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Stanley, the Tragic Visionary

Whitney Fox

What he learned in kindergarten

In kindergarten, Stanley learned that enmity was real, and abominable. He learned it through first-hand experience, clutching his paper sack of fruit leather and boxed drinks under the reading chart. Whoever read the most books in a week got to put a foil star by their name. The teachers also kept track of lost teeth. Stanley's mother attributed his lack of social skills to being left in a department store overnight as a toddler. He ate Carmex. He hadn't recovered.

Sheryl, his first true love

They met at a cocktail party for The Dependents of Those Who'd Rather Be Shopping. Sheryl was babysitting for the organization in the back of the Holy Nuts! Cathedral and was the first to hold Stanley close, really close. They played with miniature dice and cards and she taught the six-year-olds that craps is a game of chance combined with creativity. Stanley took all this to mean that it's better to think about love than never feel the obligation to love at all. He refused to play with anyone except Sheryl and watched the other boys and girls gamble from the sidelines, sometimes hitting his elbows on the communion cups stacked around the room. Since we had helped Sheryl at one point, we thought Stanley should be brought to our fold.

Things we did to teach him social skills

First, we talked softly to him. We never raised our voices or got mad when he took the last of the Jell-O. We let him take baths instead of showers. We bought him sourdough bread if he cooperated. We always remembered him in our prayers. We told him that enmity wasn't all bad and to give it a second try. We let him put his name first on all the records we kept:

Home runs batted in
 Holes aimed for and attained
 Hot dogs eaten
 Holograms ignored
 Happiness

We figured this was the best way to orient him to the ways of the world. We didn't foresee the problems attached to such an excellence-driven program. Resigned to complacency, we watched Stanley tie and retie the dog to the pole in the front yard.

Christmas

Stanley wanted to go home for Christmas, so we let him. We searched every catalog frantically for presents and even made a special allowance for watching the home shopping channels. Combining the useful with the fantastic, he made his mother a banana hanger out of some wire and wood scraps we kept in the shed. We put his name first on the list for Hangers, Banana. He appreciated our concern and told us he'd write.

The First Revolution

The First Revolution was full of pranks, some mean, some deserved, some costing millions of dollars. We couldn't be too careful those days; on camels, we paraded the streets with Stanley as our ensign, our insignia, our peacekeeper. He liked the attention, and we figured it was good for his social skills to be dealing with so many noteworthy and prominent citizens in our community. It was becoming his community too.

Puberty

Puberty was difficult, yes. Stanley was going to regular school and wanted to do regular things like the boys and girls his age. In favor of a more controlled approach, we only went to junior high basketball games if we knew his team was going to win. We didn't want him to get the idea that life is hard and sometimes you lose. He had started sweating and we could see underarm hair when he wore the light blue tank top. We didn't think it was always a sign of ignorance to wear tank tops, so sometimes we let him.

What we said when we found out he wanted to run away

We guess you were serious when you said you didn't like pimento and cheese.

Stanley's surprise

We figured that if he didn't like our cooking, he could help prepare the food. He disclosed in hushed tones that he had been taking culinary correspondence classes. It made sense in a way, because we would often find him building famous restaurants out of textbooks in his room, yelling that he was the head cook. We appointed him to assistant cook and took a vacation to Vermont.

The Second Revolution

The Second Revolution wasn't as successful as the first. We smelled defeat on the old man's breath and the ripe air. It was mixed with a little brandy and Stanley thought that was a good beginning to a new recipe. The citizens and plebeians were indignant about their rights and the news about the pursuit of happiness had managed to saturate the countryside. We battled onward, instilled with the faith that justice would persevere and Banana Bundles would be waiting for us—fireside. This time, we were our own ensigns and peacekeepers. Perhaps this is where we went wrong.

New Year's Eve

A disaster, if you count the Lippizaner ponies through the Conservatory. We fell to our knees securing the potted plants and were glad that among all of Stanley's friends an equestrian expert could be found. She talked softly and moved through the Conservatory after them, arms outstretched and blinking. We were pleased Stanley had girlfriends and considered it a blessing disguised as horses. Then it was balloons and bologna sandwiches and twelve grapes in fast succession for good luck in the new year. We slept on the veranda and watched snow hit the ground, then bounce like swirling pieces of plastic in a glass ball.

The orchestra

Stanley played the timpani in the orchestra. His forearms were tight from holding mallets. Sometimes he wouldn't play until the last nine seconds of a piece. He held the mallets for the whole time at attention, fingers gripped around the plastic sticks like a mother raccoon at a petting zoo.

Things we did to bring it on

We weaved in and out like Portobello mushrooms, wide and white, balloons above the curving city streets. A thousand bureaucrats flooded the downtown. No matter that their language was distant and rune-like, we knew it was important to our survival and maybe essential. We hung onto the night cover like suffragettes, hoping, even praying, that a sense of humor would rule the world. Cloaked and incognito, we remembered that low sounds carry farther than shrill ones. We buoyed each other up and sang hymns of an unlikely victory, clutching Stanley close, covering his ears with our mittens. Their words were shaped like tiny daggers, Stanley was dead. We found out that words could kill.

What we wrote to his mother

We regret to inform you that your son, Stanley, has finally been overcome. Despite our courageous battle (we did fight hard), in the end it was enmity that won. Your loss would normally constitute our loss, but this is one exception. Our remorse is not yet to the point of despair. Enclosed is our business card; please address any questions to the Complaint Department. We will forward you the professional bid for all regalia and homage paid, but don't be alarmed if our computers are down and it doesn't reach you until the holiday season. Here is his favorite recipe for Banana Bundles with Crystallized Ginger. One of our favorites, too.