

Herman Ohme
4185 Cherry Oaks Place
Palo Alto, CA 94306
Phone: 650-493-5512
Fax: 650-493-7604
herman@hermohme.com

77,600 words

DO NO HARM

A Novel, Copyright 2005

by

Herman Ohme

Do No Harm
The End of Unequal Schooling in America
by Herman Ohme

Published by
California Education Plan, Inc.
903 San Antonio Road, Los Altos, CA 94022

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the author, except for the inclusion of brief excerpts in a review.

Copyright 2005 by Herman Ohme

ISBN 0-936047-34-8
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: TX 6-231-590
Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DEDICATION

To my wife Jean

And to all teachers like her

Who make the world more beautiful

By striving every day

To make a difference

CHAPTER 1: THE INTERVIEW

Carol Honeywell Bradley arrived early for her interview at the Pittsburgh School District Personnel Office. Tall, sturdily built, with carefully styled, short, dark curly hair, she wore a light tan raincoat over a colorful two-piece ensemble that definitely did not come from Wal-Mart. Although she was twenty-three, she looked more like nineteen.

She had spent the weekend revising, practicing and reviewing arguments to convince the interviewer that she was the right person for the long-term learning disability substitute position at the Wylie Avenue K-8 school. The regular teacher had been in an automobile accident, and would be out for the remaining twelve weeks of the school year.

Inside the front office, she handed her interview appointment card to the receptionist, who promptly escorted her through the swinging door at the end of the counter and told her to have a seat. Ten minutes later, a clerk took Carol into a cluttered small office and introduced her to a dour elderly woman, Mrs. Mabel Crowe, Assistant to the Personnel Director.

“Hang your coat on the rack by the bookcase,” Mrs. Crowe said, then she pointed to the chair on the opposite side of her desk. Carol immediately noticed her cover letter and data sheet clipped to the sealed manila envelope containing her confidential file from the University of Pittsburgh Job Placement Office.

She has no idea who I am, Carol thought.

After a short intense gaze at Carol, Mrs. Crowe shook her head.

“We’re wasting time here,” she said. “I don’t know why you applied for the Wylie Avenue long-term sub position or even how my associate could have granted you this interview. In my opinion, it was a mistake. You don’t belong at Wylie Avenue in a regular class, much less an LD class—learning *disaster*, they call it there. But since you’re here, we can discuss two other long-term sub positions, if you’re

interested. Suit yourself.”

Carol’s eyes narrowed. “I’m interested in the Wylie Avenue Learning Disability position,” she said emphatically.

Mrs. Crowe raised her eyebrows. “Of course you are,” she remarked in a condescending tone. Then she read from Carol’s data sheet: “I see that you grew up in Sewickley,” she said, “Pittsburgh’s most prestigious suburb, then you went to Stanford, which everyone knows, is the place to acquire a social conscience.”

I know where she’s going with this. But I have my own trump cards to play...at the right time.

“Afterward,” Mrs. Crowe continued, “for reasons I *can’t* understand, you came home to the University of Pittsburgh to obtain your Teaching Certificate, which you received...one week ago! And now you’re ready to change the world?”

Mrs. Crowe looked up, reached across the desk, and touched Carol’s wrist. “I swear I’ll never understand how someone as privileged as you—the best schools, travel, whatever you want—and you think Wylie Avenue is where you belong. An all-black school? Are you trying to atone for something?”

I have nothing to atone for. I’m doing what’s important to me.

“Believe me, Miss Bradley,” Mrs. Crowe went on, “you’re not the first, and certainly not the last of the privileged *do-gooders* to come through this office. Inevitably, you end up disillusioned, disenchanted and seriously in doubt whether you should continue teaching. That’s unfortunate.”

“Mrs. Crowe,” Carol said in a polite but forceful tone, “I mean no disrespect, but I was *invited to be interviewed for the long-term...*”

“*Invited?*” Mrs. Crowe interrupted angrily. “May I see your appointment card?”

“I gave it to the clerk,” Carol said innocently.

“Excuse me,” Mrs. Crowe declared abruptly, then she left the office. She returned with an indignant look. “You know people in very high places, young lady. The deputy superintendent himself approved your request for an

interview. However, my decision *still* stands.”

Stay calm. You'll have your turn

“You do not belong at Wylie Avenue, Miss Bradley. Let me give you some facts: That school has had the lowest achievement scores in the district for over ten years. The LD class you're applying for consists of students aged twelve to fifteen, most of whom have difficulty doing second-grade work. Still interested?”

“Yes,” Carol replied. When you examine the letters of recommendation in my file...”

“Did you know that the LD classes at Wylie Avenue are considered to have the most *undisciplined* and *unteachable* students at the school? They have the worst records of truancy, suspensions, expulsions, pregnancies, and transfers to juvenile hall. I doubt you'll get through the first day.”

That's what you think. You don't know me.

“Aside from having no LD teaching experience, and lacking the required certificate, you would have to be hired on an emergency basis. And I won't recommend that, especially not with a new principal coming to Wylie Avenue next September.”

A new principal...interesting.

“Carol, trust me,” Mrs. Crowe said in a softer tone. “You won't change the world or even make it any better by going to Wylie Avenue. Our superintendent, Dr. Ben Stern, has a slogan on his desk, and also on the masthead of every newsletter, bulletin, and notice he sends to the staff. It states, ‘The best solution to any problem is knowing how to prevent it.’ It's more than a credo. It's an order. If for any reason, I send you to Wylie Avenue, to what I consider will be inevitable failure, who do you think will get the blame? You're looking at her, and I can't afford to let that happen. I hope you understand. End of discussion. Shall we talk about the two other openings I mentioned?”

“Before we do that,” Carol said, “may I ask one favor?”

“Anything you like, Carol.” Mrs. Crowe seemed to feel she had made her point.

“May I?” Carol asked, reaching across the desk, picking

up her file and handing it to Mrs. Crowe. “After you read the recommendations in my file, and you still feel I don’t belong at Wylie Avenue, I’ll leave with no argument.”

Somewhat irritated, Mrs. Crowe picked up the envelope, broke the seal, and slowly took out the letters. She read the first one, written by Carol’s uncle, Professor John Melton, Chairman of the Economics Department at the University of Michigan, and a Nobel Laureate. Carol had accompanied him on a State Department-Sponsored Goodwill Tour of developing nations in Africa when she was fifteen.

Professor Melton described how Carol had visited schools, met heads of state, educators, politicians, professors and industrialists. She engaged in endless discussions with people in the streets, in marketplaces, restaurants—wherever she could find them. What impressed her uncle most was her discovery of how economic growth and social progress were so closely related to well-supported, free public education systems. He was convinced she had chosen the right profession.

The second letter was from Toni Ackerman, Carol’s advisor at Stanford, and the person most instrumental in convincing the Faculty Senate to present Carol its Award for the Most Outstanding Senior Thesis. The title was *CHANGEology*, The Principles of Resistance and Adaptation to Change.” 120 pages. Incredible!

The third letter was from Charlotte French, Carol’s internship supervisor at the University of Pittsburgh. *Bingo!* Over half of Charlotte’s interns were placed in Pittsburgh schools. It was a much different assistant director who looked up from Charlotte’s letter.

“Do I have your permission to make a phone call to Charlotte French?” she asked.

“Of course.

“Would you mind stepping outside?”

Ten minutes later, Mrs. Crowe brought Carol back into her office. “The first two letters made me think I might be wrong,” she said, “but Charlotte made me wonder if you really do walk on water! To be honest, she told me that if I

turned down a blue chip like you, Pittsburgh schools could get a lot fewer interns! Knowing Charlotte, I wouldn't want to take that chance. However, would you like a bit of advice? I think you'll appreciate this."

"By all means," Carol nearly shouted.

"That outfit you're wearing might be fine for a dinner at the governor's mansion, but don't wear it tomorrow when you report to the principal's office at Wylie Avenue."

Carol jumped out of her chair, ran to the other side of the desk, gave Mrs. Crowe a huge hug, and then kept shaking her hand as if she would never let it go.

Mrs. Crowe gently withdrew her hand. "A half-hour ago," she said, "I felt that you couldn't possibly succeed at Wylie Avenue. But now, I truly believe that maybe for the first time, some kids are going to have a teacher who just might be able to make a difference in their lives. You have my best wishes for success."

Outside, in the bright sunlight, elated and trembling, Carol was convinced she had taken her first step on the long, tortuous path to realizing her *dream*: The end of unequal schooling in America.

CHAPTER 2: SEIZE THE MOMENT

Carol drove into the Wylie Avenue parking lot early the next morning, dressed in a pleated mid-length gray skirt, white blouse with a bright yellow ribbon around her neck, and a beige velour jacket. Not exactly *haute couture*, but very attractive.

The school building was an ageless three-story square brick monstrosity, with steel fire escapes hanging precariously on opposite sides. A slightly bent six-foot rusted iron pole in front of the building held the school sign. A fluorescent yellow skull and crossbones was spray-painted on it with the slogan, "This skool can be danjerus to yur helth."

Carol had a visceral reaction as she watched some students on the playground dodging huge cracks in the cement and skillfully avoiding broken bottles and trash.

Across the street, next to a pool hall, two elderly men were standing in front of a sign that read, "No Loitering."

Two floors above the pool hall, a girl with a baby in her arms stared blankly out the window.

As Carol walked up to the school, several students eyed her with vaguely hostile curiosity.

She smiled at them, but they broke eye contact.

As she entered the school, the squeaky floorboards made her feel she was walking on thin ice. The Main Office was directly in front of her. She went up to the counter. "I'm the new learning disability substitute teacher," she told the receptionist. "I'm here to see the principal."

The receptionist turned to a petite woman sitting at a desk next to the principal's office. "The new long-term sub for Mr. Webster's class is here," she announced.

The woman motioned for Carol to come over to her desk, and smiled. "Welcome, I'm Rose Watson, Mr. Gandolf's secretary. He's our principal. Here's the packet of materials you'll need."

From her bottom desk drawer she then took out a round three-inch plastic disk with the numbers three-zero-three etched on both sides. A steel ring with a key was attached to

the disk.

“Room three-oh-three,” Rose said. “It’s the first door to the right of the landing on the third floor. Here are Mr. Webster’s grade book and your Teacher Orientation Handbook. As soon as you have time, be sure to read it carefully.”

“When will I meet Mr. Gandolf?”

“He’ll try to be at your room when the tardy bell rings. He’s retiring at the end of this year, so he’s showing a candidate for his position around the school. If he’s not there, just start the class yourself.”

“Thank you,” Carol said, turning to leave.

I guess I’m on my own. Maybe that’s just as well.

“Just a minute,” Rose said. “Would you like a paddle?” She took a well-used plank from a box by her desk.

“What for?”

Rose put the paddle back in the box. “Never mind, some teachers, especially subs...forget it. Good luck,”

Wow, this place gets worse every second! Carol thought as she made her way up the wide, dark stairway.

Suddenly, a small group of students rushed past her, pushing each other and laughing. Carol had to step out of their way, but she was glad to see they were enjoying themselves.

On the third floor, a number of students, probably including some of Carol’s, were milling around waiting for the tardy bell to ring, which would give them five minutes to get to their classrooms.

The door to Carol’s room was already open. As she entered the room, she saw two girls sitting quietly in the front row. One of them obviously had Down’s syndrome.

“Hi,” Carol said as she put her briefcase and lunch on top of her desk. “I’m your new teacher. “My name is Miss Bradley. What are your names?”

“I’m Samantha,” the one with Down’s syndrome replied.

“My name is Sydney. I’m Samantha’s sister,” the other one said.

Carol could tell she was at least two or three years older

than Samantha. *What are they doing in an LD class?*

Carol opened her grade book. Attached to the front cover was an envelope marked, "For substitute teachers." Inside she found information about some of the students in the class. Under the name Sydney Miller, she read:

Mother hen. Three years older than sister Samantha. 8th grade. Has permission to look after Sam. Very bright. Gets her work done on own time. Also takes roll for me every day and helps other students with their work. Best helper I've ever had.

Just then the tardy bell rang, but none of the students in the hallway came in. Carol looked at Sydney.

"They all waitin' outside," Sydney said. "They won't come till the final bell."

Carol went immediately into the hallway. A black man in a dark blue suit was herding students toward Carol's classroom.

"Behave yourselves!" he shouted, cracking a ruler on the palm of his left hand.

The students drifted into the classroom in slow motion. When the last one had taken his seat, just seconds before the final bell, the man said to Carol, "I'm Mister Gandolf. As you probably know, I'm retiring at the end of the semester. The gentleman with me is a candidate for my position. I'm sorry I don't have time to introduce you to your students. I'll leave that to you."

With that he was gone.

Carol looked around the room, counting eleven faces. There were sixteen names in her roll book.

When the principal's footsteps could no longer be heard, the kids exploded out of their seats. Some of the boys rode their chairs like bumper cars at an amusement park, smashing into each other, attempting to damage whatever they could.

"Please take your seats immediately," Carol shouted. No one paid any attention. She looked at Sydney who was trying to tell her something which she could hardly hear over the

noise and the steady stream of unbelievable epithets.

“Mothafucka!”

“Yo’ momma sucks!”

“Nigga!”

“Ho!”

“Black ass!”

“Stop lookin’ at me with them crazy-ass voodoo eyes!” a girl shouted at Carol.

This is ridiculous!

Sydney approached her and handed her a sturdy wooden yardstick.

“Make some noise,” she yelled. “Hit the yardstick as hard as you can on your desk!”

Carol raised the stick with both hands and brought it down with all her might. The blast shook the room, bringing the chaos to a sudden halt. She looked back at Sydney.

“Tell them to sit down and be quiet,” Sydney whispered.

A young man wearing what appeared to be a huge Afro hairpiece started moving defiantly toward the door. “I’s outta this mothafuckin’ ho house,” he said, but Carol dashed to the door, folded her arms, and blocked his exit.

“Get to your seat,” she ordered. “You’re not going *anywhere!*”

The young man straightened his back and stared at Carol.

“Lady,” he said, rolling his index finger around his ear. “You one crazy-ass motha, an’ I don’ wanna hurt ya.”

A surge of laughter went through the room.

“Get away from the mothafuckin’ door!” he warned her.

Carol shook her head. “No way,” she said, staring him down.

If he hits me, he goes to jail. But if he backs off, he’s chicken. I need to give him a way out.

“What’s your name?” she asked calmly.

His eyes opened wide, and he shook his head.

Carol slowly dropped her arms to her sides.

“Tell me your name!” she insisted.

“Tell her yo’ name, TJ,” someone shouted.

“Malcolm X,” he said, facing the class, laughing. “You

probably hearda me.”

More laughter.

A tall, muscular, tight-lipped student, with flashing eyes stood and slowly walked up to TJ.

The laughter stopped. “Don’ mess wit Jamal, TJ,” a student advised.

“Get yo “mothafuckin’ black-ass back in that chair befo Ah pick yo up an’throw you in it,” the young man who was obviously Jamal, commanded.

TJ’s hands sprang up as if Jamal had suddenly pointed a gun at him.

“Hey, Jamal,” he said, “be cool ma’ man, we jus jivin’ heah. Ain’t nothin’ wrong wit dat. Be cool.”

Jamal pointed to the empty chair. TJ started shuffling and muttering, “Be cool, ma man, be cool.”

Jamal waited until TJ sat down. Then he turned to Carol, examining her from side to side and top to bottom. Finally, he said, “Lady, you got balls! If you that good at teachin’, then learn us somethin.’ That’s why we here, that *spoz*ed to be why you here.”

I’ve never been given marching orders on top of a compliment like that. I can’t believe this!

Jamal took his seat, and Carol returned to her desk. For the moment, the class was under control. Carol quickly opened her grade book and read what Mr. Webster had written about Jamal Wilson:

Serious, bright, born leader. Fifth-grader. Should be in seventh or eighth.

Under Thomas Jefferson Carter, Webster had written:

Disruptive, would-be comedian. Bark worse than bite.

With the class still under control, Carol opened her briefcase and began taking out materials for a science experiment when she noticed that Samantha had raised her hand.

“What is it Samantha?”

“Can I ax you somethin’ Miss...” and she stopped.

Carol had forgotten something. She quickly wrote her name on the chalkboard in big letters. Then she turned to Samantha. “Ask me anything you like,” she said.

“What’s *that*, Miss Bradley?” Samantha asked, pointing to the brown bag on Carol’s desk.

“My lunch,” Carol replied. The bag had a bright yellow smiling face in the middle with flowers drawn in the four corners.

Samantha had touched a nerve. What does a pretty young white teacher like Carol have for lunch?

Carol often ordered her lunch at a deli on Craig Street. Victor, the maitre d’, and also an amateur magician, wrapped every item in tinfoil. For his favorite customers, he included surprises. On Valentine’s Day, it could be a little chocolate heart in a box. Today, Carol’s surprise was a shiny apple, wrapped in foil with a sticker attached. “Good luck on your first day.”

With everyone watching, she took each item out of the bag and put it on her desk. Holding up a drumstick in front of Samantha, she asked, “Want to guess what this is?”

“Fried chicken leg,” Samantha said proudly.

“How many of you agree?” Carol asked the class.

All the kids raised their hands.

Carol slowly peeled away the foil.

“Fried chicken leg! You got it!”

Holding up one item at a time, she had them guess the hardboiled egg, the slice of whole wheat bread, the banana, and the carton of milk. They were stumped, however, by the granola cookie and the celery sticks. It was TJ who guessed the surprise Good Luck Apple for the Teacher.

Carol then took a cell phone from her briefcase and dialed a number. “Victor,” she said. “This is Carol Bradley. I want to order eleven special lunches just like the one you made for me this morning. And please put a *surprise* in each bag.”

The kids burst out in whistles, applause, and a chain reaction of high fives.

“These are for very special students,” Carol continued when the noise abated, “so please give us some extra cookies, cartons of juice, milk, and fruit. Have the delivery person check in at the front desk and tell Rose, the principal’s secretary, that the boxes contain supplies to be delivered immediately to Miss Bradley in Room three-oh-three.”

When Carol hung up, she realized that the class wasn’t ready for the science experiment. “Let’s get acquainted,” she suggested. “But first, ask *me* anything you want.”

“Are you married?” Sydney asked.

“No.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?” TJ asked.

“No.”

“Where do you live?”

“In Oakland.”

“What kind of car do you drive?”

“A Ford Mustang,” she replied to some oohs and ahs.

Jamal raised his hand. “Why did you become a teacher?”

Complete silence.

“Why do you think I became a teacher?” she replied.

Some answered, “To make money.”

Another one said, “It’s what yo’ parents wanted ya to do.”

“Because yo’ smart.”

“Do any of you have parents or relatives who are teachers?”

Not a single hand went up.

“Have you ever heard of Thurgood Marshall?”

“He got the Supreme Court to end segregation in the public schools,” Sydney said.

“Yeah,” TJ said, looking around. “So I notice.”

Carol had found the groove. “What about the Reverend Martin Luther King, Junior?”

All the hands went up.

One of the girls said, “He risk his life to get laws passed.”

“Why did he choose that kind of a life, and even die for it?” Carol asked.

One of the boys answered, “He wanted to help the

brothas and sistas.”

Another boy said, “He wanted us to work hard and be proud of who we be.”

“Anybody know who Malcolm X was?” Carol asked, looking straight at TJ.

Everyone was waiting for TJ’s answer.

Like a real showman, he stood up, gestured to the class, and began. “He taught hisself in prison. Then he joined the Black Muslims. Spent Saturdays with kids in the mosque. Took ’em to museums an’ other cool places, like the planetarium. He wanted all of us to get a education. On February twenty-first, nineteen hundred and sixty-five, he was gunned down.”

“Very good, TJ,” Carol remarked. The class applauded. “Did Justice Marshall, Reverend King, and Malcolm X make a difference by their beliefs and the way they lived their lives? Is our country and the world a better place because of them?”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Right on!”

“Tha’s true!”

“You go girl,” they shouted.

Carol sat on the front of her desk. “So why *did* I become a teacher?”

“Cause *you* want to make a difference,” Sydney said.

“Can a teacher make a difference?” Carol asked.

Many of the students nodded their heads.

“How?” she continued.

“By showin’ us how to learn so we can make a difference,” Jamal said with heavy emphasis on the word *we*.

Carol had never heard anyone say it more eloquently. *The “Magic Moment” has arrived! Shift gears. Galvanize this energy.*

“How about a game, with prizes for the whole class?” she proposed.

“Great!” Jamal shouted. “What kinda prizes?”

Carol shook her head. “I want it to be a surprise.”

“Could ya tell us what the game is?” a rather skeptical student asked.

Carol laughed. "Of course," she said. "First, I'm going to divide the eleven of you into two groups of four, and one group of three."

"And what are we spozed to do?" Sydney asked.

"Each group will come up with one fabulous idea for how this class can make a difference for everyone in it, including me."

They didn't seem to understand.

"Can you give us a example," a girl called out.

"What's your name?" Carol asked.

"Lois Farmer."

"Alright, Lois, what I think we need to do is find ways to get all sixteen students enrolled in this class here every day and on time. From Mister Webster's records, there appear to be five or six absentees every day. Having all of you here will definitely make a difference... Any questions before I divide you into groups?"

"How much time do we have?" another girl asked.

"And your name is?"

"Louise Douglass."

Carol looked at the clock. "Up to an hour, Louise. I expect our lunches to arrive by then. So let's get started. I want three volunteers to be group leaders."

Six hands went up.

How do I pick three without rejecting the remaining three?

"Any thoughts on how to select only three of you?"

"I think I can help, Miz Bradley," Jamal offered.

"By all means."

"Can I go to the chalkboard?"

Carol nodded.

At the board, Jamal wrote the names of the six volunteers, with his own name at the bottom.

"When I call out a name," he said, "ya can all vote by raisin' yo hand, but don't vote for yoself, an' only vote for three. Is that okay?"

"Way ta go!"

"Right on, Jamal!"

“Okay wit you, Miz B?”

“I think that’s ‘right on,’ Jamal.”

The high fives were spontaneous.

“Would ya keep score when I call the names, Miz B?”

“My pleasure,” Carol replied. The top three vote getters were: Jamal-10; Sydney-8; and Louise-6.

More whistles and applause.

Carol randomly assigned three students to Jamal, three to Sydney, and two to Louise. She then directed the leaders to assemble their groups in different parts of the classroom.

“You have twenty-five minutes,” Carol said, “to come up with your proposals to make a difference. If you need help, have your leader raise his or her hand and I’ll join your group. Okay, get to work.”

Carol circulated among the groups. *What a difference an hour can make!*

“Time’s up,” Carol announced. The students were surprised.

Carol selected Louise to report first.

“We promised each other to get cards at the Carnegie Library so we can take out books and read for at least one hour a day. We hope everyone in the class will do the same thing.”

“Wonderful idea. Sydney, it’s your turn.”

“We’re going to stay after school, Miss Bradley, as long as it takes for you to show us how to help students in our class learn more. Louise’s library books will fit right in.

This is turning into a miracle! “Okay, Jamal, give it a wrap.”

Jamal stood up. “We’re gonna work hard, Miz B, to make this class the best in the school. We want all of us to be a family an’ be proud for each other an’ our new teacher, who’s gonna help us make a difference... Okay, time for that reward, Miz B, right?”

“Right!” she said, with a solid high-five.

The moment of truth.

“We’re all going on a field trip next week to the Heinz factory where you’ll see how they make those delicious

Varieties. When that's over, they'll give you all the samples you can eat, and what you don't eat, you can take home."

Carol expected some enthusiasm. A trip to the Heinz factory was always a special event, something to cheer about. But the class was silent. Sydney raised her hand.

"Can I borrow that?" she said, pointing to the Teacher Orientation Book on Carol's desk?"

Carol handed it to her.

Sydney opened to a specific page and read aloud, "All field trips requiring transportation must be submitted by the principal to the Business Office for approval."

"In other words, Sydney, what you're saying is..."

"No field trips. There hasn't been a single one approved at Wylie Avenue as long as anyone here can remember."

"Ya gotta think a somethin' else," Jamal advised.

"We'll see about that. I intend to make Mister Gandolf an offer he can't refuse," Carol announced emphatically.

The applause, the whistles, the high-fives left no doubt on the part of the kids that they would soon be visiting the Heinz factory.

At that moment, a student aide led Victor and his assistant into Carol's classroom. The men were wearing tuxedos and top hats. They were carrying two large cartons and an intriguing, highly-polished mahogany box.

"Class," Carol said, "these two gentlemen are from the deli that I called. The taller one is Victor, and next to him," she pointed, "his assistant, Houdini. They brought your lunches. But before we get to that, if I'm not mistaken, you're in for a different kind of treat that I'm sure you will never forget."

After the cheering died down, Victor took charge. "Eet's Showtime, keeds," he said with elaborate gestures and a heavy French accent. Actually, he was born in Altoona, and his real name was Bernard Goldman. By contrast, Houdini was a head shorter than Victor and about ten inches bigger in the midsection. Victor did all the talking.

Looking around the room, he noticed a lanky,

loose-jointed student in the back row clutching a basketball that appeared to be as much a part of him as his clothes.

“You, monsieur, wid ze basketball. Could you please to come here.”

“Get yo ass up ‘ere Stretch,” someone shouted.

Stretch shook his head. At the same time, he quickly hid the ball behind his back.

“You call yourself Zdrech?” Victor asked, as he moved a little closer to him.

Stretch nodded, very slowly, very cautiously. Most of the class giggled.

“Ah, so, Zdrech, You permit I ask you one question, oui, yes?”

Stretch looked around.

“Let’s get dis show on da road, man,” TJ urged.

Reluctantly, Stretch went to the front of the room with Victor. The basketball still hidden behind his back.

Victor placed the shiny mahogany box in the middle of Carol’s desk. He and Stretch were directly in front of it.

“May I borrow ze boll, Zdrech?”

Stretch shook his head. A chorus of students began shouting “Boo!”

It was just the opening Victor needed.

“Eef zer vas a rule,” Victor said, “zat basketbolls ver not allowed in zee classrooms, and eef ze principal vas on hees way to take yours away, Zdrech, would you be villing to make eet disappear?”

Stretch hesitated.

“Would you do eet eef I promise to bring eet back?”

“Do it Stretch,” a student called out.

“What can ya lose, man,” another shouted.

Stretch hesitated, but finally gave Victor the ball.

“May I haf your permission for my assistant, Houdini, to hold ze boll vile I open ze lid of zis shiny box vere I intend to hide eet?”

“Okay, I guess...”

Victor opened the lid and showed everyone the mirrored inside of the box. He gestured for Houdini to put the

basketball inside. He slowly closed the lid and snapped it shut. He then picked up the box, shook it so everyone could hear the ball rattling inside.

“Now,” Victor announced, “after I say zee magic vords, ze boll vill disappear, and eef ze principal come, he vill nevair find eet. Ven he ees parti, gone, vid my magic vords I bring ze bol back.”

With all eyes on the box, Victor began chanting: “Salaamo, salaamas, salaamat,” repeating the words three times. “Voila, Ze basketbol est parti, gone, vatch.”

With a dramatic sweep, Victor picked up the box and shook it. There was no sound from inside. He then placed it on the desk, unsnapped the lid, opened it, picked it up and showed it to the class.

“Empty!”

Stretch stood with his mouth wide open.

“Don’t worry, Zdrech,” Victor said. He handed him the box. “Shake eet.”

Everyone could hear the ball once again bouncing inside. Houdini unsnapped the lid and Stretch lifted it up.

“Behold, ze basketbol!”

Victor took it out and showed it to a standing ovation.

When the class quieted down, Houdini walked over to Samantha and pointed to her left ear. She looked at Sydney, who nodded that it was okay.

Houdini put his fingers behind Samantha’s ear and pulled out a Tootsie Roll!

The class cheered.

Houdini gave Samantha the Tootsie Roll and then took off his hat. To everyone’s amazement, it was filled with Tootsie Rolls which he began passing out.

“Please tell us how ya made my basketball disappear,” Stretch begged.

The other kids joined in the chorus.

“Yeah!”

“How’d ya do it?”

“Tell us!”

“Magicians nevair geev away zer secrets,” Victor said.

The students shook their heads sadly.

“But just zees time, I change my mind.

The kids were ecstatic.

“First,” Victor explained, dropping the French accent, “remember *this*. The hand is quicker than the eye.”

He flipped a coin from his right hand to his left.

“Okay, which hand has the coin?” he asked.

“The left,” nearly everyone guessed.

“Wrong!” Victor declared, as he displayed his open left hand.

“Right hand,” Carol blurted out. It has to be!”

“If the coin is not in one hand, it has to be in the other. Is that what you’re thinking?” Victor asked.

“Where else could it be?” Carol asked.

“We’ll see. Notice that I have not moved either hand, except to show that the coin was not in my left hand. Correct?”

“Yo!

“Ya got that right!”

“Good,” Victor said. “How much would anyone like to bet that the coin is in my still clenched right hand?”

“A million,” TJ shouted, “if I had it.”

“Let’s pretend you do. That goes for everyone. Would you all make that bet?”

It was unanimous.

“Anyone want to change their mind before I open up my right hand?”

“No one? That’s what I thought. Guess what?”

“Tha’s easy.”

“Ya goin’ lose all yo money.”

“Show us!” the students shouted in unison.

Victor very slowly opened his right hand, one finger at a time, exposing the entire right palm.

No coin. No nothing. He closed his right fist. “How many would bet on the left again?”

There were a few takers.

There was no coin in the left either.

He went through the exercise several times.

They were wrong every time.

“Ya got rid a the coin,” someone finally concluded.

“Wrong again,” Victor announced. He opened his right fist and there was the shiniest coin anyone ever saw.

The students were totally confused.

“Okay, Victor. Explain,” Carol requested.

“Gladly,” he said. “If your guess is correct, I can switch the coin without anyone seeing it happen. It’s called *Distraction*. If I distract your attention for a fraction of a second, I can change what no one will ever notice. All it takes,” he emphasized, “is Practice, Practice, Practice.”

“What about the basketball trick?” Jamal asked.

“That’s done with what magicians call *Illusion*, often with mirrors.” He held up the open box. It was completely lined with mirrors. “The bottom mirror can be raised, so that when the basketball’s inside, it appears to fill the box. Some of the mirrors have tiny holes in them that no one ever notices.” Victor asked Stretch for the basketball. He put it in the box, closed the lid, then opened it. The basketball disappeared.

They still didn’t understand. Victor showed the class two tiny levers on opposite sides of the box. He then took the box to the middle of the room and turned each lever slowly so the students could see the mirrors separate and uncover the basketball. At the same time, the bottom mirror moved the ball up to the top of the box. Tiny holes in the side mirrors hid the rods that clamped the ball to keep it from moving.

“That is cool, man,” a boy said.

“What’s *your* name?” Victor asked.

“George Carver.”

At age twelve, he was the youngest in the class. “Can I take the ball out an’ give it back to Stretch?” he asked.

“Sure.”

George could see the ball in the box, but when he reached inside, the ball wasn’t there. He looked at Victor with a puzzled expression.

“Try again,” Victor said.

This time the ball *was* there. “How...?” George began to ask.

“Illusion,” Victor said. “With mirrors in the right places, I can make you think you see anything, but it takes a lot of what? Let me hear it!”

“PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE,” the kids shouted.

“And whether it’s magic, spelling, math, or reading, what does it take? Lemme me hear it!”

“PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE,” they shouted again.

It was now lunch time; Victor and Houdini had to leave.

“Thanks to Miss Bradley,” Victor said, “every day she’s here, someone from the Deli will bring lunch, so be good students and learn a lot.”

The kids gave Victor and Houdini a huge ovation. Then Victor pretended to kick Houdini out the door, where he stopped to tip his hat to the class, and they vanished.

When the kids stopped clapping, their minds turned to *food!*

“TJ and Jamal, would you take the cartons of food out of the closet and bring them to my desk?”

As the boys were on their way to the closet, a girl in the back row shouted, “Keep yo ‘mouf’ shut, Mose Harper, she don’ know dat.”

“Who doesn’t know what?” Carol asked.

TJ said, “Clarice talkin’ bout the princpl’s rule we not spozed eat nothin’ in the classrooms.”

“There must be a reason for that rule,” Carol said. “What do you think that might be?”

“Probably to avoid a mess the janitor would have to clean up,” Jamal said.

“And is there going to be a mess?” Carol asked.

“No way,” the class shouted. It was loud enough to be heard by every student on the third floor.

CHAPTER 3: “FOCUS ON AMERICA,” FIRST HALF-HOUR

The National Television Network “Focus On America” Program, scheduled to be telecast Sunday Evening, April 2, was advertised in the media under the optimistic title, “Progress Report on Equal Schooling in America.” Veteran moderator and host Stephanie Van Buren opened with a statement that removed any thought of optimism.

“What you are about to see during the first part of this hour is not pretty,” she declared, with the camera on a close-up of her face, her eyes penetrating the consciences of millions of viewers. “To be more direct,” she continued, “it’s ugly. I’m talking about the disaster of unequal schooling in America.”

The viewers were then shown a succession of clean, well-landscaped, well-equipped schools in the more affluent suburbs, followed by what Stephanie described as the “Anatomy of Inequality”: inner-city schools with littered playgrounds; ancient dilapidated buildings; broken windows; students shivering in unheated classrooms; confiscated drugs, knives, guns; and teachers attempting to maintain order in overcrowded chaos.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she said, “what you have just seen is not some poverty-plagued nation on a far off continent, but America. The good old U S of A! It’s what is known as an *Unequal Education* System that for decades has attracted and eluded the finest problem-solving minds in the country. The result of that effort has been a bottomless pit wherein billions of dollars disappear annually to fund programs that have had little or no effect on changing the status quo. It is blatant non compliance with the ‘Equal Protection Clause’ of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Unfortunately, we’ve been powerless to come even close to solving the problem. Many of the experts I spoke to admitted they had given up on the possibility of *ever* finding a solution.”

The camera zoomed again to a close up of Stephanie’s

face. "I'm sorry," she asserted firmly, "but I'm here to state unequivocally that in the greatest country in the world, that defeatist attitude must be totally unacceptable to every one of us!"

The camera pulled back to a waist shot. "Stay tuned, however," she said in a more encouraging tone, "because we would not have aired a program like this if we didn't have something hopeful to present."

The camera then showed photos of attractive, well-organized classrooms from the inner city of Baltimore. These images looked very much like the schools in the more affluent suburbs, *except all the faces were black.*

"What you have just seen," Stephanie remarked, "might possibly be a light at the end of that long dark tunnel of hopeless inequality. Later, you will meet Professor David Jordan from the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University. He conducted a three-year project in the inner-city schools of Baltimore, with remarkable results described in his recently published book entitled *Do No Harm.*

"Can the professor's new methods and materials work elsewhere? He believes it is possible, but it will take what he calls a 'Magic Bullet,' which he fully expects to discover during the implementation of new projects on his drawing board. If so, then we may be approaching the breakthrough we've been waiting for. So, please stay tuned, and I'll be right back after the commercial."

No one watched this program with more eagerness and anticipation than Rachel Morgan, a tall, delicately-featured, black, middle-aged woman who had recently accepted the offer to become principal at the Wylie Avenue K-8 School, located in the predominantly black Hill District Section of the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania School District.

Her acceptance had been an agonizing decision, based more on impulse than logic. It meant giving up her assistant principal position in a nearly all-white elementary school in Mount Lebanon, an upscale suburb of Pittsburgh, where for

over ten years, she had been an award-winning teacher and, subsequently, one of the most highly respected administrators in the district. If the expression, “universally admired,” could apply to anyone, it would certainly be everyone’s friend and co-worker, Rachel Morgan. She could always find time to help a student with a problem, talk to a concerned parent, or cheer anyone up with her patented bear hug.

She was assured of being promoted to principal when the next opening occurred, most likely within one or two years. It was worth waiting for. However, without any prior warning, she announced her decision to accept the Wylie Avenue position. Why?

It seems there were three people, different, but equally persuasive, who convinced her that she belonged at Wylie Avenue, the school with the lowest test scores of all fifty-five elementary and middle schools in the district for over ten years.

They were her husband, Aaron, a civil rights attorney; the Pittsburgh School Superintendent, Ben Stern; and Carol Bradley, a recently certified substitute teacher at Wylie Avenue whom she had observed in a demonstration of superior teaching as remarkable as anything she had ever experienced.

That was over three weeks ago, after an interview with Ben Stern and his determined insistence that she visit Wylie Avenue and consider becoming a candidate to be the school’s next principal.