

Slowly as a turtle, the car pulled into the driveway. It was a quaint little apartment. *Small, white, and soon to be decorated with an array of colors*, thought Josh Freeman. "With a touch of paint here or there, all the negative energy will leave the apartment." Josh's mom Angela opened the door and beckoned for him to walk into the new apartment.

"Yep," said James, Josh's father. "This is great real estate. It's only 10 minutes of a drive from our new Art and Animation studio, and apparently has one of the best public schools in the state."

"Sweet," said Josh, taking his saxophone out of the car. "I can't wait to start school!" As soon as he went into the house, a jazzy tune that resembled the likes of Kenny G radiated from the apartment.

A few days later, Josh's parents pulled into the parking lot of Josh's new school. "Wait a second....." said Josh, with arched eyebrows. "This can't be it. Are you sure this isn't a wartime bunker with some smokestacks stuck to it?" His parents, equally confused, flipped through the mapbook.

"This can't be the right address," said his dad, looking at the building the way a 10 year old might look at a pile of vomit. "The building looks like it was imprisoned and tortured." And yet, little uniformed minions were marching into the school as if nothing was wrong.

As Josh stared apprehensively, a man with sunglasses and a buzz cut stepped out of his car. Marching across the asphalt towards the school, he stomped on a tiny flower, the lone star in a vacuum of darkness. He looked as strong as a bear, and wore a gray outfit with a badge saying PRINCIPAL on it. He shoved the school doors open like they were boulders.

Once in the school, Josh gaped at all the anomalies as he walked to his first class, "Music". All the students wore a standard gray shirt and pants, and walked in a line. They stared down at their feet, not daring to look at the teacher leading them. They didn't talk amongst each other, and when asked a question by a teacher they answered with a timid, stumbling voice, "Yes sir."

Suddenly, a teacher sprang at Josh. "MR. FREEMEN!" he roared. "WHAT'S WITH THE DUMB SHIRT AND PANTS?"

"Uh....." replied Josh, looking at his bright yellow shirt and purple jeans. "There isn't anything wrong with this, is there?"

Angrily, the teacher slapped a new pair of standard, grey clothes on Josh. "THAT'S DENTENTION!" he shouted.

In class, Josh stared longingly at the sole window, letting a tiny bit of light in, which was struggling to brighten the classroom. A jazzy tune played in his head, "Dooo, buh-doo bup bee." Out of the gray the teacher whacked Josh's hand with a yardstick. She like all the other teachers, wore a gray uniform, and had short hair.

"The principal wants you all to learn what is right, and what is wrong about music. To increase efficiency, each student will do three problems of the pre-test over and over again in an assembly line fashion," barked the teacher. Looking like he had just seen a ghost, Josh's hand shot up faster than a spring. "PUT YOUR HAND DOWN!" shouted the teacher. Slamming her desk, she said, "THERE ARE NO QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED! THIS IS A SIMPLE ASSIGNMENT!" Cowering, Josh look down at his first pre-test. He was to answer problems 6,7, and 8. They read:

6. What is the most important?

- a. Order
- b. Mathematics
- c. Music
- d. Physical Strength

"Huh," sighed Josh. "This is the easiest pre-test ever." He confidently circled option c.

7. What is school about?

- a. Math
- b. Science

c. Art and Music

d. Order

Likewise, he circled option c.

8. Why are you here?

a. To improve your intellect

b. To become strong and a master of repetitive and formulaic processes

c. To be more creative

d. None of the above

Josh circle option c for #8 too, believing it was the obvious answer.

Thirty minutes later, with the teacher done grading the pre-tests, she marched over to Josh's desk with a glare in her eye. "MR. FREEMEN!" she roared. "WHY IS IT THAT YOU PICKED THE MOST OBVIOUSLY WRONG ANSWERS FOR PROBLEMS 6-8? THE ANSWERS WERE D,D, AND B!!" she smacked Josh's desk with a yardstick and got close enough for him to smell the garlic in her breath.

"Wait a second," replied Josh. "The pre-test was based on opinion, right, so I couldn't have gotten anything wrong."

The teacher's yardstick then seemed to gain a life of its own, slapping Josh's arm until his arm was red and blistered. "NOW GET BACK TO WORK!" she said. "I HAVE PLENTY MORE WORKSHEETS TEACHING THE NEGATIVITY OF ART AND MUSIC!"

With spots and tears in his eyes, Josh whispered to his neighboring student, "What's wrong with this school?" The other student looked around, to make sure no one else was listening.

He whispered, soft as a mouse, "This school is designed to produce excellent factory workers, and an important step in that process is to teach what is important. I used to be sort of like you. I loved drawing. But no more. I believe this is true with every other student." He said this statement with a droop in his voice, as if he didn't believe it.

“And what is that, if not Art and Music?” Spotting the teacher looking up, the other student shook his head and pointed to the teacher.

“Please tell me your name,” asked Josh.

“Mr. Smith,” whispered the student.

Knowing that the school had serious consequences for students who loved the arts or expressed dissent, Josh decided to go about the day as any other student. He decided to obey the teachers unquestioning, decided to suppress his bubbling desire for music and creativity until he got home, and decided to not stick out. During math class, instead of teaching the creative problem solving which he excelled at, they were forced to do quick calculations, and were timed. The problems were similar to: If $y = x^5 + 5x^4 + 10x^3 + 10x^2 + 5x + 1$ and $x + 16$, then what is y ? Or, what's 3×7 times 4×5 ? With the breath of his teacher seemingly always on his neck, he suppressed his objections and went on with the problems.

In English, they were only allowed to read three books: *Factory Business* by A.J. McFadden, *Important Science Formulas and Their Origins* by Joseph Richards, and *How to Make a Writing Rubric* by Gavin Berschback. When the teacher announced that they were going to write, Josh's spirits lifted, only to be crushed again by the strict rubric:

1. Expresses patriotism towards the school
2. Has proper length
3. Is done quickly

Again, he conformed to the school's rubric and wrote three essays during the class period about how amazing the school was. Thinking that he would be punished if he tried to write well and subsequently be slowed down, he conformed.

Finally, the final school bell rang. The loud, basketball-buzzer sounding bell rang through the halls. Remembering his detention, he asked a teacher for directions. He told him to get to Room 106.

In the detention room, the principal sat at the front of the room, giving dead stares to everyone in the room. They were told to sit. Looking at the other students, Josh presumed they were all new students like him. He sat quietly in his chair, exhausted and angry. *How could this school be so, so terrible?* He thought to himself, fidgeting. *I could transfer, but I also want to help all these poor students.* Remembering what Mr. Smith told him about most students formerly being creative, the smallest seed of an idea started growing in his mind.

Back at home, both Josh and his parents were unusually quiet. While eating dinner, Josh stared outside as some bunnies in his yard danced around. No terrible schools for them. After a quick dinner, Josh ran upstairs and played some saxophone. Strangely, it wasn't nearly as fun as usual. Frustrated, Josh slouched into his chair. He swiveled to his desktop, and found the New York Times website. The headline read: Organized Strikes Across the US.

The rest of the week in school was similar to the first day, minus the infractions. Josh kept conforming, until the teachers saw him as just another student. And he was okay with that. However, one thing was different. Starting with Mr. Smith, Josh told him his idea. "Are you crazy?" whispered Mr. Smith, fiercely. He flailed his arms in disbelief.

Josh replied, "Listen to me. We have to do something. Are you okay with this? You told me you loved drawing. If this works and people change the school, you'll be drawing again."

After mulling it over for a few seconds, the creative side of Mr. Smith won out. "Oh-okay," he said. And with Josh's help they spread the word behind the teacher's backs. They used the prospect of freedom to their advantage, and decided upon a date.

Back at home. Josh's parents, who always seemed exhausted, started to express concern over the ever more reclusive Josh. But no matter what his parents asked, Josh always replied, "I'm okay," and daydreamed of the school's day of liberation.

Finally, the day had come. It was September 2nd. Pretending to bump into Mr. Smith on accident, Josh surreptitiously whispered, "Tell everyone we strike at 9 am, about the time everyone walking is to work.

In class Josh spent the whole time looking out the one window. He even received a beating from a teacher. Josh didn't seem to care.

And then he heard it, and knew it was time. The 9 am bell rang through the halls, loud as ever. "Follow me!" shouted Josh, right before the crowd of students joined him. They looked up, with a glint in their eyes. They all held the same thought. *Freedom, maybe?* The teachers stood, flabbergasted. The principal came out of the office to see what the commotion was all about. Eyes as wide as eggs, he screamed, "What are you doing! Stop!" He even tried to grab a student's shirt, but ripped the student's shirt on accident.

Once a sizable amount of students was outside, Josh shouted, "With me!" The students chanted, "Stop the School, Save the Student!" "Arts and Freedom, Not Marks and Punishments!" A few men walked over, irked at what the students were doing. *Yes*, thought Josh, *Awareness!* However, the men roared, "What are you doing?"

"This school is terrible!" replied Josh. "It should but shut down." He said this, as excited as an Olympic racer winning a gold. But to his surprise, the men shouted, "This school doesn't need to be shut down. It produces great workers. And the whole city can back me up on this" A second later the principal burst out of the door. When the principal reached the men, the men shook his hand. "So you are the director of this fine establishment. Everyone in town thanks you."

"Yeah," said the second man. "Because of this school, unemployment has dropped tremendously, and we are now one of the nationwide leaders of manufacturing."

Aghast, Josh shouted, "But this school is like a factory!"

“Who cares?” asked the principal. “It’s great experience for the workforce. Now get inside. You have some work to do. Plus some five hour detentions.”

The first man nodded his head, and said, “Good. These children deserve some discipline.”

The principal herded all the students back into the school, and sent them to their classes. However, he gave Josh some extra attention. “Young man,” he sighed. “It’s time you learned your lesson.” The principal proceeded to give Josh a long lecture about the importance of factories. He gave Josh a few good hits with a yardstick to let the information settle in. But Josh didn’t pay too much attention. Nor did he care.

The next day, Mr. Freeman came in with a drab gray uniform. Mr. Smith came over to him and said, “I’m sorry about what happened yesterday. Are you okay?”

Mr. Freeman replied, “No talking in the halls.” Yes. Mr. Freeman thought to himself. *If everyone thinks this is the right way, maybe it is.* In English class, the teacher told him that he could write about anything he wanted. Mr. Freeman titled his paper, The Importance of Factories. Outside the door, the principal looked in through the window. And he smiled.