making zero pictures with zero actors, they still cost the family money, but the losses were negligible.

“I'm not going,” Tomasso said defiantly.

“In twenty-five years, Dino, you have never said no to me before.”

Tomasso looked at the floor, steadying himself.

“I have no heir. You are my son, Dino.”

How many times had he heard that before? Raising his head, astonished at his own courage, Tomasso said, “Go fuck yourself.”

Slowly, slowly, the Star Maker raised hands to face, shielding the bad eye. In the pause that ensued Tomasso dug his fingernails into the palms of his hands, making them bleed.

“Go ... Why, you're committing suicide, Dino.”

Tomasso fell to his knees. “Forgive me, Star Maker.”

The Star Maker's face creased. It was, Tomasso supposed, a smile. “But why, Dino?”

“Oh, Star Maker, please, it's just that I dared to dream of bigger things when you sent for me. The words leaped out. I didn't mean it.”

The Star Maker pressed a button, summoning his private secretary, Miss Mott. The Star Maker pressed another button and they were joined by two black-uniformed motorcycle riders.

“Say it again, Dino.”

“I'd cut my tongue out first, Star Maker.”

“No, no. Miss Mott, get this down. I'll want eight copies, witnessed and signed by Mr. Tomasso.”

“But it was a slip of the tongue, so help me. We don't need witnesses.”

“It's for your own protection, Dino.”

“Is it?”

“You said it to me first.”

“I've given you the best years of my life, Star Maker. Anything you asked, I did.”

“We'll take it from the top. I said, quote, I want you to go to London and look after my interests there, unquote. You said, quote, I'm not going, unquote. I said, quote, I have no heir. You are my son, Dino, unquote. Then you said, quote ...?”

“I said ... I said ... Maybe you heard me wrong, Star Maker?”

“Come on, Dino. *Then you said, quote?*”

Trembling, Tomasso repeated what he had said.

“Can you beat that?” the Star Maker asked, actually laughing.

Miss Mott’s eyes widened.

“I’m unwell,” Tomasso said, sobbing. “I was possessed.”

“To think that you’ve been with me all these years and I never suspected your true –”

Tomasso seized the smaller of the Star Maker’s hands and kissed it.

“Tell me, Dino, have you ever thought this before?”

“Never!”

“Keeping it to yourself all these years?”

“No!”

There was another pause, before the Star Maker chuckled and asked, “Say it once more, Dino.”

“I couldn’t.” “Just once.”

The black-uniformed riders stepped closer to Tomasso. So he obliged, but in the smallest possible voice.

“It’s amazing,” the Star Maker said. “Coming from you. How I’ve underestimated you all these years....”

“What happens to me now, Star Maker?”

But the Star Maker seemed to be lost in a reverie. “Amazing.”

“What happens to me?”

“To you? Why, I want you to go to London, as I said. If, after six months there, you feel the same way about England, you can come back and pick up any job you want here.”

“You mean,” Tomasso said incredulously, “you’re giving me a second chance?”

“As long as I have no heir, you are my son, Dino. Will you go?”

“Will I go? Oh, Star Maker.”

“Take this file with you, then. Study it.”

“Oh, thank you,” Tomasso said, fleeing.

The younger of the two black-uniformed riders unstrapped his gun. “I’ll see to it,” he said.

“No,” the other rider protested, “it’s my turn.”

“Neither of you,” the Star Maker said, “will do any harm to Dino.”

“*After what he said to you?*”

“Because of what he said to me. Now beat it.”

Tomasso, slumped behind the wheel of his Cobra 427, lit one cigarette off another, waiting for his heart to quiet. It was simply unknown for the Star Maker to give anyone a second chance, to forgive; therefore it must be true – the Star Maker, Blessed Be His Name, has not been mocking me all these years: I am like a son to him.

Whistling happily once more, Tomasso wheeled off the driveway, taking the left fork, the road which led to the villas by the lake where the favored stars were kept. He swept past the low-lying, windowless laboratory, turning left again when he came to the end of the humming fence; and, three miles down the road, he pulled in opposite the most elegant villa. The villa where Star Maker Productions’ most valuable property, its greatest, all-time favorite box-office Star, lived.

Might as well look in and say hello, Tomasso thought, as the Star’s next picture,

multimillion-dollar production, was to be made in England. *In England*. Maybe things are changing, Tomasso thought, his spirits rising still higher. Maybe a British production doesn't have to be small beans any more.

"Hi," Tomasso said, waving at the guard on duty. "Where's the big fella?"

"Resting," he said, puffing on his pipe.

"Still?"

"Yeah."

Tomasso stopped short when he came upon two used starlets lying on the living-room rug. They were nude. "God damn it," he said, turning indignantly on the guard, "how long have you been with us?"

"All of thirty years."

"Remember Goy-Boy II then, don't you?"

"Of course, sir."

"Then you certainly ought to know better. A pipe," he hissed, "in here? *Live ashes!*" And he yanked the pipe out of the guard's mouth, flinging it through the open window.

"Please don't report me, sir."

Tomasso, the contrite guard following after, entered the Star's bedroom without knocking and walked to the cupboard, where the Star was hanging. Tomasso pondered the Star for a long time, poking, pinching, looking him up and down. Finally, satisfied, he shut the cupboard door softly. "He looks great."

"He is great."

"You said it. What's the script like?"

"Great."

"Great," Tomasso said. "Now you be careful, will you?" he added, stepping over the starlets.

"Yes, sir."

Not until he had boarded the Star Maker's Lear jet did Tomasso have time to consider the London file. The publishing firm the Star Maker was after was called Oriole; it was run by a lord. There were two senior editors, Hyman Rosen and Mortimer Griffin. Studying Griffin's photograph, at twenty thousand feet, Tomasso decided he was going to be trouble. He felt it in his bones.

“YOUR TIME IS OVER,” THE BIG BLACK AFRICAN ON THE platform shouted, his smile lethal. “You’re done for you stupid white swine.”

“That’s the stuff,” cried a man with a Welsh accent.

“You Anglo-Saxon pigs,” the African said, still grinning. “You stupid British nits!”

Before Mortimer could intervene, Miss Ryerson was shaking her umbrella at the African. “Mr. Speaker,” she began, with that in-built authority that had once been sufficient to make the fourth grade sit bolt upright, “we decent, Godfearing people of British origin want to support you –”

“Har,” the African growled, flashing pearly teeth.

“– but when you stand up there, all cheekiness, it doesn’t give us much encouragement, you know.”

“Who in the hell wants you to support us, you stupid old woman!”

“Shoot,” Agnes Laura Ryerson said to Mortimer.

“The English are an insult to humanity,” the speaker continued. “The quicker they are liquidated the better.”

A beet-faced gentleman, standing directly behind Mortimer and Miss Ryerson, touched his tweed cap, smiled, and said, “These black chaps are splendidly uninhibited, don’t you think?”

Somebody flung a half-peeled banana at the speaker. Another man shouted, “Tell us you’re living here on National Assistance. *With your three black wives and eighteen kiddies.*”

Mortimer took Miss Ryerson firmly by the arm, leading her across Oxford Street and to the Corner House, stopping to collect the *Sunday Times* for them to study at tea. Unfortunately Miss Ryerson picked up the magazine section first, opening it at the glistening all-but-nude photograph of a sensual pop singer, a young man caressing a cat. The singer wished to star in a film about the life of Christ. Jesus, he was quoted as saying, was no square. But a real groovy cat.

Migod, Mortimer thought. Sweet, silver-haired Agnes Laura Ryerson was his fourth-grade teacher from Caribou, Ontario, and he had tried his utmost to discourage her from making this sentimental journey. Miss Ryerson’s long-cherished fantasy picture of the mother country, more potent than any pot dream, was constructed almost entirely on literary foundations. Shakespeare, naturally, Jane Austen, *The Illustrated London News*, Kipling, Dickens, Beverly Baxter’s London Letters in *Maclean’s*.

Together Miss Ryerson and Mortimer scanned the theater listings. As she made appreciative noises over her scones, he persuaded her that the Royal Shakespeare Company’s latest venture into the theater of cruelty was not quite her cuppa. “It’s vastly overrated,” he insisted nervously.

Shoot. Miss Ryerson pursed her lips, displeased, inadvertently evoking for Mortimer the day she had given him five of the best on each hand for being caught with a copy of *Nana* on his desk. She simply had to go to the theater every night, she explained, for she had undertaken to write a weekly “Letter from London” for the *Presbyterian Church-Monitor Southern Ontario*. “What do you know,” she asked, “about this one?”

This one was a tender domestic comedy about a homosexual couple.

“Um, well, it’s a bit naughty, I’m told.”

They settled on a farce for Tuesday night. Monday, one of Mortimer's lecture nights, was out, unfortunately.

Oriole Press, where Mortimer was an editor, was still one of London's most distinguished publishing houses; that is to say, it had yet to be taken over and transmogrified by the State Maker. Mortimer enjoyed his work and had reason to hope that he was being considered for the next editor-in-chief, the penultimate step toward a seat on the board of directors, his initials carved into the two-hundred-year-old round table. Oriole's celebrated oak. The saintly proprietor of Oriole Press, Lord Woodcock, had hinted at the appointment during a meeting with Mortimer at his Albany flat two years back. "Hodges," Lord Woodcock had said, referring to the then editor-in-chief, "is nearing the retirement age. It would be indelicate of me to say more, but I will tell you this much, Griffin; when the time comes I'll be damned if I'm going outside our family for a replacement." Which left Mortimer with one rival. Hy Rosen, his best friend.

Following in the footsteps of Lord Woodcock, a Fabian with the purest Christian motives, the younger editorial staff at Oriole Press was encouraged to make use of their leisure time by serving the larger community in one socially responsible form or another. Two nights a week little Hy Rosen worked as a boxing instructor at a Stepney youth club. Mortimer chose to deliver a series of lectures on "Reading for Pleasure" at an evening college in Paddington, sponsored by one of England's more forward-looking trade unions. Mortimer's third lecture, on Monday night, dealt with Franz Kafka and naturally he made several allusions to the distinctively Jewish roots of his work. Afterwards, as he was gathering his notes together, a lachrymose little man approached him for the first time.

"I want to tell you, Professor Griffin, how much intellectual nourishment I got out of your lecture tonight."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Mortimer said, in a hurry to leave because he was supposed to meet Joyce at Hy and Diana Rosen's and it looked as if he was going to be late. But the lachrymose little man still stood resolutely before his desk.

His wisps of gray curly hair uncut and uncombed, he was a puny round-shouldered man with horn-rimmed spectacles, baleful black eyes, and a hanging lower lip. His shiny pinstriped gray suit was salted with dandruff around the shoulders. A hand-rolled cigarette drooped from his mouth, his eyes half shut against the smoke and ashes spilling unregarded to his jacket. "Why did you change your name?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon? Did you ask me why I changed my name?"

The man nodded.

"But I haven't. My name is Griffin. It always has been."

The man considered Mortimer with a sardonic, pitying smile. "You're a Jew," he said softly.

"You're mistaken."

The man chuckled.

"Really," Mortimer said. "What made you think –"

"All right. I'm mistaken. I made a mistake. Not to worry."

"Look here, if I were a Jew I wouldn't try to conceal it for a moment."

Still smiling, blinking his eyes, the man said, "There's no need to lose your temper, Professor *Griffin*. I made a mistake. If that's the way you want it."

“And I’m not a professor either. Mr. Griffin will do nicely.”

“A man of your insights will be famous one day ... like ... like I. M. Sinclair. A scholar renowned wherever the intelligentsia meet. Thanks once more, *merci mille fois*, for tonight’s intellectual feast. Good night, Mr. Griffin.”

Good night.

Driving out to the Rosens’ flat in Swiss Cottage, Mortimer smiled indulgently. Me Jewish he thought, laughing out loud.

Joyce had eaten with the Rosens, and Diana, remembering how much Mortimer fancied chopped liver, had saved him an enormous helping. Seated in the living room, amid Hy’s framed photographs of Abe (the Little Hebrew) Attell, Phil (Ring Gorilla) Bloom, Chrysanthemum Joe Choynski, Ruby (the Jewel of the Ghetto) Goldstein, Yussel the Muss, Jacobs, Benny Leonard, Barney Ross, and others, Mortimer told him about the lachrymose little man, concluding with “... and where in the hell he ever got the idea I was Jewish I never know.”

Mortimer had anticipated laughter, a witty remark from Hy, perhaps. Instead there was silence. Nervy silence.

“Look, I don’t mean I’d be ashamed –”

“Gee, thanks.”

“– or that I was insulted that someone would think I was –”

“Ah ha.”

“Christ, you know what I mean, Hy.”

“You’re goddamned right I do,” Hy said, springing to his feet and removing his glasses.

Mortimer and Joyce left for home earlier than usual.

“Boy,” Joyce said, “you certainly have a gift. Once you *have* put your foot into it you certainly know how to make matters worse.”

“I thought they’d laugh. God, Hy’s my best friend. He –”

“Was,” Joyce said.

While Joyce was undressing in the bathroom, Mortimer slipped surreptitiously out of the bedroom, down the hall, and into Doug’s room. Doug was just eight years old and having a peek at him as he slept gave Mortimer a wonderfully warm feeling inside. He had to watch himself though, because Joyce felt this was very *Saturday Evening Post* of him. Specially the kissing bit. She’s right, too, Mortimer thought, as he gave Doug a hasty peck on the forehead and fled.

Joyce, Mortimer gathered, was still upset. “Come off it,” he said. “You don’t seriously think Hy thinks I’m an anti-Semite?”

Joyce raised one eyebrow slightly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “Tomorrow the whole thing will be forgotten. Hy will make a joke of it.”

Then they settled into bed with books. Back to back. Joyce, on her side, with *The Story of O*; Mortimer, on his side, with *The Best of Leacock*.

“They have an excellent sense of humor,” Joyce said, “haven’t they? There’s Mort Sahl and Art Buchwald and –”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!”

“If I were you I’d phone him and apologize.”

“There’s no need. Damn it, I adore Hy. I’ve known him for years.”

“HE’S AT LEAST SEVEN INCHES TALLER THAN I AM,” Hy said. “I’d be giving him a good forty pounds and still he was too chicken-shit to put up his fists.”

Hy bounced to his feet and pulled his shirt up high as his chin, revealing his narrow pigeon chest, his heart hammering, the ribs thrusting through.

“Punch me, luv. Let me have it.”

“Oh, Hy, please,” Diana said.

“No, no. Go ahead. All your might, now.”

“But, Hy –”

“*I said punch me.*”

Diana pulled back obligingly, grimaced, and simulated a mighty blow to Hy’s tense, flat stomach.

“Didn’t feel a thing,” Hy said, letting his shirt drop.

“But Mortimer didn’t mean to offend you,” Diana protested.

“One day in Holland, at a time when we were bloody short on ammo, the major called for a volunteer to lead a recon into the forest. I stepped forward immediately and you know what one of my *brother* officers said just loud enough for me to catch? ‘They’re all the same,’ he said. ‘Pushy.’ But if I hadn’t been the first to step forward he would have put me down for a coward. They’re all the same, goys, what do I need ’em for?”

“What about me?” Diana asked, nuzzling him.

All at once Hy gathered Diana’s long blond hair in his fist and yanked.

“Oh, Hy! Hy! Please let me go!”

“Come on,” Hy said, pulling her. “Into the bedroom. Let’s put that big goysy ass of yours to work.”

Diana, who towered over Hy, contrived to be dragged, protesting, into the bedroom.

“Oh, I know you in this state,” she said. “You’re going to be too big for me. You’re going to hurt me.”

Hy’s laugh was gargantuan, charged with menace.

“You filthy Jew,” Diana hollered, turning round and stooping for Hy to unzip her. “You always have only one thing in mind.”

“British twat,” Hy said, butting her in the belly and diving onto the bed after her.

“Ikey hooky-nose!”

“Rodean snob!”

In the ensuing struggle, Diana forgot herself and rolled over onto Hy, knocking the breath out of him. “Oh, I *am* sorry, darling,” Diana said tenderly.

“What?” Hy snarled, inflamed, whacking her in the ribs, beating her on the belly. “What?”

In the morning Hy, his mood masterful but lenient, thoughtfully provided a pillow for Diana. “For your butt,” he said. Hy was eating his Fruitifort when the phone rang. He answered it, his voice thick: “Hullo.”

“Hullo, Hy.”

“Oh, it’s you.”

“Yeah. Did I wake you up? I can call back later.”

“I’m up now. I could never fall asleep again. So just tell me what you want.”

"I called to apologize."

"For what?"

"For last night."

"What did you do last night?"

"I'm sorry if anything I said gave you the impression – the erroneous impression – that, if
were the case, I would not be proud to be Jewish."

"What made you think that offended me?"

"Joyce. I told her she was imagining things."

"She certainly was. I can't think of anything you'd say that could offend me."

"Oh."

"And what ever gave you the screwy idea that I was touchy about being Jewish?"

"Oh, you know Joyce. She's hypersensitive."

"Okay, let's say I'm familiar with your sexually frustrated wife, but –"

"My *what wife?*"

"But what about you? I think you're being very condescending. I don't go for the idea
this phone call."

"Look, let's just forget anything happened last night. Now would you mind repeating what
you said about my –"

"Nothing did happen last night. Except in the perversely racial-conscious mind of your
wife."

"Hy, wait a minute. This is dreadful. I didn't call you up to quarrel. Tell you what. Why
don't you and Diana come up for drinks tomorrow night? They're doing an old Gary Cooper
Western on BBC-2."

"Some of us have better things to do at night than watch TV."

"Now what in the hell do you mean by that?"

"Skip it. Forget it."

"Gladly. Can we expect you tomorrow night, then?"

"Diana's coming down with the flu."

"Oh, I see. I see, old pal. Well, I do hope she feels better soon."

"Now what kind of a crack is that?"

"All I said was –"

"I heard you the first time, chickenshit. Thanks. I'll give her your heartfelt message."

"Well, that's very good of you. Now would you mind repeating what you said about my v
_"

"Goodbye," Hy said, and he hung up.

Mortimer shot an apprehensive glance at Joyce, smoking languorously at the breakfast
table, her dressing gown falling open over her long coltish legs. Joyce was tall, with natural
curly brown hair, her breasts small. Okay, she's good-looking, radiating health in
windblown Canadian way, but she's not beautiful. She –

"How come," Joyce asked, "you have no Negroes on the editorial staff at Oriole Press?"

"*What?*"

Joyce lit a cigarette, inhaling with immense satisfaction.

"Because we've never had a Negro apply for an editorial job. Should I search Camden Town
for one?"

“That would hardly be necessary. I could introduce you to one or two candidates.”

Joyce worked for the Anti-Apartheid League. And Oxfam.

“Could you?”

“We never have any for dinner. It might make for a change, you know.”

“Yes. Quite. Um, men or women? I mean that you could introduce me to.”

“Oh, are you ever prejudiced! You’re just a cesspool of received WASP ideas.”

Doug, hearing their voices raised, suddenly stood at the kitchen door, beaming.

NOTHING FLUSHED DOUG OUT OF HIS ROOM LIKE A quarrel; he even tried to provoke them, for the truth was he had a gripe. Nearly all of Doug's fabulously rich classmates at Beatrice Webb House came from broken homes, which gave him reason to envy them. Take Neil Ferguson, for instance. He had been a nervy kid, a bed-wetter, until his parents were divorced two years ago, remarried almost immediately, and began to compete for Neil's affections. So that now, come the Easter hols, Neil could create traumas in two households while he vacillated between Bermuda with his mother and stepfather or Paris with his father and stepmother.

Doug was being misled, Mortimer knew, he was clearly better off in a happy – well, reasonably happy – home, but all the same Doug and two or three other Beatrice Webb boys felt deprived because they only had two parents each.

Damn that school, Mortimer thought.

No sooner had Mortimer driven Doug to school and turned into Regent's Park than he developed a puncture and had to change the tire himself. In the rain.

At Lloyd's bank, on Oxford Street, a day begun badly took an anguishing turn. Ahead of Mortimer in the queue there was an attractive, elegantly dressed girl. *Colored*. Now Mortimer was certainly not prejudiced, but even so he had to admit that the first thing he noticed about the attractive, elegantly dressed girl was that she was colored. When Mortimer had first entered the bank, there she was standing in the queue with *nobody behind her*. There were shorter queues leading to other tellers, there was even one teller with nobody to serve but Mortimer, remembering Sharpsville, remembering Selma, Alabama, immediately fell behind the attractive colored girl.

Well, she certainly was a jumpy one, obviously unsettled by his waiting behind her, possibly because there were now two other tellers with nobody to serve or maybe because he had edged too close behind her. Not that he could retreat a step now – that would be insulting. Finally the girl endorsed all her checks, eight of them, each made out for twenty-five pounds, handed them over (somewhat nervously, it seemed to Mortimer) and turned to go, which was when it happened. The attractive, elegantly dressed colored girl dropped one of her white gloves, and for an instant the two of them were suspended in time, like the frozen frame in a movie. Mortimer's first instinct was to retrieve her glove, but he checked himself. She was, after all, colored, and he did not want her to think him condescending on the one hand, or sexually presumptuous on the other. And then her smile, a mere trace of a smile, was ambiguous. Was she waiting for him to retrieve the glove or was she amused by his dilemma? His ofay dilemma. Or perhaps she wasn't a militant and she thought it prejudiced of Mortimer not to retrieve the glove as he would have done instantly had she been white. Yes, he thought, that's it, but by this time she had scooped up the glove herself, cursing him in parting. "Mother-fucker," the elegantly dressed colored girl said; Mortimer was prepared to swear she called him mother-fucker.

But I'm not prejudiced, he thought, outraged. Scrutinizing his own attitudes as honestly as possible, Mortimer felt (Joyce be damned) that he could objectively say of himself, coming out of Lloyd's bank on Oxford Street on a windy morning in October 1965, that, considering his small-town Ontario origins, his middle-class background, he was refreshingly free of prejudice. Even Ziggy Spicehandler would have to agree. Ziggy, he thought, how I miss him.

Joyce phoned him at the office. Before she could get a word out, he said, "If you ask me, almost all of Doug's problems can be traced to that bloody school."

"Would you rather that he was educated as you were?"

Mortimer had been to Upper Canada College. "I don't see why not."

"Full of repressions and establishment lies."

Establishment. Camp. WASP. She had all the bloody modish words.

"Well, I –"

"We'll discuss it later. Just please please don't be late for the rehearsal."

Mortimer had only been invited to the rehearsal for the Christmas play because he was publishing and Dr. Booker, the founder, wanted Oriole to do a book about Beatrice Webb House. Drama was taught at the school by a Miss Lilian Tanner, who had formerly been with Joan Littlewood's bouncy group. A tall, willowy young lady, Miss Tanner wore her long black hair loose, a CND button riding her scrappy bosom. She assured Mortimer he was a most welcome visitor to her modest little workshop. Mortimer curled into a seat in the rear of the auditorium, trying to appear as unobtrusive as possible. He was only half attentive to begin with, reconciled to an afternoon of tedium larded with cuteness.

"We have a visitor this afternoon, class," Miss Tanner began sweetly. "Mr. Mortimer Griffin of Oriole Press."

Curly-haired heads, gorgeous pigtailed heads, whipped around, everybody giggly.

"Now all together, class ..."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Griffin."

Mortimer waved, unaccountably elated.

"Settle down now," Miss Tanner demanded, rapping her ruler against the desk. "Settle down, I said."

The class came to order.

"Now, this play that we are going to perform for the Christmas concert was written by ... class?"

"A marquis!"

"Bang on!" Miss Tanner smiled, flushed with old-fashioned pride in her charges, and then she pointed her ruler at a rosy-cheeked boy. "What's a marquis, Tony?"

"What hangs outside the Royal Court Theatre."

"No, no, darling."

There were titters all around. Mortimer laughed himself, covering his mouth with his hand.

"That's a marquee. This is a marquis. A –"

A little girl bobbed up, waving her arms. Golden head, red ribbons. "A French nobleman!"

"Righty-ho! And what do we know about him ... class?"

A boy began to jump up and down. Miss Tanner pointed her ruler at him.

"They put him in prison."

"Yes. Anybody know why?"

Everybody began to call out at once.

"Order! Order!" Miss Tanner demanded. "What ever will Mr. Griffin think of us?"

Giggles again.

"You have a go, Harriet. Why was the marquis put in prison?"

"Because he was absolutely super."

“Mmnn ...”

“*And such a truth-teller.*”

“Yes. Any other reasons ... Gerald?”

“Because the Puritans were scared of him.”

“Correct. And what else do we know about the marquis?”

“Me, me!”

“No, me, miss. Please!”

“Eeny-meeny-miny-mo,” Miss Tanner said, waving her ruler. “Catch a bigot by the toe ... Frances!”

“That he was the freest spirit what ever lived.”

“*Who* ever lived. Who, dear. And who said that?”

“Apollinaire.”

“Jolly good. Anything else ... Doug?”

“Um, he cut through the banality of everyday life.”

“Indeed he did. And who said that?”

“Jean Genet.”

“No.”

“Hugh Hefner,” another voice cried.

“Dear me, that’s not even warm.”

“Simone de Beauvoir.”

“Right. And who is she?”

“A writer.”

“Good. Very good. Anybody know anything else about the marquis?”

“He was in the Bastille and then in another place called Charenton.”

“Yes. All together, class ... Charenton.”

“*Charenton.*”

“Anything else?”

Frances jumped up again. “I know. Please, Miss Tanner. Please, me.”

“Go ahead, darling.”

“He had a very, very, very big member.”

“Yes indeed. And –”

But now Frances’s elder brother, Jimmy, leaped to his feet, interrupting. “Like Mummy’s new friend,” he said.

Shrieks. Laughter. Miss Tanner’s face reddened. For the first time she stamped her foot. “Now I don’t like that, Jimmy. I don’t like that one bit.”

“Sorry, Miss Tanner.”

“That’s tittle-tattle, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Miss Tanner.”

“We mustn’t tittle-tattle on one another here.”

“Sorry ...”

“And now,” Miss Tanner said, stepping up to the blackboard, “can anyone give me another word for member?”

“*Cock,*” came a little girl’s shout; and Miss Tanner wrote it down.

“*Beezer.*”

“Pwick.”

“Male organ.”

“Penis.”

“Hard-on.”

Miss Tanner looked dubious. She frowned. “Not always,” she said, and she didn’t write down.

“Fucking-machine.”

“Putz.”

“You’re being sectarian again, Monty,” Miss Tanner said, somewhat irritated. “Joy stick.” pause.

“Anybody else?” Miss Tanner asked.

“Hot rod.”

“Mmn. Dodgy,” Miss Tanner said, but she wrote it down on the blackboard, adding question mark. “Anybody else?”

“Yes,” a squeaky voice cried, now that her back was turned. “Tea-kettle.”

Miss Tanner whirled around, outraged. “*Who said that?*” she demanded.

Silence.

“Well, I never. I want to know who said that. *Immediately.*”

No answer.

“Very well, then. No rehearsal,” she said, sitting down and tapping her foot. “We are simply going to sit here and sit here and sit here until who ever said that owns up.”

Nothing.

“I’m sorry about this fuck-up, Mr. Griffin. It’s most embarrassing.”

Mortimer shrugged.

“I’m waiting, class.”

Finally a fat squinting boy came tearfully to his feet. “It was me, Miss Tanner,” he said in small voice. “I said tea-kettle.”

“Would you be good enough to tell us why, Reggie?”

“When my nanny ... I mean my little brother’s nanny, um, takes us, ah, out ...”

“Speak up, please.”

“When my nanny takes me, um, us ... to Fortnum’s for tea, well, before I sit down she always asks us do we, do” – Reggie’s head hung low; he paused, swallowing his tears – “do we have to water my tea-kettle.”

“Well. Well, well. I see,” Miss Tanner said severely. “Class, can anyone tell me who Reggie’s nanny is?”

“A prude!”

“Repressed!”

“Victorian!”

“All together now.”

“*Reggie’s nanny is a dry cunt!*”

“She is against ... class?”

“Life force.”

“And?”

“Pleasure!”

“Right. *And truth-sayers.* Remember that. Because it’s sexually repressed bitches like Reggie’s nanny who put truth-sayers like the marquis in prison.”

The class was enormously impressed.

“May I sit down now?” Reggie asked.

“Sit down, what?”

“Sit down, please, Miss Tanner?”

“Yes, Reggie. You may sit down.”

At which point Mortimer slipped out of the rear exit of the auditorium, without waiting to see a run-through of the play. Without even finding out what play they were doing.

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