



I was finishing up a chocolate-covered donut in front of Frank's Soupe de Jour on Front Street, when gray-haired Mrs. Fogey stopped in front of me. She was panting, probably from her exercise. She pierced me with her famous gimlet eye. She said, "Aren't you Ella Sackworth's girl? Patella?"

"Still am, Mrs. Fogey," I went, licking a bit of chocolate from my lip.

"Staying out of trouble, are you?"

"Trying hard. Heh-heh." She always made me uncomfortable. She was doing the same now, looking first at my donutted lips and then at my sweats.

"You still need to lose a little weight, Patella."

"I am working at it, as you can see." I managed a smirk. I said, "So how's things, Mrs. Fogey?" This is something a decent person has to say in Balona, whether you care about things or not.

She responded appropriately with another, "Mmmm. How's things?"

I did something almost nobody ever does: I answered that question. I said it spontaneously, since it was on my mind. "I got me a nice little cat. She is so sweet. She is already a friend."

Mrs. Fogey looked around, as if to find my cat lurking.

“She is at home, getting acquainted with her catbox, ekse-dra,” I explained.

“First cat?”

“First pet of any kind.”

“How come?” She seemed actually interested.

“I am thinking about changing my majors over at Chaud County Community College from journalism and criminal justice to pre-vet. I am already taking a science class.” I did not mention that at the moment I was cutting my history class.

“Well,” she said, “if you wanted to, you could make a presentation to my class of third-graders and explain why you want to become a veterinarian. They could use some inspiration.”

Oh, boy, I thought. I could do that, and maybe it would help straighten out my own thinking. “I could do that,” I said. So right then and there we made an appointment for me to address her class.

It seemed like Oliver Kuhl Elementary never changed. Same spotty lawn that needed cutting. Same windows that needed washing. Same smell of cleaning fluid in the empty, dingy, and obviously unwaxed hallways. I could almost hear the Delta Taxpayers Association shrieking “no new taxes” whenever repairing our beat-up and neglected schools comes before the voters. I could actually hear childish screaming and shouting from the cafeteria, so I directed myself to Mrs. Fogey’s classroom. Same setup as in years of yore. Same pictures on the walls and stains on the floor. Same agenda of odors.

I seated myself in the back of Mrs. Fogey’s classroom on one of the little yellow wooden chairs just about exactly where I used to sit, next to where blue-eyed Joey Kuhl sat. I got sort of teary-eyed imagining I was a third-grader again. Now I sat waiting for the kiddies to come back from lunch, the one school activity I most enjoyed. My stomach rumbled

because it had picked up the fine rich smell of cafeteria pasta sauce, which reminded me it was Wednesday, spaghetti day, and that I was suffering from calorie deprivation. The little kiddies would enter smelling of spaghetti.

My rear end is now bigger than the seat of the little yellow chair, and I could feel my lower parts hanging over the edges, a sensation that sort of muted the satisfaction of inhaling a tasty dish. It is a stressing thing to be thinking thoughts of rumpfat when you are both hungry and expected to perform before kiddies in a short time. If I was a pill-popper I would have probably popped a pill the way my mother says she does to begin teaching every one of her high school math classes, every day.

To take off some of the olfactory stress I examined the backs of my hands where Fredly had left souvenir scratches already, one of the scratches making a dark red seam diagonally across the pale skin of my left hand. I rubbed at it without thinking, drew a little blood and, again without thinking, licked the blood off. Not very tasty. I wondered how vampires could make it calorie-wise with only blood in their diet.

Then I noticed Mrs. Fogey's triple-chinned face in the doorway window, watching me, her expression in sort of a one-sided smile, like she had seen me licking my hand. She opened the door.

"I got a cat scratch, Mrs. Fogey," I explained in a too-loud voice.

"Uh-huh," she said, turning sideways in the doorway and breathing in to let the kiddies squeeze by her.

"I hope everyone has washed his hands," she shouted over the din. "Frankie, you go to the sink right now and get a paper towel and blow your nose in it," she said to a kid who did just that, squeezing the remnants of the towel into a juicy ball and throwing it into the wastebasket like he was an NBA star, creating a *thunk* from the basket and a cheer from the

back of the room, evidently Frankie's buddies. It struck me that these third-graders might be a tad more sophisticated than the crew in my day.

She hollered at me, "Ever since the terrorists and perverts, we have to eat in the cafeteria with the children." She made a disapproving face expression.

There was now an authentic spaghetti smell in the room all right, but suddenly there was also sort of a generally pooppy smell, reminding me of my daddy's habit after a hearty meal. Any meal, in fact, including snacks. "I am just blessing your mother's cooking," he would say, and my mother would shriek and leave the room. Oh, well, I thought, kids make smells, too. I was feeling sympathetic and generous, characteristics of mine.

Mrs. Fogey clapped her hands and the kiddies all shut up. Suddenly, it was like being in church. "Now, class," she said. "Patella there, the heavy girl back there wearing purple sweat clothes, was once in this very classroom, one of my students. She sat right back there where you are sitting, Michael." Michael's friends nearby cheered and hi-fived each other. "It is not necessary to be demonstrative right now, children. Patella is here to tell you some things about your pets. Patella says she is going to be a veterinarian. Who knows what a veterinarian is?"

Everybody shouted different things. "Do not shout," said Mrs. Fogey in a low tone with a very serious face. Michael and his friends then repeated their answers to her question in loud hoarse whispers.

"Children, you are testing my patience. Do you know what happens when you test my patience?"

Everybody nodded and shut up. Mrs. Fogey had developed some discipline talents since I was in her third grade. "So, Brie," said Mrs. Fogey, "tell us what you think a veterinarian is." Brie, a pasty-faced child, turned around, gave me a big-blue-eyed look, showed where a front tooth was missing, giggled, and then froze. Mrs. Fogey sighed. "You might

as well come on up and give your presentation from here, Patella,” said Mrs. Fogey turning away, sighing again, and sitting down at her desk. I marched to the front of the room, my heart racing.

Why, I asked myself, should I be scared of telling little kids something I believed in? My heart calmed down right away.

“A veterinarian is an animal doctor, children.” I smiled showing my teeth.

“How come you’re wearing sweats on a hot day?” asked Frankie, his nose running again.

“Sweats are my trademark clothes,” I replied, “so don’t worry about it. They are cool and comfortable if you are used to them. Now, about veterinarians...”

“My uncle wears sweats all year round,” said another little boy. “He smells bad, though.”

“No worse than you, Eddie,” shouted a different little boy. Everybody laughed.

Brie now said, “My Uncle Kenny is a veterinarian, but he doesn’t like animals. He likes football better.” I happened to know that little Brie’s Uncle Kenny must be Doctor Kenworth Fring who reportedly likes the beverage Delta Brew more than either animals or football.

“Well,” I said, “getting back to business here, I am planning to change my major to pre-vet over at Chaud County Community College, a place smart kids call C4.”

“You got a car?” This from Eddie.

“I used baby-sitting money to buy a classic Ford coupe with a stick shift. It’s purple to match my sweats and my glasses frames, as you can see.” I took off my glasses and waved them around. I could talk all day about my car.

“Better get to the point pretty quick, Patella,” said Mrs. Fogey, extending her arm and pointing with her thumb at the clock on the wall.

“Well, okay. So, I am going to become a vet some day because I love animals.”

“My cousin’s got a ferret,” said a very little girl with golden curls, eyes and lips heavily made-up with black cosmetics, like a teen-age Goth. “He lets it drink beer,” she added. Everybody laughed.

I did not want to add a comment that keeping ferrets was probably illegal in Balona, since Balonans typically do whatever they want, illegal or not, and Mrs. Fogey was now tapping on her wristwatch. “Do you have a special pet, Patella?” asked Mrs. Fogey, finally getting in on the act.

I responded, “I have a beautiful little cat that’s about four or five months old and is now recovering from being spayed.”

“No,” said Mrs. Fogey to the number of hands that were immediately raised, “we do not need to get into that, so I’d say it’s about time for language arts. So thanks a lot, Patella. Class, give Patella a round of applause.”

All the kiddies stood up and clapped and cheered. “Sit down, children,” said Mrs. Fogey, after all maybe not the discipline champ I had suspected. I could feel my face turning red as I left, waving goodbye behind me as I left the classroom.

In the hallway, a tall, skinny, pimply young man in black clothes held up his hand like a traffic cop. “You got a permission slip to be in this hallway?”

“I was making a presentation in Mrs. Fogey’s classroom,” I explained.

“Don’t matter. You got to have a permission slip since perverts come around here all the time, trying to get by me. You come along to the principal’s office and we’ll see what’s what.” He pointed and I marched on before, suddenly feeling guilty and hearing my shoes squeaking and slapping on the tile floor.

I inherited the running shoes my daddy had on when he died while jogging along the West Levee Road. Daddy had a good side, even though I suppose it was hard for other people to see. I do feel the good side of my daddy there on my feet

when I strap on his shoes. “Go get some for me, Patella,” the shoes seem to be saying, So I try to get what my daddy never got in all his life: some respect. That makes me cry to think about, so I don’t think about it.

Daddy had bragged that he was going to lose some weight. So the Death Shoes are practically new. They are black with heavy rubber soles. They have fat sticky flaps instead of shoestrings to keep them snug, a feature that old folks are said to like and that my classmates snicker at. The shoes are size-eight on my size-six feet and so make that floppy sound when I walk on any hard surface. The shoes also make loud squeaking noises on any classroom floor.

I could hear my pervert-monitor breathing, following in step, close behind, like he was hustling a criminal along at Runcible Hall or San Quentin Prison.

“I recognize you. You’re Ella Preene’s girl, Patella,” said the black-eyed redhead behind the reception desk. Her cheeks and chins quivered as she spoke. She almost spat the names like she was pronouncing an accusation.

“I am her, she.”

“Her,” the redhead assured me. I felt better all at once, knowing from recent study that she was wrong and that I was finally right about something.

“Ella and me went to Big Baloney together. She married Piggy Sackworth but he died as you of course became aware of. Is she still skinny? She was always skinny, skinny and dry like a korndog left in the sun. She’s my little girl’s teacher but I haven’t seen her for years.”

I said, “She is slim and exercises a lot and watches her diet.” I was going to add, “Watches my diet, too,” but decided it was none of this person’s business.

I was waiting for word about my permission, but the woman persisted. “Anyways, we never did get along. Tell her Sheba’s mom said hello. She knows my little Sheba from her math class over there.”

“Yes, okay. I need a permission slip, says this fellow here.” I jerked my thumb at the pimply guy who was leaning over the counter, appearing to read something upside down on the other side of the counter.

“What for?” said Mrs. Weiner. I now knew Mrs. Weiner by name because of my mother’s constant complaints over supper about Sheba Weiner.

I said, “I made a presentation to Mrs. Fogey’s class. She asked me to. Do I need to see the principal?”

“No. I’m in charge of the office here. You should’ve come in here first. Otherwise it’s not official.” Mrs. Weiner sighed loudly and wagged her head while writing something on a small yellow pad. She signed it with a flourish, tore it off the pad, and handed it to me. “There,” she said. “You give it to Gilbert here so he can get back to work.” She smirked at Gilbert who held out his hand for the yellow paper, the permission slip. I gave it to him and he stuffed it into his shirt pocket.

“See how easy it was to obey the rules?” Gilbert said.

I right away felt like I was eight years old again.

Mrs. Weiner said to me, “You shouldn’t hang around here now that you went and gave your presentation. We got perverts who try to hang around and snatch kiddies. That’s why we got Gilbert.” I walked out of Oliver Kuhl School trying to remember what my mother told me about old Oliver Kuhl. I think it was that he liked little girls and used to invite them into his feed store on Front Street and give them alcoholic beverages. He was very rich and was said to be a philanthropist, a word I recently learned how to spell.

I got to the edge of the walk and turned around to get a last look at my old school. Gilbert made shooing motions with the backs of his hands, so I kept on moving.