

Teacher's Pet

By: Jack LaValley

Randy looks a little like a bear cub today, round shouldered, furry headed. He's relaxed sitting in his chair sideways, hunchbacked with his book resting open in the cradle he makes by laying one ankle across the other knee doing what interests him most – studying. He has a large head, and just now as I watch the intent to learn gathered on his face I wonder if his big head doesn't somehow make schoolwork more logical for him.

No one could be further from the other students than Randy and still be a successful academic competitor here from day to day. Any number of peculiarities explains this fact immediately. When he comes through the door in the morning you can see that he's not looking for anyone. His eyes go only where they absolutely need to, not including the trashcan, which he infrequently falls into. He is carrying a large double bagged grocery sack which contains his books, papers, and personals. They are stuffed into it. Crammed. Not out of disrespect. It's Randy's way of owning the stuff in there. The only difference between the inside of the bag and the inside of his desk is that the desk contains five times as much and is slightly smaller in volume. When I ask him to clean it out, it hurts him so much that he can hardly bring himself to reach in, and is so teary that he can't see what's in there anyway. On a bad day now, I'll ask him to clean it out. Otherwise I leave it to him.

Some other things that distinguish Randy are included in the way he dresses. He's probably thirty pounds overweight and a good portion of it appears as the proverbial inner tube outside of his T-shirt draped over his pants. His belt doesn't fit anymore, but he doesn't care enough to trouble his mom for one. None of his zippers successfully replaces it, and when one gets past the halfway point he'll come and ask for a safety pin. 'Sir, I have a problem.' He looks down at his fly which he's clutching in his fist.

He has learned not to try and interact with other kids. He is very different from them and it scares them so much that the only way they dare try and respond is in a group, hackling him. Sometimes when I look over Randy's way he has all or parts of both hands inside his cavernous mouth. This is when it appears that he is living something he's reading so perfectly that he's trying to reach inside his head and touch it, too. Boy, do they get him for this at lunch.

One day he came to school with a brush cut. I'm not sure what the effect of the brush cut alone would have been, but I do know what happened that morning when someone called everyone's attention to the quarter sized circle of scalp showing over his ear- his birthmark. First they taunted him to tears in front of the school. Then they scared him into running. Someone darted in and hit him. Then the next most desperate of the lost in

order, showed they're hidden courage and power. Randy stayed on his feet, covered his head, and made his way to the door where he arrived in time to go in with the bell.

Some kids ran ahead to tell me the whole story. Some kids ran ahead hoping to absolve some guilt by being first in the room. So many were involved that it was hopeless to think of tracking down the assaulters. I considered the many strange habits that drove Randy into social seclusion just long enough for them to drive me mad and tip the balance against my frustration. Unable to pin it on anyone or even address the ones involved, I called his home. I told his mother what these kids were doing to him, and she said "They can all go to hell!" When I ask Randy about his father, "does he live there?" - "Well kinda." He has never made contact with the school at all. I wonder if I shouldn't have called him sometimes, but when I think of it I can find no feeling in Randy for him, so I dropped the idea and consider the mother as the controlling parent.

Randy's habits remain the same. He doesn't cry much or pout too long anymore, mostly, I think because I let him be. Now and then I'll keep him after to do an assignment he neglected. He used to cry the entire twenty minutes, trying to do the work through his tears. These days I help out a little, but within five minutes he's doing it and appears to be under no strain.

He seems very content to be in school, spending as much time in the library as possible. Always has a book open and ready for the times he finishes work early, and between classes. He's an A plus student and writes well enough to hold the interest of any young reader when he's making up a story. The kid's simply treat him as though he spoke a different language. I haven't seen anyone address him at all in months, in school anyway. And the teacher lives at school. Life goes on outside of school, but the teacher remains. Isolated in their building, unable to affect change outside the brick walls. That fact is undermining my will to make a living this way. In order to do it, you have to dodge your feelings all the time, until you get so good at it that you don't feel anything at all.