

Kindergarten

October, 1958



I have the best Kindergarten in the world. The old Blue Hills School needed space for more kids, so they built a brand new Kindergarten and two first grade classrooms. Arthur is in the second grade, which is in the old building.

The Kindergarten Room is bigger than both combined first grade classrooms with higher ceilings, so the big kids use it for assemblies and movies. The Venetian blinds create a nearly movie house darkness for our brand new projector. Unfortunately, we have only seen two movies. The room is also dark for Nap Time. We have blankets rolled up in a cubby hole for our daily Nap on the padded tile floor. I don't nap. A few of the kids actually fall asleep.

We have to walk in two lines to walk to the two bathrooms. It takes longer to line up than it takes to walk to the two Rest Rooms, which are right next door in the new wing. Everything is brand new and shines.

Thirty-six students attend my Kindergarten – sixteen girls and twenty boys. Half the students live in an area I now call Old Pershing Park and eighteen are from the new development like me. The best part of the Day is Recess when we get to play with new toys.

I made friends with Bobby Clemens when we both grabbed the same cardboard bricks to play with. We debated several building projects. A rocket ship. A gas station. Mary suggested a Fort and the three of us went to work at once. The paper

bricks stacked easily, but also tended to tip over easily when they were bumped into. Mary showed us how to overlap the bricks which makes them harder to knock down. Timmy still managed to knock over our fort, and stood proudly over his new possessions. Timmy started building his own fort and I began to complain, but Bobby calmed me down. "Why are you playing with the niggers?," Timmy demanded, looking straight in my face. I looked at Mary, confused.

Mary lowered her angry eyes. Bobby is the tallest kid in the class. He stands a foot taller than Timmy and speaks calmly. "Timothy, you must be color-blind, because Mary Calderon is not Black. She is Hispanic. You may keep the bricks I was using. My Black hands are the only ones who touched them."

Timmy removes his white hands from the red, cardboard blocks and leaps at me. My first fight ends quickly. I roll to avoid Timmy's lunge, and my fist connects with his nose which starts bleeding. Timmy and I are sent to the Office, where the Principal is known for her ruler and paddle board. Instead, Timmy and I are separated and forced to lean our heads on both arms against the Lobby wall of the old building.

Mrs. Goddard addresses me first. "No fighting is allowed. We must practice more restraint." One hour on the wall, then return to your classroom."

Restraint. That's what Mary and Robert did. Mrs. Goddard crosses to Timmy, pulls his arm around and body slams him into the wall. "What did you call Bobby?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I didn't call him any names."

Mrs. Goddard grabs Timmy by both arms and shakes him violently.

"I called him a Negro. That's it."

I try to correct his story, but Mrs. Goddard looks at me and shakes her head. "Did you call Robert the n-word."

"No, I swear to God. I didn't."

Mrs. Goddard grabs Timmy by both ears and lifts him in the air as his feet sway listless. He is defeated.

"Yes. Yes I said it."

Mrs. Goddard releases Timmy.

"I merely asked Alan why he always plays with the n... Negro kids?"

Mrs. Goddard dismisses Timmy. "Please tell your teacher to send Mr. Clemens and Miss Calderon to the Office."

I realize several things while I awaited the arrival of Robert and Mary. First, I notice that I am still being punished while bully Timmy was now free from the Principal's

wrath. Second, I notice the Principal does not pronounce Mary's last name like Robert. Third, I notice that the Principal never says aloud the word Timmy used. Robert prefers the word Black, so I vow to never utter that other word. Mommy and Daddy say it sometimes. More often they use the Yiddish term *Schvartze* in their conversations.

When, my classmates arrive, Mrs. Goddard announces, "Children. You are not in trouble. I simply want to hear your story about the fight between Alan and Timothy. Mr. Clemons first." She leads him to her office in the Old Building.

"I'm so sorry, Mary. I didn't want to get you guys in trouble."

"We're not. The teacher put Timmy in the corner."

"Oh." That's good. I'm just so confused. "I didn't think we were doing anything wrong." Robert is Black and Mary is Hispanic, whatever that is.

I interrogate Mary while she waits to tell the Principal her story. "Does being Hispanic mean you come from another country? What do you call yourself? How do you pronounce your last name? Are you adopted? Do you speak Spanish?"

Mary tells me that she is from, Puerto Rico, which is an island like Cuba whose inhabitants speak Spanish as their primary language. She teaches me *hola*, *gracias* and how to pronounce Calderon properly. She is not adopted, nor did her parents ever give a child up for adoption. She thinks Bobby is the best looking boy in the class and would love to get married to him someday, but her parents would not allow it.