

A Narrative about a Memorable Teacher

The Rosy-Cheeked Ghost Lesson

by Corbett Harrison

Thinking back, I suspect Mr. Borilla had shown up late to a faculty meeting the year I became one of his fifth graders. I suspect someone had volunteered him—in his absence—to be in charge of Bullard Elementary’s Fall Play, because why else would you do that? In fourth grade, my chorus teacher was put in charge of this extra duty expectation at our school, and I saw first-hand what a chore it had been for her; I am sure she went a bit grayer that fall. When she put on “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” I had hoped to be Linus, because he had some good lines, but Matt Shipley got the part because he actually looked like Charlie Brown’s blanket-carrying companion. So I played a member of the chorus who had no name and accepted my first lesson in humility.

Mr. Borilla chose to focus on Halloween for his fall play. He chose that well-known, high-quality piece of drama “The Rosy Cheeked Ghost.” When he personally asked me to audition and told me about the play—it was the story of a school that taught ghosts to be scary, but one ghost had these amiable rosy cheeks—I was sure he was asking me to try-out because he wanted me to star in his production. Had he known I was still bitter about the Linus thing from the year before? We had gotten to know each other pretty well during my fourth grade year, and now that he was my fifth grade teacher, was he helping me overcome the previous year’s drama debacle?

I gave up a day of lunchtime kickball and tried out for Borilla’s play. I read a Dr. Seuss poem I had memorized for a poetry festival, and I nailed that audition. I was horrified to find out that Mr. Borilla gave the part of the Rosy Cheeked ghost to Fred Dau the next day. I had been cast as the professor who ran the school for ghosts, and I was so angry, I almost quit the play before the first rehearsal even began. I had less than fifteen lines. My time could be better spent playing kickball.

Mr. Borilla had indeed known me, and he knew I was disappointed by his casting. Before I had an opportunity to complain to anyone he took me aside and explained his decision. “The Rosy-Cheeked Ghost is a bigger part, but he’s not that funny. The professor is supposed to be really funny, Corbett, and I know you can do funny. I need you to do funny.”

Turns out I could do funny. At Borilla’s suggestion, I turned the character into a mad scientist type, and I perfected an evil laugh and the crazy rubbing of my hands together, which I still get asked to do by friends today. After the play, students I didn’t know came up to me for weeks and told me I was the character they liked most in the play. I suspect Fred Dau received no such compliments; he was a stunning ghost, but no one even knew it was Fred beneath the sheet that concealed him.

To this day, I still carry the lesson of Bullard Elementary’s fifth grade fall play with me. I know that having the biggest role is not that important. I know that making the most of what you’re given and trusted to do—no matter how big or small—is how one becomes remembered and respected. I’ve taught that lesson to my own students, while directing plays myself and while teaching them about life and writing. Thanks again, Mr. Borilla.

And just for the record, I volunteered to direct those plays. I hardly ever come late to faculty meetings.

On the next page, you will find two meaningful revision activities I could do once I had a final draft of the narrative above.

Three 10-Word Versions of my Narrative

(inspired by the book 6-Word Memoirs)

- 1) Beneath that sheet, Fred Dau missed learning what I learned.
- 2) Like a mad scientist, Borilla had his own creation: me.
- 3) I auditioned for a ghost. Learned to play the teacher.