

“The Kid They Called Winsome”

Before I became “The Mood-Swinger,” they simply called me by my last name, “Winsome.”

It was 1980 and the local Volkswagen plant, just out of Pittsburgh, shut its doors. This upset many people in our suburban community, especially Principal Faustus. He was pretty uptight already because we had just taken the Iowa Basics and our scores had not come back yet. Mr. Faustus took standardized tests very seriously. The closing of the Volkswagen plant must have pushed him over the edge.

In response, he ordered the entire sixth grade to write an essay about our plans as future, productive adults. He ordered all sixth grade homerooms to collectively meet in the library (instead of the gym). By the way, this was the only time we ever met in the library. Since some of the other kid’s parents were there, Mr. Faustus did not have “The Tan Van” with him. I’ll get back to this in a minute.

Mr. Faustus went on to explain the importance of writing the essay: “The ‘Japs’ are beating us black and blue! Don’t you know I formerly owned a Honda? It ran well and I loved that car. However, my neighbor’s son (an I.Q. of 151—I know because he attended grade school here) went to college and now ‘tinkers’ on foreign cars. Just think about that for a second

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and you see why those Japs are beating us black and blue. Now, my son is not very smart. Never was, never will be. We raised him right, but he is not very bright. He managed to make it through high school, that is for sure, but there was no way he could get into college. So now, he is a butcher’s assistant. He has a steady job and goes to work every day. You see, my *senior class*, this is the whole point of the essay. You have a kid that does well in school and ends up putzing with Hondas. You have another kid who knows how to work hard, as a good American should, and he ends up as an assistant to a butcher. That is why it is so important for you to think about your future. We can’t let those Japs beat us black and blue. I bought a Ford last year. It was more expensive than a Jap car, but that does not matter. I will always buy American cars and, when you are old enough, so should you. That is why the essay is so important. You understand, don’t you?”

Upon finishing his screed, his face was beet-red and dripped sweat. As conditioned, no child dared move as he surveyed his audience. In fact, it remained silent in the library (as it normally should be) until some of the parents in attendance started clapping. Amid the applause, I poked Charlie Jones and asked him, “What the hell is a Jap?” Charlie had no clue. In fact, not one of the collective sixth graders had an idea what the sweaty lunatic before us was talking about. All we knew was we had an essay to write.

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After returning to my homeroom, I refused to write it. I professed I was far too young to consider such plans at this point in my life. After my homeroom teacher pressed the point, I bawled that I did not want to even *think* about my future. I guess I got pretty upset about it and kind of acted out. I do not really remember very much about that part though.

After I calmed down, I met with Mr. Faustus and the School Nurse to discuss my unwillingness to compose the essay. I am not sure why the nurse was there, but it was nice to see her. To tell the truth, I was quite familiar with her. My teachers often sent me to her when they thought I was ill. I was never sick on those days though, I just felt like being quiet sometimes.

Mr. Faustus started off by explaining to me how I was not a problem student, but he had his concerns. He reminded me that I used to be in the gifted program, just like my sister, before my grades dragged me down. Although he was a huge fan of standardized testing, he admitted that in my case the scores *might* be off. In any case, if I was gifted, it was time to start applying myself. If not, I needed to try to make average grades.

He was serious as could be as he lectured me. It was depressing because I could tell that he actually thought this session would help me. He went on to talk about his son some more and ranted about the Japs. To be

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honest, I’m not quite sure what he said because of my inability to pay attention sometimes. All I know is it was pretty sad.

Mr. Faustus finished his tirade and asked me if I finally understood the importance of the essay. I lied and said I understood. I thanked Mr. Faustus and the Nurse for their valuable lesson. Incidentally, the Nurse did not say a word during this entire scene; although, she smiled with thin, pert lips, at the appropriate times throughout my social adjustment.

Just before leaving, I looked over the shoulder of Mr. Faustus at the Tan Van hanging on his wall. As I returned to my homeroom I thought about who was beating us black and blue. It certainly did not seem to me that it was these Japs Mr. Faustus referred to, but Mr. Faustus himself.

Mr. Faustus carried the paddle at all of the student functions parents did not attend. The Tan Van was undeniably recognized as an instrument of fear and anxiety by the student body. It was three feet long, two inches thick and had holes drilled in it. In addition, Mr. Faustus used a wood burner at the High School to inscribe, “You’re NOT a Man until YOU meet THE TAN VAN” on the face of the paddle. He even burned a little picture of a van on it.

Scott Barrow met the Tan Van on one memorable occasion. In third grade, our class saw a movie about ants. The following year, grades four

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through six gathered in the gym to watch the same ant movie. Of course Mr. Faustus was there, the Tan Van in hand, to presumably prevent any possibility of a grade school riot. With everyone comfortably seated on the floor of the gym, he addressed us: “Before the movie starts, I want to know if there is anyone here who doesn’t care to see it?” In disbelief, we all sat motionless as Scott raised his hand. At the time, I could not imagine he had the guts to do such a thing. I later learned that he was just stupid. Since he saw the movie the previous year, and did not want to see it again, he actually took Mr. Faustus’ question as genuine. Mr. Faustus did not say a word as he carefully stepped through the planted children until he reached Scott. He yanked him up by the arm, escorted him to the front of the gym and proceeded to thwack Scott three times (hard) with the Tan Van. Scott was then forced to watch the movie anyway.

As I thought about the Tan Van, I decided that I had better write the essay. Actually, I wrote two essays. I thought this was a good idea in order to have options open for me.

Essay One

I want to die as a hero at a very young age. What I would like to see happen starts out with me watching an old man cross a street. He has a short white beard, cane, dark glasses, wears a dark suit and sports derby.

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Basically, he looks like he stepped out of an old movie. By the way, if the scene is ever re-enacted in a movie, a documentary or anything, I hope it is filmed in black and white.

Anyway, the old man starts to walk across the street and a truck blows a red light, and barrels towards him. The old man is about to be crushed, and then out of nowhere, I leap from the crowded sidewalk and push the old man out of harm's way. I save the old man but “BLAM” I am hit by the truck.

Lying on the street, with the crowd gathering around me, I hear things like: ‘My that was the bravest thing I ever saw, what a hero!’ I can't help but smile as I fade into darkness.

Essay Two

I want to live in Canada. What I do there is not exactly important to me. I think living in Canada is definitely in my future.

Several things happened after I turned in my essays. First of all, I met the Tan Van immediately after Mr. Faustus read them. Thereafter, I was sent home with a copy of the essays, along with a note addressed to my parents from the School Nurse. The following week I had my first appointment with Dr. Coffee. Then, after all of this surfaced at school, I became The Mood-Swinger.