

The Consumers
by
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"Please help me, Mister Goodman." a boy's voice said from the dark of what I had thought to be my empty classroom.

Startled, I quickly looked up from the assignments I was grading. Reaching for the desk-lamp, I noticed the time on my watch. School had been out for over three hours. I aimed the light toward the student's cubicles.

"Jimmy, is that you?" I asked.

Eight year old Jimmy Merchant stepped from the dark into the light. As he moved closer, his red eyes told me he had been crying recently, though his cheeks were dry.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Please help me, Mister Goodman." he said.

"If I am able to, Jimmy." I said, closing the folder of assignments. "Have you been sitting in the dark all this time? Do you know what time it is? Your parents must be worried sick. I'm going to go call and let them know you're..."

"No, Mister Goodman, please don't call them." Jimmy said, with great emphasis on "no" and "don't". The sharp claws of something horrible had hold of this boy.

As a teacher, I was not allowed to have children of my own, but I made every effort allowed me to be there for my students. My student's laughter, the bliss of their youth, their inquisitive minds, these were the rewards I gained for choosing the life of a teacher. I found great personal pride and accomplishment when my young students smiled after finally comprehending their lessons. So, when I saw such a depth of terror in Jimmy's eyes, I knew he was somehow familiar with some older, and darker, corner of the world we lived in.

"It's my parents." Jimmy said, in a voice that trembled as feverishly as his body.

He looked straight into my eyes and said, "My mom and dad are going to kill me and eat me."

I sat back and straightened up, dumbfounded, literally at a loss for words.

Fortunately, society provided excellent teacher training and it kicked in. With precise textbook accuracy, I said, "Jimmy, what a terrible thing to say! Your parents love you very much. What on earth makes you say something like that?"

"They did it to my sister Fiona." he said. "She started being gone last month and no one ever saw her leave and now no one even talks about her. I know what happened, Mister Goodman, I'm not stupid."

"No one called you stupid, Jimmy." I said.

"They cooked her and made her into dinner stew and even put meat in my sandwiches for lunch but I threw those out!"

"Come on, Jimmy, this is unbelievable!" I said. "Stop these stories immediately."

"I'm not telling a story!" Jimmy shouted. "It's true!" He was clearly on the edge of hysterics.

"Your parents do not want to cook and eat you and you do not have a sister." I said calmly, exactly as the teacher training had taught me.

I knew such fright-filled ideas could not have originated from other students.

Using the approved system of teaching, based on the very prosperous "cubicle" workplace environment, children learned in their own "office". Four walls for each child, a computer displaying the daily lessons and no interaction between children during school hours resulted in statistically-proven superior concentration and dedicated focus on lessons by pre-pubescent students. The teaching system (known as the "Gates Funnel") had a residual benefit for society in that it allowed officials to know what was in the mind of each and every child. How a child of eight could have forged the thought that his older sister was murdered and cannibalized by his family was bureaucratically unanswerable because such topics were not in the curriculum of that age group. Familial obligations, such as Reproduction and Consumption, were not discussed until the thirteenth year, when the child became a first-stage adult and was leaving for the four year social interaction part of becoming a responsible member of society. The teaching system would dispense the truths about life as the child reached the proper age. Licensed families were directed in parenting school to tell children mythical tales of benevolent gift-giving elves and stay away from the educational aspects of their child's life. The cannibal horror in Jimmy's mind did not (because it could not) originate from other children or the curriculum. The only place it could have originated was in his household.

Jimmy's parents had probably left a door open. I made the decision then and there to remedy the situation as soon as possible.

"You don't know what happened!" Jimmy yelled, pushing the textbooks and pens off my desk and onto the floor. "Why do you say I don't have a sister? How do you know? I did but now I don't! Her name was Fiona and my mom and dad killed her and cut her up and made me eat her so they could make room for their dumb new baby and they're going to do the same to me!"

"That's quite enough!" I said, slapping the top of my desk with an open palm. I took a breath, then continued in a calm manner. "I've been your teacher for two years now, Jimmy, and you have never had a sister. Your parents are not planning to hurt you. Your parents are planning to have a baby. You should be excited about a new baby in the family!"

"It happened!" Jimmy yelled. "They killed my sister and they are going to do the same to me!" Tears streamed down his cheeks. "I don't want to be eaten. Please, Mister Goodman, please help me."

Eight year old Jimmy looked at me with the face of a man waiting his turn on the electric chair. Terror, panic, desperation, those were not faces for an eight year old.

Though my training said to call the parents and let them take their child away, at the time, given the circumstances, I believed the decent thing to do was give the boy a ride home and make him feel safe. So, I did something my instinct, background and teacher training all told me not to do.

I told Jimmy I would help him.

The rules of society were in place for a reason: the survival of the human species.

The planet had little left in the way of natural resources and ozone layer. Only so much recycling could be processed, only so much waste could be filtered, only so many people could eat. Humankind reached critical numbers a long time ago, longer than anyone alive remembered. When that critical population mass was reached, the world's powers put into effect a plan that had been worked and reworked a hundred thousand million different ways in preparation for "The Day". The best of all those plans was exactly how society lived ever since. With no available land to bury the dead and no natural tolerance left for burning or unnatural temperature fluxes, the dead were consumed by the living and processed into "midnight soil", used to grow the world's food in.

Like becoming a teacher, to become a family, a couple had to seek the proper education and achieve the approved licenses. A licensed couple was permitted two children. Because contraceptives and abortions were illegal, once a family had reached their two children limit, the couple had to abstain from pregnancy or face having to perform a Consumption in their future.

Consumption was the global society's approved method for ridding a family of the excess child. The birthing couple was obligated to the survival of their two youngest children. This meant dispensing of and consuming the eldest child, should the household's birthing mother become pregnant with a third child. It was horrible, but that was part of what being a family was all about. That was one of the reasons I became a teacher instead of a family man. The pay was considerably less but any potential obligations my being a teacher could demand weighed nowhere near as heavy as that of being a family man.

There was no doubt in my mind Jimmy had had an older sister named Fiona.

There was no doubt in my mind she had to leave for exactly the reason Jimmy had described. As I drove Jimmy home, back to his parents, I reminded myself of my teacher's oath. I swore to uphold the sanctity of the approved

curriculum and to not become involved with the household matters of my students. All I could do for Jimmy was drive him home, back to his waiting parents. It was all I could do because it was exactly what I had to do.

I never saw Jimmy in my class again, but I did hear through the grapevine that the Merchants became parents of twins. I smiled when I heard the news and hoped to be the twins' teacher one day.

It had always been my pleasure, and duty, to help my students in any way I could.

The End

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