

The School Board

from *Particivision and other stories*

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"Len!" His father called angrily toward his bedroom again, "Len!"

"What!" He'd been disturbed from sleep.

"It's eight o'clock--doesn't the school shuttle come by at eight-thirty?" He was standing at the doorway now, in his heavy coat, gloves, and hat, lunch pail in hand. He looked with disdain at his sixteen-year-old son, still lying in bed.

"I'm not going to the school", Len muttered and rolled over.

"I won't have you skipping school again!"

"There's no such thing as skipping anymore--attendance isn't compulsory anymore, remember? I don't have to go to school", he said saucily.

"You don't have to go to school--what, you know everything there is to know?" Though he had to admit that much of what his son was supposed to have been learning before was good for nothing. But things had changed, hadn't they?

"You can't make me", Len delivered the bottom line.

"Then have the driveway shovelled, the house dusted and vacuumed, the dishes done--and fix the strapping in the crawlspace, the insulation is falling down. And the woodstove can be emptied, you know where the ashes go." He stopped a moment. "That's hardly eight hours' work, but--why don't you make up a batch of chili and freeze it--"

"Don't know how." He'd discovered a refuge in ignorance. It released him of responsibility.

"You know how to read, don't you? Use the cookbook!" He was shouting. "And try to fix the snowmobile--"

"Can't--I tried--I don't know how to fix it." He was sullen.

"Well I guess you're fired from that job."

"And I'm not gonna do all that other stuff either, I'm not your slave." He put his hands behind his head and stared at his father.

"And I'm not yours!" He was enraged. "You expect me to buy your food and make it? Want me to serve it to you too, on a silver platter maybe?" He hit the doorframe. "If you don't fix the snowmobile, I guess you can't use it. And if you don't make the chili, you won't be eating it. Unless of course you can pay me for it--got a job?" he chided. Then he turned away in disgust. How many times had they been through this? "I don't have time for--" he broke off, "You better learn one thing: you get nothing for nothing!" He stood there in silence for a moment, expecting a response. Then he looked at his watch. "Shit, I'll be late for work again", he glared at his son. "You'll get me fired and *then* where will we be, what will we eat, eh?"

Len heard his father slam the door. The truck started and after a minute or so, he heard him drive away. He relaxed back into his bed but he felt no victory. What *would* he do all day? He was tired of watching tv. He had no way of getting to Bud's house--bastard, he thought, why didn't *you* fix the snowmobile? You could've done it last night, at least then I could go see my friends. He felt like a prisoner. Bet he did that on purpose. He wondered if that was child abuse--his dad was keeping him from, what did they call it, 'social development'? Maybe he'd mention it tonight. Fuck, he looked outside at the snow blowing, too cold to even try to hitch a ride.

He got out of bed then and walked into the kitchen. He took a bottle of

juice from the fridge, then went to their telephone/computer in the corner. He sat down at the little table and called up the School Board--it was easier than looking it up in the newspaper. He could turn on the tv to the School Board channel, but the tv was in the other room. And anyway, it was one of the free bulletin boards. He scanned the screen--there were tons of courses. Many were offered at the school, but there were a lot at workplaces and people's houses--the school shuttle went everywhere. Accounting, biochemistry, broadcasting, cake decorating, Canadian geography, computer skills, electrical I, english language, english literature, french language, french literature, greek history, latin. He couldn't believe people were really interested in this crap. He sure as hell wasn't. He fast forwarded. Snorkelling, snowmobile repair--he stopped. He punched up that course. It started last week. Figures. He punched up a screen showing everything starting today. He crossed it with things needing no prerequisite. He was left with Intro Science I. Yeah right. Well shit there was nothing else to do. He looked at his watch. Eight-twenty-five. Fuck. He washed up a bit, put on some clothes, and ran out to the shuttle stop.

Ivanya Summer moved through the hall full of students. They were of all ages--and all of every other variable you could think of as well. She was heading toward Room 107, one of the science rooms. It was the first day of the term. There were three four-month terms now--three times a year she could feel this first-day-of-school feeling. Used to be this excitement was part anxiety: would it be a good class? or would so-and-so be in it, and so-and-so. and--

Several students were waiting at the door, smiling and eager. She chatted with them as she opened up the room, and five minutes later, at nine o'clock, she began the class.

Not with taking attendance. It didn't matter who was--who wasn't here. There was no punishment for absence, no bonus for presence. If a student wasn't here, maybe they wouldn't master the topic of the day. And if they were here, they could count on her help to do so. It was as simple as that, now.

Now, attendance at school was compulsory only until the person was literate and numerate. There were a few standard tests to be taken, by anyone at any time--read the newspaper, write a letter to your government rep, have a mock conversation with a mock doctor to explain what the problem was and to understand what to do about it, fill out your income tax return--and then you were, if you wanted to be, through with school.

She began to hand out the texts and schedule for Intro Science I. As an intro course, it had no prerequisite. However this was rare. Most courses required certain courses to be taken prior; or in lieu of that, adequate performance was required on a test measuring the skills and knowledge that would've been acquired in those prerequisite courses. The class met for an hour every day and every two or three days there was a new topic: how does a plane stay up in the air, why do leaves turn colour, how does aspirin work, why do male dogs lift their leg when they pee. and on and on.

As she began to talk a bit about the schedule, the door opened and a young man, about sixteen, sauntered in. He walked across the front of the room with a

smirk on his face.

She continued, "So that's what we're--"

"Where am I supposed to sit?" he accused her. She thought it best to ignore his attitude.

"There's an empty desk over there", she pointed.

"Oh." He walked over toward it.

"So that's what we're going--" A loud scrape of chair along floor interrupted her. She looked angrily at him. He shrugged, exaggerating apology, blaming the desk.

"What we're going to do in the--"

"Hey Axelrod", Len had seen someone he knew across the room. "Do you have a pen I can borrow?" he called out loudly, then looked at the teacher, daring her.

For a moment it was like so many of her classes used to be. too many of her classes. There was always one or two, or five or six, or ten or fifteen kids who couldn't care less about the lesson, who did not want to be there. And they were unable to amuse themselves quietly. Sure you could kick them out, send them to the vice-principal's office. And lay yourself open to the charge of 'inability to control the class' or 'poor classroom discipline'. And anyway, that was an option only if there was one such student. There were, after all, a limited number of chairs in the vice-principal's office. And yours was not by any means the only class with uninterested students. Sometimes she'd send them out into the hall, to mellow out or cool off or whatever--hoping to make headway talking to the student one-on-one and away from the gaze of the rest of the class. But more often than not the student just took off, and *she'd* be the one in the office because one of her students was found wandering the halls and didn't she know that she was legally responsible for each and every one of her students for the duration of that period? Besides, as the vice-principal may point out, if the student isn't in your class, she or he can't learn. And, as you'd be reminded, it was your duty to teach them.

And so would begin every teacher's understanding of the many roles to be played. Teacher as prison guard and teacher as drill sergeant. Or for the more hopeful, or at least the more creative (the more energetic?), there was teacher as entertainer, teacher as class clown. However everyone soon realized it all boiled down to teacher as fool. After you tried to entice, coax, and trick them into learning, you coerced them. When that didn't work, you bribed them--with marks usually, but also with no homework or a spare on Friday. Eventually that didn't work either: students stopped caring about marks, stopped doing any homework, and stopped showing up on Friday.

Eventually, someone somewhere realized that you can lead a horse to water but you can't force it to drink. No matter how hard you whip it, no matter how attractive you make the water--if it isn't thirsty, it won't drink.

She turned her attention back to Len, who had begun to drum loudly on his desk. "You don't want to be here, do you? You don't want to find out why--", she looked at the schedule she had just passed out, "why chickens run around after their heads have been cut off."

"No, I don't. Hey Axelrod, do you?" The boy on the other side of the room smiled nervously and was silent.

"Then please leave." It was as simple as that, now. (And if it wasn't, she could phone for an escort.)

For a moment Len forgot that things were different. "What--not sending me to the office? No detention?"

"No--the only consequence of your behaviour is losing the privilege of attending this class; and the only consequence of that is, I suppose, that you'll have to learn the material--that is, if you want to learn it--on your own, without my help."

"Think I want your help?"

"Obviously not--so you shouldn't have come in the first place." She paused and asked the question she could now ask. "Why *did* you come?"

He got up so violently the chair clattered backwards to the floor. He walked out and slammed the door.

Used to be, Ivanya realized. I'd now consider him *my* failure: my failure to interest him in science, my failure to motivate him to want to learn about science, or my failure to help him find the real cause of his anger. (Did I forget teacher as psychologist and teacher as social worker?)

But now--it suddenly occurred to her--how *do* you get the horse to drink? Make it thirsty. Deprive it of water. And in essence, that's what this new system did. It wasn't pouring water down their throats six hours a day, five days a week; it wasn't even holding out a glass. It wasn't withholding it either, but the deprivation would be there just the same. Len would be ignorant. He would be without knowledge, without skill. Whether or not he would become thirsty would depend on whether or not he recognized knowledge and skill to be a necessity. It was easier with water. Water was tangible, and drinking some directly and immediately alleviated thirst.

She handed out a diagram of a chicken's insides. Then she put an overhead of the same diagram onto the projector, and with a blue felt pen she traced the path of the nervous system, explaining as she went along.

"So the chicken continues to 'feel' after its head has been chopped off?" someone asked.

"Do our nervous systems work the same way?" She fielded their questions then gave them some time to field hers.

And people were accustomed to direct and immediate effects, she continued her thought. Cause wasn't understood otherwise, 'Deferred gratification' was an oxymoron these days. What with songs being no longer than three minutes, hour-long tv shows with three story lines and any one scene lasting no more than two minutes, ads were thirty seconds, sentences in the newspaper were ten words or less. (No wonder their attention spans had become so short!) If you didn't get it right away, you didn't get it. 'Trying' supposed time. 'Persistence' an eternity. And it's like they have no conception of time: no memory of the past, no plans for the future--this moment is all that exists. They're like children, she realized.

For a while she had thought, if the courses were valuable, they wouldn't

have to trick, coerce, or bribe. But their value was years away. Too far to be perceived. Or their value lie in an 'if-then': if you want to be a forest ranger, then you have to learn plant biology; if you want a high school diploma, then you have to get thirty credits. Too indirect to be noticed.

Fuck! What an asshole! So now what, Len thought, wandering down the hall. (It used to be a fine thing to get kicked out, sent to the v.p.'s office. First it was initiation, then it was worth so many points.) He slithered against some lockers to the floor. He could sit here all day. No he couldn't. Someone would notice him, call the cops, and he'd be picked up for loitering. Okay so he could sit somewhere else all day, he could go to the washroom. He remembered how many teachers he'd fooled with that one. "Miss?--" What teacher would say no and risk him pissing all over the floor. He would too, they knew it. So they'd say sure, making some comment about interrupting the class, or controlling his bladder, or asking why he didn't go during the ten-minute break between classes. "Didn't have time--had to go to my locker and get my books for this class and it's way over at the other end of the school and my last class--" Once a teacher actually suggested he get the books for *both* morning classes and carry them all morning with him so he wouldn't have to go to his locker between classes. But no, the washroom was out, now. No one there.

She listened to their answers to her questions. There were some very good hypotheses.

"All right, I like what I'm hearing. If you'll turn to page ten in your text, you'll find more information on nervous systems. Take a few minutes now to check out the theories we've Just heard with the facts."

The seeds for change had been planted mostly by teachers who had been on exchange programs, especially in developing countries, and by night school teachers. They were the ones who got things going. Ivanya supposed that they were the ones to whom the existing state of affairs was most clearly a farce. A ridiculous, pathetic, definitely unsatisfactory farce. Many simply could not return to regular day school teaching In this country, it filled them with such disgust--after having experienced an educational context in which the students *want* to learn and *try very hard* to do so, after being able to be simply and magnificently teacher as teacher.

The changeover was simple actually. Ten percent of the Ministry of Defence budget was transferred to the Ministry of Education--with no strings attached to the number of students in attendance. So suddenly there was no need to force anyone to be anywhere to learn anything. Suddenly a lot of administrators had time--which, along with that \$1.2 billion, was used to run schools round the year and round the clock. All the fringe 'alternative' learning programs burst into growth--an extensive learning network developed. Whenever and wherever someone decided they wanted to learn something, it was relatively easy to get (back) into the school system. And, with money left over, a joint program was established with municipal recreation and police departments, to set up youth drop-in centres next to all major school buildings.

She began to circulate among the students, stopping here and there to help them help themselves.

The result was astounding. Smaller classes. Full of people who wanted to be there, people who wanted to learn. 'Discipline problems' became non-existent. And though it was too early to really tell, Ivanya thought the students were changing. They weren't coerced anymore to be there or to learn a certain subject, so they were gradually losing the habit of resistance they had acquired. It freed up a lot of energy: energy they used to spend on refusing, in a thousand different ways, to do, now they could spend on doing. The habit of participation, even of co-operation, was beginning to develop. Learning became active, instead of passive--not because of the strategies taught in teachers' college to make it so (strategies used all along--but to no avail), but because without compulsion, presence became a matter of choice. And to choose to attend became to choose to participate. Then, not only did they become participants, they became initiators: once you were concerned with possibility of doing (as opposed to the problem of not doing), the decision of *what* to do became possible.

Everyone was over at the drop-in probably. It was next to the school and had a gym, several lounges, food and drink machines. A lot of kids hung out there. All day. He had. For four months actually. But you can play only so much basketball and so much euchre day after day, eight hours a day. Even the talk got boring. When you got right down to it, no one had much of anything to say.

That was another thing, Ivanya thought, returning to her desk. Decision-making. When something is mandatory, there is, in essence, no choice to be made. So it used to be students weren't accustomed to making decisions. Oh sure, they could decide whether or not to do their homework, they could even decide what courses to take. But most students didn't care about such things--and a decision without real interest in the possibilities as well as in the outcome isn't really a decision. Besides, the consequences were seldom really experienced. If they didn't learn the material, so what? They still survived, still had food, water, and shelter. They still got jobs. (It doesn't matter what you know, it matters what you look like--put on a suit and tie for the interview--we taught them well.) And usually they still passed--what with teachers inflating grades to give students a feeling of success (in the hope that then they'd be motivated) and department heads inflating grades to make the school look good (see, our students are accomplished; see, we're successful teachers). So they learned/we taught them that they can succeed without trying, without achieving--that they can get something for nothing.

The feeling of success should've come directly from the achievement, not from the mark put on it. Part of the problem was, again, the perceived worthlessness of the task and hence its achievement (I can solve a quadratic equation, whoopedoo). Marks--that was the other part of the problem. Like money, they were an intermediary that became an end. Most people don't want jobs, they want money. Because there are lots of jobs, i.e., lots of things to do--

and yet the unemployed complain. Because they are 'unpaid', not 'unemployed'. And students didn't want to learn, they wanted marks. Everyone forgot that the money was *for* the job done, the mark was *for* the skill or knowledge mastered. And so cheating, like theft, became logical. You can steal money but you can't steal a completed task; you can cheat to get a mark--you can't cheat to acquire a skill or knowledge.

But now that they can make a decision, about something that really matters to them (shall I go to school or not), and now that they will experience the consequence of that decision, Ivanya thought that the students were feeling more responsible for their own lives, for their own happiness. If they weren't learning, now they first thought that it was *their* fault--I wasn't listening carefully enough or I didn't do the assignment. (And so developed real abilities.) And if they were bored, it was *their* problem--I should drop this course and find one I *am* interested in. (And so developed real interests.) And, she hoped, after the responsibility for self would come a feeling of responsibility for others, maybe even for the world. And once they did for themselves (instead of waiting for the school, the teacher, to do for them, to them) they might start thinking of doing for others.

It was painfully clear now. When you're not forced to be part of, not coerced to co-operate, you will do so more often, and more willingly. And so they will learn. And with knowledge comes power. Power to--

So he could wait for the next shuttle and go home. And do what, watch tv? Certainly not that list his dad had yelled at him.

Maybe he'd raise a little hell, he thought. Kick in some lockers, write on the walls. What for, he suddenly wondered. 'Cause I'm fucking angry! He knocked over a recyc-bin.

What are you fucking angry about? There ain't fucking nothing to do! He could go to student services. They had to help him find something to do. That was their job. Yeah sure. He remembered going to student services a few months ago.

"So, Len, how can we help you?"

"I don't know--you want me to tell you how to do your job?" he asked without making eye contact.

"Well are you having trouble with one of your classes, your teachers--maybe you need advice on a course of study that leads somewhere--"

"I'm not taking any courses."

"Oh--then let's start there. Do you want to?"

"I don't know."

"Well, what interests you?"

"I don't know."

"There's nothing that you enjoy doing?"

"No--not really." He paused. "Driving around on my snowmobile."

"Ah--okay--good--we have a snowmobile repair course." She punched up the School Board to find the listing and get the details.

"*Driving around* on it, not *fixing* it." Stupid bitch.

"Okay. If I could find someone into snowmobile racing--"

"I don't want to race." Are you crazy?

"Okay. So you like driving around on your snowmobile. Unfortunately I don't think anyone will pay you for that--wait a minute--there's probably some snowmobile patrol force--" She turned with excitement to the computer and in a few seconds she was reading from the screen, "You'd need to get your first aid and--"

"I don't want to do no first aid."

"Why not?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Just don't."

"But if it meant you could--" she stopped. The force was probably better off without him then.

"Okay I assume you want a job though--eventually--or do you already have a source of income?"

"What?"

"Do you know someone who's willing to--to 'keep' you for the rest of your life: to pay your rent, buy your food--or at least pay your taxes if you intend to build your own house and grow your own food."

He was silent.

"Do you know how to build a house or how to grow food?"

What was she asking that for?

"Well--do you?" She was getting exasperated.

"Do I what?" He was getting angry.

"Know someone who will buy you a snowmobile and keep its tank full!"

"No!"

"Okay--let's take a look." She had punched up the Job Board. "What kind of job would you like?"

"One that pays good."

"Okay--doctors get paid well."

He looked at her and laughed as if to say 'yeah, right--me a doctor'.

"You don't want to become a doctor?"

He looked at her again. Boy, was she dumb.

"I don't like school. Doctors have to go to school for a long time, don't they?"

"Well yes--before they apprentice. They need to know the names and functions of all the parts of the body--can you think of a better way to learn all of that than by going to school?"

Len got up to leave.

"Wait a minute", she'd gone too far. "You know you don't have to 'go to school'. I mean you can learn at home by correspondence on your computer. Or you can learn at someone else's home--we have lots of off-site possibilities. And then there's apprenticeships--learning at a workplace--what used to be called 'co-op'."

He sat back down.

"Let's take a look here." She scanned the job board, reading aloud listings at random. As expected, every single position required some kind of certificate of

skill or diploma of knowledge. "Anything here of interest to you?"

He wasn't even looking at the screen.

"Look, it seems you're going to need a certificate or diploma in *something*--let's go through the School Board and see if we can't find something you're interested in."

So they began to go through the School Board listings. Acrylic painting, archeology, architecture, auto mechanics. She paused there hopefully. No response. Biology, blueprinting, ceramics, chemistry, drafting.

"Maybe we're going at this wrong. Maybe there isn't anything we can offer you."

He grinned sarcastically. "You got that right."

"Maybe I should be asking what you can offer us."

He was silent.

"Do you have any skill you can pass on to others? Do you have any ability your community needs?"

"No."

"Well--you've got two arms and two legs, a sixteen-year-old body--there's a task force cleaning up the rubble from that--"

"You mean be a volunteer?" The word was repugnant to him. "No fucking way."

She turned with a sigh back to the computer screen. Electronics, engineering, english language, english literature, flooring, floristry, forestry, guitar. He grunted.

"You're interested in music? Do you want to learn to play guitar?"

"Already did. I took that class for *three* days and I still can't play anything."

"I see. You want something you can learn and do in one day."

"Yeah."

"And get paid."

"Yeah." Now she was cooking.

"I have just the thing then--"

She lined up a seven-hour apprenticeship on an assembly line leading to a job that paid minimum wage. When the apprentices got a break for lunch, he left.

It was ten o'clock, the class was over.

"Try a few of the problems on page eighteen, and come up with one good question about nerves," she smiled, "or chickens, for tomorrow." The students left, chatting happily to each other.

Sure there were still casualties of the system. Some chose not to go to school and discovered later that, for some things, it was easier to learn when young. And some were like that boy. Hard core cases. Oh well, she knew, he'd've been a casualty in the old system as well. And he would've taken a few others down with him--some easily influenced friends, a teacher dying of burn-out. She knew his type. Interested in nothing. Scornful of everything. Always arrived late and unprepared. That is, when he arrived--he skipped school more often than not. Never did any homework. Expected nevertheless to learn. And

insisted on passing. Probably never been to a library. At least, not on his own. Hopeless, she almost thought. But she knew that some kids loafed for two, even three years before thinking 'hey--.'

She sat at her desk a while longer, making a few notes on the students she had just seen. Throughout the course she'd enter comments into their computer file, notes on their achievements and their level of understanding of the material. The students would also add material to their file--mostly copies of work they had done. Then whenever the student requested it, a multidisciplinary jury would review his or her file and decide which, if any, certificates or diplomas could be awarded, and with what standing.

Why *did* he come? He didn't know. Shit. Maybe I'll check the School Board again, there was one in the main foyer. See what's starting next week. Or maybe I'll go to the library-- Where *is* the fucking library?