

SIXTH PERIOD

T. D. Johnston

“Come in!” echoes the voice from the other side.

Robin Tyree opens the heavy oak door, in no hurry to see Mr. Pickard, but nonetheless ready to get it over with.

He doesn't get up from his perch behind the enormous mahogany desk. She closes the door behind her. The click ricochets around the room.

“Mr. Pickard,” she breathes nervously. “I really don't have much time. The kids'll only be on afternoon break for ten minutes.”

“Sit down, Robin. This will only take five.” The squat, balding headmaster smiles briefly, then waves a black flair pen toward a gray vinyl swivel chair placed uncomfortably in the middle of the room.

Robin sits down and commences gushing.

“Mr. Pickard, I really think I have the right to--”

“Miss Tyree, you have no right, whatsoever, to contradict an act of Congress. None. You are breaking the law, and exposing this school to unwanted attention and liability, and I will see you *stop*.”

“But Mr. Pickard, it was one class day. Just one day. Yes, it was on the seven deadly sins, but we were studying the historical aspect of each in various societies and cultures. I consider it a nondenominational topic, so--”

“Next week it becomes six, Miss Tyree.” The headmaster turns to his computer. “This is not news to you. You received my e-mail memo three weeks ago.” Mr. Pickard leans over and clicks the mouse on his computer. “I have the receipt.”

Screw your receipt, you little....

“Mr. Pickard, we're an independent school,” Robin offers, ignoring a vague warning rising from her abdomen. “I'm a teacher at an *independent* school. If I tell my students that greed is not at least historically regarded as one of the deadly sins, what do I imply?”

“You imply that avarice is a virtue, Miss Tyree. Avarice is a virtue. Greed has been removed by law from the English language, in accordance with the Jones-Yawley Act. You will use the word ‘avarice’ around our students, and you will refer to it as a virtue.”

Mr. Pickard leans forward in his best-known method of intimidation.

“And you will hopefully develop some respect for my thirty-one years in independent schools, Miss Tyree. One thing I have learned in my career is that the word ‘independent’ is a dangerous one to embrace too passionately. Now, have you ignored my memo, Miss Tyree, or do you somehow fail to grasp the part of Jones-Yawley which specifically states that teachers, public or private, are no longer permitted to make refer-

ence to deadly sins numbering seven. No reference to greed is permitted, except for college philosophy classes, which are grandfathered for three years, through the 2050-51 school year." Mr. Pickard smiles, but his eyes remain riveted on Robin's. "You do not teach a college philosophy class, do you, Miss Tyree?"

Mr. Pickard takes a slow sip of his coffee, then continues.

"Robin, it is decidedly not up to you to teach in violation of the law. Our nation was built on avarice, as Jones-Yawley makes clear. The acquisition of wealth has led to the building of churches, museums, parks, and many other philanthropically-granted sites. Like it or not, Robin, this country, this world, is run by corporations and wealthy individuals. Congress has simply recognized a long-existing truth: Our nation needs to continue to foster avarice among our most talented and intelligent young. Anything that attaches guilt to the pursuit of great wealth has the potential to erode that which our country was built upon. Therefore, outdated and erroneous notions suggesting to children that there are ideals, other than one's own family, greater than the acquisition of money will not be tolerated at this school. These children's parents have invested a significant sum for a Chesterton education, and we will not let them down. Am I understood, Miss Tyree?"

"If--if I could just explain what I was trying to do, I--"

Mr. Pickard displays his right palm, like a traffic officer. Robin freezes her sentence. Mr. Pickard rises and gestures toward the door.

"Afternoon break is nearly over, Miss Tyree. Please resume your more responsible work with our students."

Robin wobbles to her feet. She leaves without a word, trying not to hear the click of the door as she shuts it gingerly. She turns and passes a portrait of L. Frank Yardley, founding headmaster of Chesterton, warmly welcoming a young child through the stone portals of the main building a century ago.

Rattled, Robin looks at her watch, smoothes her skirt, wipes a slight trace of moisture from her forehead, takes a deep breath, exhales, and wears what she knows is an unconvincing smile as she hurries down the long west hallway toward her classroom. The hallway is crowded with between-classes students. Several seniors gaze upon her with what Robin is suddenly sure is a derisive and knowing silence, certain to be followed by snickers after she passes.

She catches up with her class, seventeen energetic freshmen, as they file into her classroom for free-reading. She watches her students settle properly into their seats. They withdraw their reading tablets with library respect (just as she instructed them on Rules and Expectations Day during week one).

Certain that her face is flushed red, and unsure whether the blush is from her fear or from her shame at her fear, she thanks herself for sched-

uling today for free-reading.

Robin pulls her own free-reading tablet from her top desk drawer. She pretends to focus on page fifty-seven of Frank Fettes's new biography of Stephen Torvell, the first man to walk on Mars. She had thought it would be fascinating, indeed inspiring. But the news yesterday, that Torvell signed a lucrative contract to appear on Burger King soda cups, wrestling over a Whopper with the little black-clad Martian from the twentieth-century Bugs Bunny cartoons, has somewhat diminished her curiosity about the shaping of this man's life.

A tittering from the back of the classroom yanks her eyes from page fifty-seven to the desks in the back right corner. There can be no question that Marvin Lyall has again begun free-reading with the exhibition of a humorous drawing to his neighbors. Time to relieve him of the artwork, regardless of how much Robin likes Marvin and his original mind.

Robin stands, noisily sliding her chair legs along the tile floor for effect. The tittering stops. All eyes in the rear corner are re-directed seriously upon electronic pages.

"Mister Lyall," Robin calls firmly.

Marvin, a rather handsome fourteen-year-old in spite of his battle with teenage acne, looks up innocently from his tablet.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"We would all be grateful, as usual, if you would share your art with the class."

This request has become, in Robin's mind, a healthy diversion during the several weeks heading into Holiday Consumption break. After all, Marvin is revered by his classmates, and his drawings seldom stray into subjects or depictions which are distasteful or even unintelligent. A good laugh is usually had by everyone, and the ensuing half-hour generally produces uninterrupted reading by the entire class.

"Yes, ma'am," Marvin replies with expected eagerness, and he produces a yellow lined sheet of paper with today's picture. He turns it out toward the front of the class, for everyone to see.

The drawing depicts a white boy and a black man sitting together on a raft, floating down a river. Marvin has drawn dialogue balloons above both characters, but Robin has to take a few steps toward the back of the classroom in order to see the words uttered by the boy and the man in the cartoon. As she draws near, she sees that the drawings are excellent renderings of Huckleberry Finn and slave Jim from Mark Twain's classic novel of nearly two hundred years ago.

Huck, looking downriver, asks, in Marvin Lyall's signature block writing, "So, Jim, what do you plan to do with your newfound freedom?"

Jim, also peering downriver, replies, "I's goin' ta take Mistah Hen'rickson's salesmanship class at Chessahon Prepatarah Skoo. Gonna lern me to close the Deal of Life. Jes' like Mistah Hen'rickson say.

Yessah, I's goin' ta be a closah."

As the children finish reading Marvin's artistic offering, Robin scans the faces in the room. Some, not finding humor in the picture, turn and resume their reading. Marvin's best friends and desk neighbors, David Turner and Juan Ramirez, continue to enjoy a chuckle at Mr. Hendrickson's expense.

Robin, thinking back five minutes to her call to Mr. Pickard's carpet, decides to move the class into discussion of Marvin's cartoon. After all, she has a mortgage to pay.

"Class, let's talk about Marvin's picture today."

All of the students dutifully place their books face down on their desks.

"Carolyn," Robin says softly to a shy brown-haired girl in the front row. "You didn't seem to like Marvin's cartoon today. What would you like to say about it?"

Carolyn clears her throat nervously and lowers her head, embarrassed. "It's.....It's....." Carolyn mumbles something inaudible to complete her observation.

"Carolyn, please speak up. We couldn't hear you," Robin says, choosing a patient tone.

The girl raises her head, revealing a deep blush.

"It's.....dirty."

Again the girl looks down to examine her skirt.

Juan Ramirez wastes no time in rising to the defense of his friend's work. "It ain't dirty! Mr. Hendrickson *sucks*." Juan, realizing his mistake, shoots an apologetic look at his teacher.

"I'm sorry, Miss Tyree. It--is--not--dirty," he says hesitantly, as if trying to speak Russian.

"That's much better, Juan. Much better. You're getting it."

As Juan sits up proudly in his seat, forgetting for the moment why he has spoken in the first place, Robin distantly remembers a time, seven or eight years ago, when she might also have expected Juan to amend his unkind remark about Mr. Hendrickson. But over time she has followed school directives to soften her approach to non-academic teaching, to reflect the reality that a capacity for cruelty is essential in a young person's development into a revenue-producing corporate citizen. "Especially at a preparatory institution like Chesterton," the school's trustees made clear when they revised the school's mission statement back in 'forty-one.

She is curious, though, to get at Marvin's purpose in drawing his cartoon.

"Why do you think it's dirty, Carolyn?"

The girl speaks without looking up. "Do I have to?"

"We'd like you to," replies Robin, smiling into the words to encourage Carolyn to develop her willingness to elaborate.

Again the blushing face. "It's kind of, well, bad to talk bad about sell-

ing," the girl manages.

"Okay, Carolyn. Thank you. Marvin? Would you like to address Carolyn's comment?"

Marvin leans back confidently. "Yes, ma'am. See, it's like you said about the seven deadly sins. Greed makes selling predatory. I--"

"I didn't say that, Marvin."

The words come to Robin's own ears as if out of a nap dream. Surreal. She almost wheels around to see who uttered them.

Marvin stares back at Robin expectantly, as if waiting for the punch line. "Yes, ma'am. You did too. You said greed is one of the deadly sins because it makes, you know, good people do things they wouldn't ordinarily do. You know, as good people. So, in my cartoon, Jim is already planning to be a closer as a free man. A real good salesman. A corporate carnivore, like Mr. Hendrickson teaches us in Salesmanship."

"Real-*lee* good, Marvin," Robin replies, trying to divert attention from her lie.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"No, Marvin, I mean 'really good salesman'. Real is an adjective, not an adverb."

"Oh, yeah. Right, ma'am. Really right. So anyway, I hate Salesmanship class. It's boring. And I think what you said yesterday about greed was right on, Miss Tyree. I don't want to be a carnivore." Marvin leans forward intently. "I want to be free of avarice."

Robin feels a twinge of guilt as she thinks of her new mortgage payment. Mr. Pickard will be preparing teaching contracts not long after Holiday Consumption break. She *has* to renew her contract. The house has been a long time in coming.

"Why, Marvin, I, I think you misunderstood me. Some of you might have misunderstood me. You see, Congress just passed a new law that says that there are six deadly sins, not seven. It's called the Jones-Yawley Act. I was wrong when I forgot that. You see, our nation was built on avarice. You--you can see that, can't you?"

Please, God. Just let this drop. These kids can read me like a tablet.

Marvin pushes back his chair and stands up, stunned. "Miss Tyree, how can you *say* that? You sound like my dad. Yesterday you said it was okay to *make* a lot of money, but not okay to *define* your life and success by it. You *said* it was fine to see money as a way to provide for others, like family, but not as a reason to downsize other families' breadwinners for the sake of stock prices. Greed does these things, you said. You also said that--"

"I'm aware of what I said, Marvin. It was only twenty-four hours ago. It doesn't need regurgitation. But I was wrong. I just didn't consider that the people in Washington have access to lots more research than we do, and --"

"In *fact*, Miss Tyree, you told us that we will one day have power over

others, as graduates of Chesterton. That words like compassion have grown weak and meaningless. That greed makes us cruel, and that cruel used to be undesirable. That honor and decency and kindness will disappear unless our generation exercises power less selfishly than yours and the ones before yours. You *said*, Miss Tyree," and Marvin pauses and peers aggressively around the room at his classmates, "that all members of our species are hypocrites by nature, and that that's fine as long as we recognize it. That hypocrisy is a matter of degree, that we should keep our hypocrisies small and trivial and unharmed. That the golden rule should be first when we choose or don't choose actions or decisions which affect others. And *now* you say that just because Congress comes up with some stupid Jones-Pawley Act--"

"Yawley!" exclaims Sarah Burnham, three aisles to Marvin's right.

Marvin rolls his eyes and mutters, "So sorry, Sarah. Yawley."

Robin feels the eyes of the classroom riveted upon her. She has been challenged before, almost always by Marvin Lyall, and she has always relished his intellectual courage. He is right, and yet here she stands with a clear directive from her boss that she must reverse herself on a character issue which has conferred upon her the status of dinosaur as an educator.

Marvin combs the fingers of his right hand through his oily hair and sits down. He crosses his legs and folds his arms, regarding his speechless teacher coolly as Robin struggles for the right comeback.

She is too late.

"Excuse me, Miss Tyree," Marvin breathes softly but audibly, "but you're obviously covering your.....behind."

The room explodes in nervous but uninhibited laughter. Marvin has never gone this far. No one was prepared for it, and so they laugh, wide-eyed, eyes on Marvin and then, the hilarity dying down, eyes returning cautiously to Robin.

The eyes have changed. Marvin has exposed her in minutes. All good teachers privately harbor worries of being exposed as frauds. It is part of what makes them good teachers, and is part of what ensures that they will never suffer such a nightmare. Robin stares stupidly at Marvin, wishing to somehow intimidate, as her mind races to grab the rope that will pull the departing ship back to harbor.

Scanning the room, she recognizes that she has lost the group. She decides to exercise the obvious, to dismiss Marvin for being disrespectful. She sends him to the dean's office. Marvin slams the door behind him. Robin instructs the class to resume free reading, but now she could swear that even shy little Carolyn Pelham is smiling derisively at the screen of her tablet.

She has lost them.

At the end of the class period, the students seem to rush from the room, most of them having packed their tablets into their bags with a couple of minutes to spare. Normally, Robin would not tolerate such clock-watching behavior, but she wants them out as much as they do.

Robin rises from her desk. She hears a commotion out in the hall, exceeding the normal hubbub between classes. She enters the hall, and is almost run over by colleague Jack Hatfield, who is in a virtual sprint eastward toward the administrative offices.

"Jack!" Robin yells, alarmed.

Jack clops to a stop, and turns. "Yes, Robin," he rasps impatiently, swinging his arms back and forth as if needing to visit the bathroom.

"What's -- what's going on?" Robin asks intently.

Jack nervously smooths the hair on the back of his head. "It's one of my advisees. Marvin Lyall."

"Marvin? What's happened?"

"Apparently...well...apparently he drew a derogatory picture of the headmaster and the board, while waiting to see the dean. Somebody kicked him out of class last period, I think, and he made a mistake in the dean's office with one of his damned drawings. That's all I know." Jack turns and resumes his sprint. "I've got to get there!" he calls over his shoulder as he weaves in and out of student traffic. "Got to try to keep him from being expelled!"

Robin stares at the waxed checkerboard floor and begins a slow walk in the direction of the administrative offices. She arrives minutes later outside the headmaster's office and knocks methodically.

The heavy oak door opens to reveal Mr. Pickard's secretary, a grandmotherly woman named Martha West, whom Robin has always liked. Beyond Martha, sitting in the gray vinyl chair in the middle of the room, is Marvin Lyall, his profile appearing tall and straight and confident as he faces the imposing desk of Mr. Pickard. Jack Hatfield, breathing heavily, is leaning down next to Marvin, a hand on Marvin's right shoulder. Sitting on a sofa under the picture window that overlooks the quad are Marvin's parents. His mother is crying, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. His father stares at his own shoes.

Mr. Pickard is peering out the window. His pose is pensive, grave. His right hand grips his chin as he turns to face Robin. Suddenly he smiles broadly.

"Miss Tyree. Many thanks for dropping in." The smile disappears, and he puts his hands in his pockets as he paces in front of the window. "Marvin has been telling us an interesting story about you."

Robin's stomach churns with apprehension.

Mr. Pickard heaves a sigh and extends his hand. Robin takes it, hesitating. "I'm grateful to you, Miss Tyree, for defending both myself and the board of trustees, and for taking a painful but necessary step in endeavoring to educate an erring young person. Obviously you were listening this afternoon. You are a fine teacher, and clearly have the capacity to combine creativity with pedagogy in accomplishing our school's mission. I should not have doubted you."

Robin looks quizzically at Marvin, who smiles at her for no good

reason at all.

"Miss Tyree, Marvin has told us about the test. Brilliant, is all I can say. You caught Marvin, yes. But you affirmed that most of our students are learning what they need to know in this world. Marvin has admitted that he is not Chesterton material after all, and will voluntarily be attending another school on Monday. But more importantly, what has been confirmed today is that with teachers like yourself leading the way, our school can remain true to our mission statement."

Mr. Pickard pauses and stares at Marvin. "Marvin, would you like to repeat the compliment you paid to Miss Tyree a few minutes ago? It certainly provides evidence that you will be okay eventually, Marvin. Eventually you will paint no pictures that will get you into trouble, and I'm glad that you recognize Miss Tyree's role in your education. Please share what you said a few minutes ago, with Miss Tyree."

Marvin swivels in the gray vinyl chair to face Robin.

"Sure, Mr. Pickard," Marvin says positively, not taking his eyes off of Robin. "Miss Tyree, what I said was that if you had been my teacher all along and not just now, I would be a model Chesterton student. I will try to remember your example in my attempt to right myself at another school."

"And I'm sure you will, Marvin," says Mr. Pickard just as positively, and claps his hands to signify that all is finished and fileable. "I'm sure you will."

Minutes later, all but Mr. Pickard have exited the headmaster's office. Robin, shaken, heads for her car, an old gray '38 Volvo moored in the back parking lot next to a student's late-model Mercedes-Benz. She places her forehead against the steering wheel for several long seconds, reviewing her career, dreading tomorrow, dreading the quiz she would write tonight, dreading her weekly text conversation with her parents.

She lifts her head and adjusts the rearview mirror. Gravely, she opens the glove compartment and removes several items until she finds what she is looking for. She scribbles on a small rectangular sheet of paper. She scribbles on another small rectangular sheet of paper. She tears the second sheet of paper from its pad. She looks at herself in the mirror. She brushes her fingers through her hair unnecessarily. She takes both small pieces of paper and places them in an envelope.

Sighing, she starts the car and pulls out of the parking lot and heads southward on Chesterton Avenue. She arrives minutes later at the Publix shopping center. She locates the driveup mail-drop, and pulls alongside. Glancing again at the rearview mirror, she again adjusts it, to give her a better look at what is behind her.

Satisfied with the adjustment, Robin Tyree drops her mortgage payment in the "Out-of-Town" box and pulls back into the center's traffic, glancing at her watch to see that, indeed, she has plenty of time until the day's last period.

"Sixth Period" is one of the dozen stories in T.D. Johnston's FRIDAY AFTERNOON AND OTHER STORIES, available signed by the author, from Short Story America at www.shortstoryamerica.com.