Big School

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THE RULE was no running. They obeyed just to the edge of it. I caught the heel-balanced thud thud thud and rattle-clank of Batman or Monster-Man lunchboxes swung free at arms-lengths as noisily as those arcs could make them and waited for them in Room 1. I was totally inexperienced and untrained, though I’d been at Fairviews Park two weeks now. All I could offer was a stop-gap love in exchange for the real teacher they had driven away finally by their wildnesses. Our brown wrapper-paper mural was still on the linoleum from yesterday’s learning experience. Around it were still the futile and dirty lacings of newspapers for protecting the floor, which stopped just where the squashed crayons, chalk and clay began, in the cracks of the tiles.

Afternoons, the janitor came and I felt guilty somehow, though she didn’t know or care about my young young ones, how David finally learned what a word meant in May of his first grade year, besides messing up the floor.

“How do you take it, Miss? The little pigs ought to be made to pick up like the rest of ’em. You do know, don’t you, they’re supposed to put the chairs up, not you? I’ll tell Joe
no more wax for this room, doesn’t help a bit, and they don’t respect it, neither.”

“All right, kids,” I began each day like the beginning, all over again, braver and expecting less and less, “today we’ll finish our mural and Mrs. Percy’s letting us put it up in the hall for the rest of the first grades to see.”

We gathered around it, warmed inside for one second at the idea that we could do something good, too, even if it was only a torn-up and mussed-up five and six-year-old surrealism, upside down pictures along one side. The vying for the prettiest butterfly or flower went on in the clump of five girls; the guns, boats, planes multiplied wherever one of the thirteen boys could jockey in.

“What kind of plane is that, Antoine?” I pointed to the four-pointed gray crayon star he squinted at. “Is it a jet?”

“Yes, a Crusader.” He whispers, not because he’s sick or mad, just because he never talked until he was three.

“Does your dad fly it?” Good, I patted myself on the back for letting him tell me about his hero, his Navy dad.

“No.” The wall slammed up again. Each second I looked into his eyes he retreated further. Not because it was Maryland and I was white and he was brown, not because he was such a small young seven-year-old. It was set between us, because I had assumed he was proud of fliers, even if his dad were only a mechanic. Even the immature here know, though; the officers’ kids’ jeers make them know. Antoine doesn’t even know anyone in the hill apartments whose dad is an officer, or who flies the jets.

We looked for the masking tape, started lifting the mural, but Gary pushed Antoine out of our way.

“I hate you!” screeched the wild one. “Get your hands off me!” I turned, but not in time to head it off: that horrid whap and the whoosh of a kid’s breath knocked clean out, the grimy fist dent still showing in his tee-shirt. Gary squealed as he always did, hysterically, for he never expected someone really tough to call his tough acting bluff and they always did.

“A Antoine! Stop that! Wait a minute you two!” The foot was speeding to get Gary again, even doubled-up on the floor.
The mural forgotten, dropped to trap my feet, my alarm had roused the vigilantes to action: Jeffrey, Vanesa, Carol, David, Humphrey.

“Get him!” “Antoine, you stink!” “What’d’ya do that for!” “You sure are stupid!” “What’s the big idea!” And one ominous trailing, tattle-tale voice, “I get Mrs. Percy!”

Antoine was hounded back to the windows by little fists. A thousand years of hate might as well be in those eyes, clouded and clenched in meanness. I saw a sixteen-year-old delinquent in his tensed body, knotted to spring fast.

“Don’t bug him! Leave him alone!” As so many times before, my dead run to help was too slow, my words meaningless to them, as my words on no fighting were.

“Stay away! Stay away!” wrenched from him; madness made his tears formidable. With a rage-yelp he threw the nearest desk right into them, the crashing of it and the door slamming behind our ship of state hushed the din. Seventeen faces looked to me and Mrs. Percy to hit Antoine a mighty one.

“We cannot have this, children! I heard you all down the hall, even before Brice came to get me. Just because you can’t do the work of the other children doesn’t mean you can’t act big like them!” Slap, slap, slap went the paddling board only she could use by law. “Antoine, honey, you actin’ up again? Now come now, you didn’t really mean it did you sweetheart? My, my, this room is a pig-sty! Now, how about picking it up, so we’ll be real proud of you!”

“But they learned about the tens counting numbers today.” I watched, shaken as always, while she ran the angels, putting them in line for me.

“Now don’t you fret none, about that stuff. You just get them to follow the rules. They’ll just have to re-learn all that arithmetic and writing over next year; it’s the rules they need now.” Mrs. Percy cooed.