

## Cheering Up Darren

“No, Mindy, you can’t ride your horse to school!”

“But ...”

But Darren was already on his way out of the office. He looked stressed.

Bonnie had been listening in. “Mindy, you remember what we talked about ...”

“Yeah, I forgot. I’m sorry.”

During the first week of school, the staff had gotten together to talk about ways to cheer Darren up. He’d had a rough summer ... he’d had to stick around to hire some new teachers, and he and Kate hadn’t had much of a vacation.

“Our only trip was to see the End of Steel Museum in Hines Creek”, he’d told us. “And Kate had to stay in the truck. All the buildings were full of mice. And we got food poisoning in the restaurant there.” We’d forgotten to warn him.

So that’s when the staff began its official campaign to ‘Cheer Darren Up’.

The only mistake we made was putting Bonnie in charge.

Not that we doubted she’d do a fantastic job, you understand. It’s just that sometimes she’s a little too ... enthusiastic.

On Monday of the second week, Darren walked into his office to discover a juggler tossing four or five staplers and some other things in the air. Bonnie came in. “Isn’t he fantastic?” she gushed. “Our Arts grant paid for him. Val wanted to get the mime back, but, well, ... you know ...”

On the mime’s first visit he’d so terrified Bonnie after he’d chased her down the hall that she’d slugged him. He didn’t seem that upset about the black eye. At least, he hadn’t said anything. But then, I suppose he wouldn’t have ...

“This guy is pretty good.” Darren was watching the juggler. “Hey, wait a minute! Isn’t that ...”

The juggler had added Darren’s coffee cup to the objects he was juggling. It was his lucky Edmonton Oilers coffee mug. The one he’d bought after the last time they won the Cup. It was old and chipped. But Darren cherished it.

“Be careful! That’s ...” Darren made a grab for the mug. The juggler made a grab for the mug. Various staplers, notebooks and the Edmonton Oilers mug all went crashing to the floor.

Bonnie and the juggler made a quick retreat out of the office, as Darren knelt to pick up the pieces. He wasn't looking very happy.

Later that day, I noticed Bonnie sneaking out of Darren's office. Darren was teaching.

"Bonnie, what were you doing in there?"

Bonnie was looking a little sheepish. "I didn't make a very good impression with that juggler" she admitted. She went back to get Darren's mug, and held it up to show me. The pieces seemed to be all there, in the right places, but the duct tape didn't look pretty. "I fixed it for him. Sort of."

Then she brightened. "But I'm going to make it up to him tomorrow! I'm making him lunch. Mindy's going to serve it."

That sounded pretty harmless. And Darren would appreciate it. He hardly had time for lunch these days; he'd been dealing with some Jr. High boys who we suspected were sneaking out back at lunch for a little illicit beer drinking. The first couple of times it happened, none of us noticed. In fact, their behaviour seemed to improve. Who'd have guessed?

The next day about half an hour before noon, Mindy and Bonnie were in the kitchen. Bonnie was cooking.

"What is that, Bonnie? It smells delicious"

"It's egg and cheese macaroni. I'm serving it with a fantastic egg and three bean salad. I got the recipe from Sandy."

"Uh, Bonnie ..."

But she was already busy serving it up onto plates. Mindy was wearing a short black skirt, highlighted with a pearl necklace. I thought the cowboy boots were a nice touch. Obviously she wanted to make a good impression.

I'd wanted to mention that the recipe Bonnie had obtained from Sandy was one we'd had problems with last year. It was delicious, nutritious, and the kids loved it. But it had caused a certain amount of ... flatulence, particularly in the Jr. High classes. I'd started buying car air fresheners to hang around my classroom.

Mindy made a big production out of serving Darren at his desk. He seemed pleased by the attention. "Thanks, Mindy. This is really great! And Bonnie prepared it? Thank her for me, will you?"

Later that afternoon the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent stopped by. They wanted to discuss something with Darren. Apparently they were quite impressed with his proposal to have all of the Menno Simons Jr. High students bussed to our school.

They were in the office for quite a while. Bonnie and I were there when they came out.

The Deputy Superintendent was looking a little green. "Hi Karen. Are you feeling OK? You look a little under the weather."

She tried to smile. It ended up looking more like a grimace. "I think I'll be OK. I just needed a little ... air."

The Superintendent emerged. He seemed to be holding his breath. He expelled it with a gasp. He turned back to the doorway. "Thank you, Mr. Phelps. I'll be sure to pass ... uh, mention your idea at the next Board meeting."

Both of them headed for the front door. They seemed to be moving very quickly.

Bonnie and I went in to see Darren. Bonnie came to a dead stop. I bumped into her. Bonnie's nose wrinkled. "Ewww.... Darren .... what is that smell? Did something die in here?"

Darren left without saying a word. Bonnie and I looked at each other. "Bonnie ... that food ..."

Her hand flew to her mouth in shock. "Oh, no! I forgot about that! You think Darren ...?"

There wasn't much doubt about it. That night Kate made him sleep in the staffroom.

The following week Bonnie tried again. She convinced Mindy to have her grade one and two class wash Darren's truck. They did a good job, too. Unfortunately Mindy had to take a washroom break, and her kids decided to do the inside as well. With the hose.

Sometime later that week we held our regular semi-weekly staff meeting after school. No-one had ever complained about the twice-weekly meetings; they'd been Darren's idea. Mostly we didn't mind, as long as they ended by six.

This meeting only lasted two minutes. No-one said anything.

Darren was perplexed. "Nobody has anything to say?" It was a little unbelievable. Both Val and Colleen tended to talk a lot. And Mindy usually had two or three things to complain about.

But together we'd all decided to give Darren a present. The shortest staff meeting in the history of our school.

Darren left the staffroom scratching his head. Bonnie met him in the office.

“I don’t understand, Bonnie. Am I doing that bad a job? Nobody has anything to say? Maybe I’ve been too hard on people and they’re intimidated. I should be nicer to the staff!”

“Uh, Darren ...”

“I know what I need to do!”

“Darren, I don’t think ...”

“I’m going to town tonight and buying four dozen donuts. Maybe then the staff will realize how much I appreciate them.”

Bonnie stopped trying to interrupt. Darren had mentioned donuts.

We hadn’t had donuts since Melanie’s last visit. And she’d eaten most of them.

“Uh, that’s a good idea, Darren. Get lots of chocolate ones, OK?”

Things came to a head a day later when Bonnie decided to paint Darren’s office.

She planned to do it over a weekend when Darren and Kate planned to be in Edmonton. She bought the paint and the rollers, and we all helped empty the office on Friday night. But she wouldn’t let anyone help with the painting.

“You all go home. Jessie and I will do it.”

Apparently Bonnie reasoned that having her artistically-inclined daughter along to help her might make things go a little smoother.

They might have, too. Except for Bonnie’s choice of paint colour.

Bonnie had described it as ‘Shocking Peach’. It wouldn’t have been my first choice. What colour *is* a peach after it’s been shocked, anyway?

Unfortunately once it dried, it was more like ‘Flaming Pink’.

Monday morning we all waited around near the office to see Darren’s reaction when he walked in. None of us had seen it yet. Bonnie wouldn’t let us look. She wasn’t saying anything either.

Darren walked into his office. He stopped and looked around. Surprisingly, he didn’t say a word. He just sat down at his desk and put his head in his hands.

Val stuck her head in. "Oh my Lord ... it's PINK!"

We all had to have a look. It was definitely pink.

"That's not going to go over too well with our Jr. High boys" Mindy suggested. "They're going to think you're ..."

Mindy wasn't known for her tact.

We all looked at Darren. His head was still in his hands. He was shaking.

"Oh no, Darren ... don't cry! I hate it when you cry!"

Darren had shed a few tears on the first day of school when the new coffee maker that Bonnie had purchased for the office malfunctioned, and emptied a full cup of coffee on the front of his pants. Apparently the burns hadn't been too bad.

But then Darren looked up. He was shaking with laughter. "You guys!" He had to stop. When he'd quit laughing, he continued: "Kate filled me in on what's been going on. You've been trying to cheer me up, haven't you?"

"Uh, sort of ..." That was Bonnie.

"Well, I want you to know that I really appreciate it. Despite the ... er ... difficulties ... I'm really touched that you've been trying so hard to make me feel better!"

"Well, that's good, Darren." Bonnie continued. "Because I sort of blew the next three year' toilet paper budget on the paint, and ..."

"Don't worry about it". Darren was looking quite mellow. "Actually, I sort of like the pink. It's kind of appropriate, actually. Kate and I have some wonderful news to share with you."

"You mean ...?" Val was ecstatic. "A little one?"

"Yes. Kate and I are ...buying a dog!"