

TALES OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

*The Mournful Tale of the Death of
Mr. School Improvement*

*The Case of the Remarkable Reappearance of
Mr. School Improvement*

and

The Return of Mr. School Improvement

THE MOURNFUL TALE OF THE DEATH OF MR. SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

It was exactly at 10:40 a.m. that Mrs. Wilson found the corpse of Mr. School Improvement on the cafeteria floor. Mrs. Wilson, the volunteer coordinator at William Burnett Middle School, was on her way to get a “bite to eat” before the first-lunch-period students arrived. Generally, this daily trip was fairly mundane, and usually Burnett was a pretty normal school. You will, I think, not be surprised to learn that the experience of discovering the corpse of Mr. School Improvement had an unsettling effect on poor Mrs. Wilson. She immediately, and with considerable celerity, set off to find Dr. Johnson, the interim principal of Burnett. Unfortunately, Dr. Johnson was the third interim principal at the school in the last two years. He hardly knew his way around the building yet and certainly didn’t understand the approved pathway of action for dealing with a corpse in the school, especially one as famous as Mr. School Improvement. He did have the good sense to dispatch one of the deans to ensure that no students were permitted into the cafeteria until this issue was “addressed.” He then called his boss, the superintendent of the Franklin School District, who informed him that she was immediately sending the district’s three best forensic school improvement investigators—and would call the coroner as well.

As promised, within three minutes Barnabus Dolphin, Mr. Wolf (no first name), and C.B. (initials only) checked in at the office and hurriedly made their way to the Burnett cafeteria, sans administrative entourage. C.B. was the first to speak.

“Pretty unpleasant business,” he said.

“Indeed,” said Barnabus. “But perhaps it isn’t as bad as Mrs. Wilson suggests. She always was the jittery type.”

Any such hope quickly dissolved as the three detectives entered the cafeteria, after asking the dean to remain as sentinel.

“You were correct, C.B.,” said Wolf. “Very bad business indeed. Dead without question.”

“It is hard to believe that it is really our old friend,” said Barnabus. “I haven’t seen him in two or three years. He looks terrible. He was just a young man when last we met, and a big strapping fellow at that.”

“Good fishmonger,” echoed C.B. “Poor Mr. School Improvement looks like an old man.”

“He is all worn down,” chimed in Wolf.

“Let’s see what is in his pockets,” said C.B. “There may be a clue or two there.”

A thorough search of Mr. School Improvement’s corpse uncovered only one large envelope, in the inside pocket of his sports jacket.

“Hmmm, let’s see what we have here,” Barnabus remarked in an inquiring kind of way. “It is a large stack of FedEx delivery receipts.”

“Odd, I think,” murmured Wolf.

“Let me see those,” said Barnabus in a reaching kind of way. “Just as I suspected. There are receipts here for twenty-five or thirty reform packages delivered to Mr. School Improvement at Burnett over the last half dozen years, a good ten or twelve arriving in the last eighteen months alone. There’s one for a block scheduling kit and another for a student advisory system. And here’s one for an interdisciplinary-based inquiry program and one for a detracking plan.”

“Good fishmonger,” cried out C.B. “Here are receipts for the delivery of a comprehensive school reform model and an entire small school. They must have been pretty large boxes.”

“And here is a recent one for something called turnaround elixir,” said Wolf. “Are you guys thinking what I’m thinking?”

Two confirmatory nods.

“He seemed to be getting more desperate,” said C.B.

“And less coherent,” said Barnabus.

“That ‘Hail Mary’ strategy never works,” lamented Wolf. “His back must have really been up against the wall. Such a bad end to such a promising start for our friend.”

Just then the coroner arrived on the scene, looking a good deal like “Doc” from the *Gunsmoke* series.

“Hi Doc,” the three detectives nodded in unison. “Thanks for coming so quickly.”

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“My job,” said the coroner, nodding in return. “Besides, being a school and all I thought we best get this cleared up as quickly as possible. Who is he?”

“His name is School Improvement,” replied C.B. “Been at Burnett about eight years now as I recall.”

“Whoa,” said Doc, “I’m not used to seeing senior citizens in middle schools.”

“Ah, but that’s part of the rub,” said Wolf. “He’s really only a young man.”

“Hmmm,” said the coroner. “Best be having a look.”

In the meantime, Wolf and Barnabus went to have a word with the sentinel (i.e., the dean). They asked him to call down and have Dr. Johnson convene an emergency meeting of the school leadership team for the second lunch period. They had questions. They needed some answers.

“And make sure Johnson orders pizza for everyone,” Wolf stressed to the dean as they returned to join the coroner, who was just finishing up his examination of Mr. School Improvement.

“Well, Doc?” inquired C.B.

“Poor guy is pretty beaten up,” said Doc. “Look here, his entire body is covered with small bruises and thin cuts. Layered on over a long stretch of time, I’d say. And look here,” he pointed, “there is quite a number of larger contusions as well.”

“My, my,” said Barnabus. “We have not come up against that before in the district.”

“No indeed,” responded Wolf. “Nothing quite this bad, anyway. What’s the cause of death, Doc?”

“That’s the most peculiar part of the story,” noted Doc. “Your friend, Mr. School Improvement, bled to death. Best I can tell he’s been bleeding very slowly for quite a long time now. Hardly noticeable at any particular point in time but lethal over the long haul, as we see here,” he reported in a puzzled kind of way. “Well, my people will be here shortly now and we’ll get him downtown for an autopsy. Know for sure then,” he reported.

The three district investigators then headed off for the teachers’ lounge where Dr. Johnson had gathered together the twelve members of the school leadership team, per their request.

“Thank you all for coming on such short notice,” began Wolf. “Know it is inconvenient, but we need your help. Has Dr. Johnson filled you all in? Good. We will get right to it, then,” he explained with a nod to C.B.

“Thank you again for coming,” said C.B. “We will get you back to your students just as fast as possible. Which of you knew the deceased the best?”

After some hesitation and a good deal of eye movement back and forth, Mrs. Peterson began. “A number of us were here when Mr. School Improvement came to Burnett. Let’s see, that would have been seven or eight years ago. All of us know him, some better than others. But I’m pretty sure none of the teachers who came in the last three or four years know him well at all.”

“How did he get here?” asked Barnabus.

“We invited him,” answered Mrs. Guimond. “Voted as a full faculty actually.”

“Any objections?” inquired Wolf.

“No, not really,” said Mrs. Guimond. “We knew he was a good friend of the superintendent; probably in our best interest all around if you know what I mean.”

Unmistakable glances of acknowledgment followed throughout the room.

“Many of us were generally excited about his joining us at Burnett,” added Mrs. Fitzgerald. “Even the most jaded of us didn’t really see much downside. No real problem potential.”

“Hmmm,” murmured Barnabus. “How did he fit in? Did he get along with everyone all right?”

“Oh yes,” answered Mrs. Joy. “You know, when he came he brought a lot of extra stuff with him. You know, books, money for professional development trips, science equipment, stuff like that. And some things we really need at Burnett too. He was always around. You saw Mr. School Improvement pretty much everywhere. Very helpful. Sat in on all the leadership team meetings, right at the table with the rest of us. And most of the department meetings as well. He was an attractive devil for sure and we were drawn to him,” she added in a blushing kind of way. “Seemed to have a lot of money, too, which didn’t hurt.”

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“He was at all the administrative team meetings also,” said Ms. Raschner. “I was an interim AP when he first came. Got along real well with the principal too.”

“From what we can tell, and the coroner’s initial investigation of the corpse, it seems pretty clear that things were not going well here at the end for Mr. School Improvement,” said C.B.

“Yes, yes, that’s true,” said Mrs. Peterson. “Mrs. McCray had tried to alert us to possible problems way back at the start, when Mr. Improvement first came. Said she had worked with his brother at one school and his sister at another. Neither of those cases turned out well at all. She was clearly the most skeptical of all of us. Told us to keep our eyes open—and our ‘doors closed.’ Always was talking about the ‘past returning again.’ Smart woman that Mrs. McCray.”

“And you know,” said Mrs. Fitzgerald, “he grew more tiresome and bothersome the longer he was here,” she reported in a somewhat annoyed but embarrassed kind of way. “He was kind of a my way or the highway type of guy. I never really had a sense that he understood much about Burnett. At least I never saw him make much effort to do so. Kind of knew everything already.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Mrs. Joy acknowledged. “He brought a whole bunch of stuff from Caldwell Elementary School, where he was before. A lot of it didn’t seem to fit. Ended up in the closet. Still there, I believe.”

C.B. gave a knowing nod to his colleagues. In their archaeological work in school closets throughout the district, they had uncovered more than their fair share of evidence to support Mrs. Joy’s hunch.

A bit of a twinkle appeared in Barnabus’s eyes and just a trace of a smile.

“Anything else?” said Wolf. “Did Mr. School Improvement have any friends?”

“Well, he was real tight with the superintendent at the time,” said Mr. Rubio. “The guy before the guy before the current superintendent. Thick as thieves,” he added in an inside kind of way.

“Not so much now though,” added Mrs. Peterson. “The superintendent brought in a whole new team—you know, new ideas, new people,

new ways of doing business. Even redid the district organizational chart. Not much space for Mr. School Improvement and his friends there, I'm told."

A meaningful glance was exchanged between Barnabus and C.B.—only an eyebrow movement, but clearly sufficient for two of the nation's foremost forensic school improvement investigators.

"What about with the teachers?" asked Barnabus.

"At first, he was liked by nearly everyone. Lots of friends, in a professional sense at least," replied Mrs. Jeffries. "You'd see him all the time in classrooms and hallways. Hung out a lot before and after school as well."

"What about now?" Barnabus asked in a probing kind of way.

"Things seem to have changed quite a bit," said Mrs. Peterson. "I know he still had a few friends in the AVID program, and he gets along with some of the social studies teachers."

"He really has become quite the loner," said Mrs. McCray. "We hardly see him anymore. Spends most of his time in his office putting together binders on all sorts of things. I was in there the other day looking for him. He had promised to get me a sub so I could observe Mrs. Guimond's science lesson. But since no sub ever came, I went down to see what the story was."

More nuanced eyebrow movements from the three forensic sleuths.

"He wasn't there. I was told he was at his regular meeting with some foundation at the district office. But his office was stuffed with stacks of really hefty binders. I remember that some were on his desk. One was on 'data,' another even bigger one on 'teacher quality,' and a monster-sized one on 'teacher evaluation.' Now that I think back on it, it seems odd that there weren't any binders on the children."

"Peculiar indeed," mused Wolf. "Anything else that you can tell us that might throw some light on the cause of Mr. School Improvement's demise? Any recent activity?"

After a bit of silence, Mrs. Fitzgerald spoke up. "Well," she said.

An informed nod among the three detectives indicated that they had some sense of where the narrative was heading.

"Well," Mrs. Fitzgerald repeated, "as Mrs. McCray reported, he had become almost a hermit, and I believe the situation was getting even worse.

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We heard that Mr. School Improvement wasn't even getting along with the social studies teachers any longer, and we all know that that is hard to do."

"You know he had promised quite a lot when he came to Burnett," said Mrs. Joy. "And as we said, he seemed to have a lot of money, at least a lot more than any of us had ever seen."

"You know we still got stuff from time to time," said Mr. Rubio. "But we didn't really know what to do with most of it."

"And even when we did," chimed in Mrs. Peterson, "when it broke there wasn't really anyone to help fix stuff. We tried working on broken stuff in small groups for a while, but that petered out. Too much other stuff to do, I guess."

"More and more of us just pulled away," Mrs. Guimond reported, in an embarrassed but defiant kind of way. "You know, just closed our doors and went on with our work."

"Hmmm," whispered C.B.

Mrs. Joy jumped in here. "I also don't think that he had the ear of the new interim principal, Dr. Johnson. It wasn't like they were at each other's throats, though. I just don't think they understood each other. In the old days, Mr. School Improvement and the interim principals always seemed to be together. We don't see that anymore."

"All true," nodded Ms. Raschner, the school psychologist, in a meaningful kind of way. "But there is more here, I believe. I don't think he saw himself as particularly successful. Even when things worked in one or two classes, they didn't seem to take off. I think this really ate at him. He aged right before our eyes."

"And grew less and less pleasant, too," said Mr. Rubio. "Meaner and more pushy, I would say."

"Oh my," said Barnabus, exchanging knowing looks with his forensic partners.

"At the last faculty meeting he told us that he had 'friends in high places,' insinuating that they were right at the top of the educational food chain in Washington."

"He snarled at us," said Mrs. Fitzgerald. "Told us that if things didn't begin to shape up around here, 'heads would roll.' Said we would all find ourselves 'out on the street.' The words still ring in my ears."

“He even threatened to sell the entire school to the Smoogle Hat Company,” chimed in Mrs. Guimond. “Very unpleasant.”

It was at this point that they saw the corpse of Mr. School Improvement being conveyed to the waiting ambulance.

“Well, I think we have enough for now,” Wolf reported in a gracious kind of way. “My colleagues and I want to thank you again for your help with this investigation. We are in your debt—as is the district and the education industry in general,” he closed.



Later that afternoon we find the three renowned forensic school improvement sleuths at afternoon tea at their local House of Coffee.

“You look glum, my friend,” said Wolf to C.B.

“It is this unpleasant business with Mr. School Improvement,” he replied. “I can’t seem to shake it.”

“Me either,” said Barnabus. “Even though it is becoming increasingly common, it’s still sad.”

“I just don’t get the sense that he really knew what he was doing—and where he was going, for that matter,” lamented C.B. in a mournful and disappointed kind of way. “And moving faster and working harder didn’t seem to help much.”

“Yes, he covered an amazing amount of territory but didn’t seem to really go very far,” said Wolf.

“And he irritated pretty much everyone to boot,” added C.B. “Just another layer of organizational sediment at Burnett, I guess.”

“And the nonnourishing kind,” said Wolf in a faraway kind of voice.

“Let’s all have a piece of cinnamon swirl pound cake,” said Barnabus. “It is good for chasing away school improvement ghosts and glumness.”

“What do you think will happen to the body?” inquired Barkley, the store manager, who was refreshing their drinks and laying out the pound cake.

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“I dropped by Mr. School Improvement’s attorney’s office earlier this afternoon to see if I could get an answer to that very question,” said Wolf. “Turns out he asked for his body to be cremated and for his ashes to be spread on the lawn of the State Department of Education. But I wouldn’t worry too much. It turns out our friend Mr. School Improvement was a firm believer in reincarnation. So I suspect we will be seeing him again downstream.”