The Pencil Perplex

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Abstract

MARIANNE tossed the red curls from her eyes, intent on her work. She squirmed in her desk for a better position, her fingers tightening around the crayon. Her nose wrinkled—rabbit fashion, and a pink tongue crept to the corner of her mouth. She drew in her breath, then very slowly lettered. M...A...R...I... .
MARIANNE tossed the red curls from her eyes, intent on her work. She squirmed in her desk for a better position, her fingers tightening around the crayon. Her nose wrinkled—rabbit fashion, and a pink tongue crept to the corner of her mouth. She drew in her breath, then very slowly lettered. M . . . A . . . R . . . I . . .

She glanced up at Debby in the desk next to hers. Debby’s hand moved confidently across the paper. Debby got to use a pencil. Marianne wanted more than anything to graduate to pencils. More than a Barbie doll for Christmas even. She wasn’t sure what graduate meant exactly, but that’s what Miss Dean called the step from crayons to pencils. Her cousin, Libby, was graduating from college soon. She wondered if that meant Libby got to use pencils. She guessed so. Your handwriting had to be almost perfect, though, to get a pencil. Debby’s handwriting was perfect. Miss Dean said so. I bet Libby’s penmanship is perfect, too, Marianne thought wistfully. Maybe Libby could help her over Christmas, when she came home from college.
She returned to her work, her face scrounging in concentration. She took another gulp of air and held it. A . . . N . . . .

Miss Dean peered over Marianne's left shoulder, shaking her head at the child's chicken scratchings. *This one may do her master's thesis with a crayon,* she thought. She chuckled inwardly, envisioning a learned scholar with crayon in hand. It was irritating, though, after all their instruction. Even at the second grade level, they should be able to absorb a few simple penmanship lessons.

“No, Marianne. . . .” Her voice had a slight edge to it. “We don't make our N's that way.” She snatched the crayon and printed a neat N on the child's paper. “Now, print it like that!”

Marianne clutched the crayon awkwardly and painstakingly copied Miss Dean's N.

Miss Dean watched the child's shaky progress. *Honestly,* she thought, *half of them print like palsy victims.*

Marianne dabbed at the moisture in her eyes. She wouldn't cry. No, she wouldn't. Only babies cried. She glanced up at Debby. Debby was giving her one of those “I can do something you can’t do” smiles. Sometimes, she just wanted to hit Debby. She quickly looked back to her paper.

Miss Dean hadn't been very nice. She hoped that didn’t mean she wouldn’t graduate soon. Daddy had promised to get her a mechanical pencil when the day came. She’d even picked it out at the drugstore. It was blue with an eraser shaped like Donald Duck.

Miss Dean surveyed her class as they finished their penmanship lessons. Marianne was still in the fetal position, practicing her N's. “Class, it's time to put away our things for the day.” The class scraped and shuffled in response, clearing their desks. She cringed, watching several of them stuff their papers into their desks. She had hoped to use some of those papers for the parent-teacher conferences as work samples. Just one red tousled head remained stationary during all the confusion. Marianne still hovered over her paper. *Working on her N's, no doubt,* she thought.
"Marianne, for heaven's sake, you can practice your N's at home or tomorrow."

Marianne's eyes, flying up at the sound of her name, sank down again at the tone of Miss Dean's voice. A miserable tear meandered down her cheek and plopped onto her paper, smudging an N. And it was her best one. Slowly, she closed her book and folded her papers, all except one. The sheet with the teacher's printed N, she creased carefully, and put in her pocket.

* * *

Mrs. Olson bustled about the kitchen, concocting a new recipe for tonight's dinner. The slam of the front door startled her, sending the egg from her hand to the floor. It splattered in a sunburst pattern across the red linoleum. Damn those kids, anyway, she grumbled to herself. She was about to deliver a harsh lecture when Marianne shuffled through the door—the picture of dejection.

“Well, how did school go today?” she ventured.

Marianne burst into tears, flinging herself into her mother's apron. Hmm, apparently that was the wrong thing to say—then aloud, “What's the matter, honey? Have a bad day?”

Marianne sniffed into her mother's apron, trying to explain her failure. “I couldn't make an N . . . an . . . an . . . and Debby laughed at me . . . and . . . sniff . . . and Miss Dean got all mad. . . . Oh, Mommy, I'll never graduate to pencils.”

Mrs. Olson stroked her daughter's hair while trying to decipher this traumatic incident. She spoke softly. “Now, tell me again what happened. Mommy doesn't quite understand.”

Marianne started up again, this time more slowly. Poor dear, her mother thought, this pencil thing has got her down. She had been moping for two weeks about it. She seemed obsessed with earning a pencil, to the exclusion of all else. She hadn't even gone to the zoo with her father and brother last
weekend, preferring to stay home and work on her penmanship. It was the L that day.

The charred smell of ground beef jarred her from her thoughts, ending the counseling session. Marianne's world seemed somewhat brighter from pouring out her woes.

By dinner time, she was again in deep depression, barely touching her meal. She pushed her fork around her plate, making designs with her potatoes and peas. When excused from the table, she moved quickly to a chair, paper and crayon in hand. She worked diligently until bedtime.

Mrs. Olson, watching her daughter, made a mental note to discuss the issue with Miss Dean at the parent-teacher conference, day after tomorrow. She hated to have Marianne consider herself a failure in life at age seven. She even lacked her former enthusiasm for the usual things that occupy a second grader's mind . . . Brownies, ballet lessons. . . . Yes, she would certainly have to discuss this with Miss Dean!

*   *   *

Mrs. Olson sat outside the second grade classroom in the waiting chairs set up for the conferences. She thought about what she would say to Miss Dean. Poor Marianne. She had walked in on her last night while she was practicing her O's. She was writing with a pencil—handling it as if it were the crown jewels. Discovering her mother's presence, her face had looked like when she'd been caught with her fingers in the cookie jar.

"Mrs. Olson, would you come in, please?"

Mrs. Olson took the chair opposite Miss Dean.

Miss Dean opened Marianne's folder and took out various samples of her work. Her head was beginning to ache; she couldn't wait till her coffee break. "On the whole, Mrs. Olson, Marianne's work is good to excellent." She pointed out several papers—spelling, modern math, English—making the routine comments. She glanced at her watch. Thank God, only 15 minutes until her break. "Excuse me, Mrs. Olson, what were you saying?"
“I was asking you about Marianne’s penmanship. Apparently, the pencil has become a second grade status symbol which she has yet to achieve. I’ve never seen her so depressed about anything.”

*Oh, no, not another parental pep talk,* Miss Dean groaned silently. *When would these pseudo-authorities realize she was the one with four years of teachers’ college under her belt?*

“Frankly, Miss Dean, I don’t feel that this plan is to the child’s best advantage. The inferiority complex Marianne has acquired is not worth the perfection of her handwriting.”

Miss Dean opened her mouth for a defensive retort, then slowly closed it. “Yes, Marianne’s work has not been up to par lately,” she mused, more to herself than aloud.

“She hasn’t been up to par in anything lately. I hate to see her sacrifice her self-confidence. . . .”

“Oh, come now, Mrs. Olson.” Realizing the sharpness of her voice, she added more gently, “It can’t be that bad.”

Mrs. Olson felt her back bristling. “I think it is, Miss Dean. I wish you would consider the possibility of promoting Marianne to pencils.” Her voice trailed off. Miss Dean’s expression indicated she wasn’t buying this line of thought.

“I’ll do that, Mrs. Olson. Now, if that’s all, I. . . .”

“Yes, thank you. This talk has been most interesting.” Mrs. Olson rose and walked out the door.

Miss Dean resisted an urge to stick out her tongue at the retreating figure, but grabbed her purse instead and headed toward the lounge. She poured herself a cup of coffee and glared into its depths. *Hadn’t these parents ever heard of incentive? Yes, incentive, that’s what it was—she remembered that from Elementary Education 413. The move up to pencils was the incentive for improving one’s penmanship. If Marianne was that intent on earning a pencil, she’d just have to work a little harder. That was all there was to it!* She finished the rest of her coffee, bracing up for the next relay of conferences.

* * *
The day had progressed poorly. Miss Dean was still irritated from her conferences and the children had been climbing the walls all day. She had finished English, and had just penmanship left before she could crawl home. She had debated all day whether or not to even tackle that subject—it was still a sore point.

"Class, will you please take out your penmanship books, paper, and pencil or crayon."

Marianne dug through her desk and extracted the required items. She'd worked all last night on the P. She'd even practiced right through Huckleberry Hound on TV. Mommy and Daddy had told her how nice they all looked, standing in a row . . . P . . . P . . . P . . . P . . . P . . . . She hoped Miss Dean liked them, but she probably wouldn't. She never did.

Miss Dean studied Marianne for a moment. Marianne did look unhappy. Oh, well, I'm sure it's due to something wrong at home, she thought. Honestly, parents are so eager to palm off their children's problems on the school. She explained the procedure for printing the Q, then demonstrated on the blackboard. She gazed about the room, watching the children. Marianne was in the fetal position again, struggling with her lettering.

Marianne started her second line of Q's. The ones in the first line were too skinny. She carefully printed . . . Q. No, that one was too fat. Her fingers tightened around the crayon. She tried again . . . Q.

Miss Dean walked up and down the aisles, surveying the children's work. "Very nice, Debby. You're doing a lovely job." She continued up the aisle, then down the next, approaching Marianne's desk.

Marianne felt all goosepimply. Miss Dean was almost at her desk. Oh, she hoped Miss Dean would like her Q's. She smiled hesitantly at the teacher.

Miss Dean paused by Marianne's desk. "No, Marianne, your Q's aren't supposed to look like boxes. They're round, like this." She watched Marianne's smile dissolve into a hurt expression. She continued down the aisle.

Marianne clutched her crayon, increasing the pressure as it met the paper. Halfway around the Q, the crayon snapped in half. The long blocked tears rushed to her eyes and
cascaded down her cheeks. With a whimper, her head slumped to her arms resting on her desk. Choked sobs shook her body.

Miss Dean walked quickly to the child's desk. "What's the matter, Marianne?"

"I just can't do it... Miss Dean. I'll never graduate. I can't..." The rest of the sentence was drowned in a new flood of tears.

Miss Dean patted the child's back. "Put away your things, class. It's time to go home." She leaned down to the little girl. "Don't cry, Marianne. Everything will be all right." She moved to the front of the room to direct traffic as the children filed out. _That poor child really was upset_, she thought, zipping Johnny into his jacket. _Oh, it has to be more than just her penmanship._ She'd never heard of anyone getting so upset over such a small... _Wait! Elementary Education 461. What was that principle?_ Miss Dean's brow furrowed in concentration. _Yes, that's it! The child experiencing continued failure in a subject is apt to become highly frustrated._ Maybe Marianne was experiencing high frustration. _Could her teaching methods affect all the children like this?_

She caught sight of Marianne heading for the door. "Marianne, I'd like to speak to you for a moment, please."

Marianne stopped, then turned and trudged back toward Miss Dean's desk.

Miss Dean looked at the woebegone face opposite her—still tear-stained. "Marianne, I've decided that your penmanship has reached a point where you'd do much better work with a pencil." Miss Dean watched the fog lift from the child's face.

"Do you really mean it, Miss Dean? Really? Oh, thank you. Gee..."

Miss Dean watched the red curls bobbing happily as Marianne skipped out the door.

Marianne thought of her mechanical pencil. She and Daddy could go to the drugstore tonight and buy it. _Whoops!_ "Good night, Miss Dean," she called over her shoulder, then disappeared down the hall.

Miss Dean smiled as she slipped into her coat.