

Running Away From School and the Gym Show by Justin McGonigle

I'm calling him Mr. Ape because he looked and acted just like an ape. He had hairy arms and was always in a bad mood. His classroom was the place other teachers would escort us to if we were in trouble. I knew that staple on the wall, the one I was told to keep my eyes on or else, very well. This day, Mr. Ape was filling in for our regular gym teacher, who was absent.

Mr. Bird Face, our Principal, didn't look much like a bird, but I'm calling him that because just like a bird, he would peck at us until we were ripped apart like a pile of birdseed. He was always there, hovering around us. Keeping an eye on everything, always, until the end of time. I hated him.

Standing in a corner of the gym, Mr. Ape began watching over our gym class. I was in the 6th grade. This day, we were playing floor hockey.

Floor hockey was one of my favorites. I had become quite good at playing hockey. Every winter I would play on the nearby ponds. This particular day, before class ended, I was up to 19 goals. By then, I had talked mad trash and Mr. Ape had told me that if I didn't settle down, I'd be in trouble. I didn't take him seriously. What I didn't realize, was that Mr. Ape had had enough.

Trying for my 20th goal, I took a strong slap-shot, almost hitting someone. It was strong enough for Mr. Ape to remind me that I was still on thin ice. I muttered something under my breath like: "Go screw." Well, that was enough. Mr. Ape quickly escorted me out into the hallway and in front of a plaque hanging on the wall. He said: "Memorize this plaque, and when I come back right before class ends, if you've not done what I've asked, you're in big trouble, young man." He went back into the gym and I found myself alone staring at a plaque on the wall.

I felt humiliated. Part of me believed that Mr. Ape was going to award me for all the goals I scored. And maybe join in, man to man, in some of my trash talking. But instead, I found myself staring at 20 words on the wall that I had to memorize in 5 minutes and if I didn't, God only knows what would happen. I was already in big trouble with Mr. Ape and with half the faculty. I was often insubordinate.

I evaluated my situation. Behind me, were the double set of doors, leading outside. They were right next to the gym. I turned around and went through each set of doors as fast as I could. I was free! I started running home. It was about a mile or so away. I ran half way home when Principal Bird Face appeared in his car. Some tall hedges were between him and I, when he began to speak to me, saying: "Justin, I can see you. Why don't you get in the car so that we can go back to school? C'mon Justin, get in the car." When I passed the last hedge, I bolted for my house. My plan was to run into the woods and sit in a tree and hide. As I entered the grass driveway, that led to the woods, I saw Bird Face pull into the main driveway. We were neck and neck.

I made it to my tree and sat in it until I felt that Bird Face was gone. My Father, who worked 3 days a week, was home. I figured my Father and the Principal would talk for a while and then I'd go up and speak with my Father and figure something out. I couldn't stay in the tree forever. After a little while, I made my way up to the house. I spoke with my Father and we both decided that I should go back to school. It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. I thought for sure, the school would reward me for coming back or at least be easy on me.

My Father drove me back to school. I remember how nervous I was. He dropped me off in front of the school and a teacher walked me back to my classroom. I sat there stupefied until I was called into the Principal's Office. He told me that my punishment would be that I couldn't be in the Gym Show. I was devastated. I had trained for it all year. I was really good at vaulting. I could vault over 4 people doing the splits and bounce off my head the long way. It was going to be the culmination of all my hard work. Most of the town would be there. It was a special night. I couldn't believe that I wouldn't be a part of it anymore.

I did go the night of the show. I don't remember much. I remember mostly someone climbing a rope really well and someone doing a floor performance. I don't remember the vaulting.

Years later, I found out from a friend, he was a few grades ahead of me, that he too was denied the Gym Show for his insolence.