

Victor

I met Victor Benshoff in 1970 on the first day of seventh grade at Burley Middle School. At that time the county school board had elected, for reasons every parent found obvious, to segregate the seventh graders in a school all to themselves, as far away as practical from the other children and the normal teachers. I will always be convinced the state's correctional facilities supplied the majority of Burley's staff; if that gym teacher was not a hardened felon, the term has no merit. And then there was Mrs. Duck.

She stood before us, cold, and cruel, and six months pregnant. Someone giggled and was instantly transfixed by her stare and burned to a fine white ash. From that moment, we all vied to become her ideal students: frozen in speechless horror. All of us but Victor.

Victor was, well, a little different. He had hair like very dense wool, which he endeavored with small success to part on one side, and he had the most unbelievably impish, mischievous face you can imagine. He was in constant motion, and the harder he tried to sit still, the more his everything would twitch. Today all the little Victors pass their school days in the Ritalin zone, but back then schools were mostly drug-free, and there was nothing to be done but to send the problem children to Mrs. Duck. She tried. By the end of day one, Victor had sworn feud, and by the end of the week, he and Mrs. Duck were enemies for life. I will never doubt that the best day of all his years in education was the day Mrs. Duck left on maternity leave.

It must have been a dry week at the parole board, because the replacement teacher was a kindly young woman with high-minded notions about classrooms filled with young minds yearning for the light of knowledge. Ha Ha Ha! We damn near killed her. Victor was in heaven.

I will never forget the day he brought the Whoopee cushion to class. I've seen what passes for a Whoopee cushion these days; pallid little latex balloons that hardly make a squeak. Victor's device was real rubber, thick

as a hot water bottle, and had lips designed to flap until the last cubic millimeter of air was expressed. It made a noise like a herd of hogs on an all-bean diet being steamrollered.

He had a happy morning of it, but was finally cornered by the exasperated substitute, who threw the thing in her desk drawer with one last hilarious blat. Victor, still convulsed, was ordered to sit beside her desk, facing the class. A fatal mistake.

As she turned back to the blackboard, Victor was opening the drawer. As she chalked out examples of deductive and inductive reasoning, Victor was sneaking out his toy, and filling it. And filling it. Bigger. And bigger. Big as his head, fuzz and all. She heard the tittering, but ignored it. She was on the edge, but bravely holding herself together. Brightly, she turned around and pointed to the first example. “Now class, what kind of reasoning is that?”

John Peterson, sprawled at his desk in the back, hollered out, “STOOpid reasoning!” and the whole class cracked up. The poor woman put her face in her hands, burst into tears, and sat down backward, hard, in her chair. Victor, Victor, Victor. It was his moment. He slid that bloated Whoopee cushion underneath her just as she sat down; NASA could not have timed it better. The thing went off like a thousand sloppy wet foghorns for what seemed like, I swear, a whole minute. Along with everyone else, I was hysterical, but through my tears of laughter I saw Victor slide out of his little chair in a heap of joy so complete he literally could not get his breath. He writhed, gasping, for most of the time it took the principal to show up and take over.

I lost track of Victor after high school. When I caught up with him on Facebook, decades later, he was delighted by my remembrance of the Whoopee cushion incident. And he was still such an original; the one and only Victor Benschhoff. He spent his lifetime making music and joy. 45 years

was too short a time to know him. It is just not right for him to be gone so soon. I will miss him very much. May this story, long held dear in my heart, add one more smile to the happy memories of Victor's friends and loved ones. Peace.