

Kenton

Kenton was a handful. There was no doubt about that. Can a grade four student be evil? We were starting to wonder.

Kenton's behaviour took a turn for the worse in mid September. I first learned about it when Leslie, the aide in the classroom, came to me in tears. I was sitting at my desk trying to mark some tests when she came into my room.

"Mr. Foster, I can't take it any more!" The tears were running down her cheeks.

I got up and went to her. She was standing by the door. "Leslie, what ..."

She wanted a hug. She cried on my shoulder for a minute or so. "You must really be upset" I said. I didn't know what else to say. I wasn't very good at comforting people.

But as the Assistant Principal, I'd had plenty of people cry on my shoulder before.

- A teacher once, whose dog had died. She'd really loved that dog. Personally, I was sort of happy it had met an early demise ... it used to pee on the tire of my car every morning.

- Several support staff members who'd had issues with a Principal. I managed to talk them out of the violence they were planning.

- A student or two, upset at their marks. We've all had that. It's part of the job. Although I couldn't figure out why they were upset ... they hadn't done any homework for three months.

- Even a student teacher once, who had discovered after two or three days in the classroom that she couldn't stand little kids. I sympathized with her. I let her teach some Jr. High classes.

But Leslie was different. She was usually so calm and collected. Nothing fazed her. A student had thrown up all over her shoes once, and she'd calmly removed them, led the student to the washroom and helped him clean up. Although she *had* thrown away the shoes.

"Leslie, what's the problem?" I wanted to know what had upset her so much.

"It's Kenton. In grade four. He's evil!"

"Well, Leslie, I don't think ..."

"You don't know what's been going on in that classroom, Keith! I can't handle it any more. And Barbara doesn't even notice!"

Barbara is our grade 3/4 teacher. Barbara is the most laid-back person I have ever met. If she'd been alive in the sixties, she would have been a hippie. Not much on discipline, but she got the job done, as far as I knew, and the kids loved her.

"But ... nobody has said anything about this before. What's Kenton been doing?"

"Well, you know Barbara. She would never complain about anything. She thinks Kenton is 'a misunderstood creative soul who needs to push the boundaries a little'. Those are her words. Personally, I think the little ..."

"Leslie, don't say it." But I knew what she was getting at. Barbara's description of Kenton suggested that he was probably a pain in the neck who was always getting into trouble.

"OK, let's go talk to him. What class do they have now?"

"It's drama" Leslie told me.

"Oh oh, we'd better hurry!"

On the way, I asked Leslie how Kenton was doing academically.

"He's very smart. He gets everything right, and he's always finished his work early. He would be such a good student if he only could keep out of trouble!"

When we arrived at the classroom, Barbara was seated in the middle, with the kids sitting in a circle around her. That didn't look too bad. I was hopeful. But Kenton wasn't in the room. And when we went in, we could see that Barbara was duct-taped to the chair. And her mouth was gagged.

"Barbara, what on earth ..." I ripped the tape off her mouth. She winced a little. "Sorry. But tell me what's happening? Why are you ..."

"Oh, Keith, we're having so much fun. The kids are really getting into it! We're re-enacting the story of Joan of Arc'. It was Kenton's idea!"

"And where is Kenton now?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

"He went to the washroom to get a whole package of paper towel. We needed a fire ..."

"What?? You can't have a fire in here!"

"Oh, I know, Keith. Don't worry ... we were just going to pretend. They're getting ready to burn me at the stake."

I was pretty sure that Kenton didn't get the 'pretend' part. I helped Barbara out of her duct-tape bindings. The kids on the floor looked disappointed.

"Oh, well. I guess Drama class was about over for the day anyway. Look, here's Kenton". Barbara pointed.

The boy in question entered the room with an armload of paper towels. He stopped when he saw Leslie and I. "Hi, Mr. Foster!"

I recognized him now. He was the kid who was always stopping me in the hallway to say hello, put his arm around me, and ask me how my day was going. He'd seemed nice. I hadn't really connected him with the sticky notes that appeared occasionally on my back ... the ones that read 'Kick Me', or 'I'm Irish. Kiss Me!'

I'd never been kicked, but that note, come to think of it, might explain the unexpected kiss I'd received from our school secretary last week ...

I was beginning to think that there was more to Kenton than met the eye.

I took Kenton out into the hallway. He went to put his arm around me, but I was wise to that game now. "Kenton, I'm a little disappointed ..."

"It's OK, Mr. Foster. We really wouldn't have had a fire. At least, inside."

I didn't pursue that.

"Try to be good, all right?" I shooed him back into the classroom.

Leslie joined me in the hallway as we headed back to the office.

"Do you see what I mean, Keith? This morning he was handing out lipsticks to all the grade three girls at recess. They had a great time. When they came in all their lips were red ... they looked like ..."

"Well, that's not so bad. A little fun, and it washes ..."

"They weren't lipsticks. They were little permanent markers."

"Oh!" That explained all the little girls I'd seen with pink mouths. And why the school secretary had been frantically looking for Handi-Wipes.

"He's always wandering around the room. It's as if he's just looking for ways to cause trouble".

I was pretty sure I was getting the picture.

“And, Keith! Some of the things he’s been doing have been downright cruel. He says things to the kids around him in class to make them cry. Barbara ignores it. And if he pulls out that Whoopee cushion one more time ...”

“Was he the one ...”

“Yes, under the Superintendent’s seat when he was at our staff meeting. You know how that went over!”

Our Superintendent doesn’t have much of a sense of humour. “But how did he know which seat in the staff room he’d be using?”

“He didn’t. I think it was meant for you, Keith.”

“What??”

OK, this kid’s behaviour had to improve. We needed to call a staff meeting. Start a task force. Call in some behaviour modification specialists. Invest in a straight jacket.

But of course I didn’t do any of those things.

I told Leslie, “I’ll talk to him. Try to stay sane for a day or two, OK?”

I called Kenton down to my office the next morning. Or rather, to the Principal’s office. The Principal was away for a few days at a seminar. He always managed to be away when the fun things happened. He’d been gone for three whole days in the fall when we had the head lice scare. I was still scratching.

“Good morning, Kenton, how are you?” I motioned him towards the chair. Kenton didn’t see the Whoopee cushion on the seat. He sat down.

When we’d both stopped laughing, I turned serious.

“Kenton ... I think I understand why you’re always doing things that get you into trouble.”

He looked at me. “What are you going to do?” He looked worried.

“Do? I’m not going to do anything, Kenton. I just want to talk to you.”

“Oh ... OK.” But he still looked unsure.

“Kenton, you remind me exactly of myself when I was an elementary student!”

“I do? But ... “ He thought for a moment, and then grinned. “Back then, did you ride a horse to school and have to write on slates?”

Kenton had a quick wit, I'll give him that. "Hah hah ... very funny! No, but we had to clean out the outhouse every morning ..."

"Ewww ... you're joking, right?"

"Of course I'm joking. We even had cars and everything! But, listen, Kenton. Here's what I meant when I said that you reminded me of ... me".

So I proceeded to tell him what kind of kid I'd been in elementary school. I'd been very smart. I'd found the work easy, and I was bored a lot. The teachers never gave me anything interesting or challenging to do when I was finished my work. So I'd looked for ways to ... amuse myself.

"I got into so much trouble ..." I told Kenton. "And it wasn't because I was bad. I was just ... bored. Practical jokes and stuff just seemed like a way to ... I don't know ... show a little creativity? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Kenton was indeed very smart. "I think so, Mr. Foster. I don't have any trouble with the work ... I always finish early. But Mrs. Fenwick ..." that was Barbara "doesn't have stuff for me to do. I've read all the books in the room ... Mrs. Marriott let me read as much as I wanted to last year. And Mrs. Fenwick won't let me help the other kids. So I just ... look for ways to have fun. But I know some people don't like it. I think I made Miss Wilson cry once". That was Leslie.

"So, Kenton, how do you think we could make things better for you in the classroom?"

Kenton and I talked for about an hour. Together we made a plan. And I promised him that there would be some changes.

The next day I had a discussion with Barbara and Leslie about our problem student. I suggested to Barbara that she bring in a shelf full of books from the grade five and six classrooms, and let Kenton read whenever he was done his work. I also explained how Kenton could really help the other students improve their learning, if she'd let him help them. Barbara agreed. I arranged for Leslie to set up some science projects for Kenton to work on when he was done his work.

And I told Kenton the next time I saw him: "I know how your mind works." He looked at me strangely. "Smart people like you really enjoy practical jokes." He brightened.

"You do too, I bet!"

"Oh, the hot water I've gotten into ..." I replied. I didn't tell him about the time I'd turned the Science teacher's mailbox slot into an aquarium. He smiled. "Here's the deal" I continued. "Whenever you have an idea for a joke to play on someone, come and tell me about it first, OK? Then maybe we'll do it together ... if it won't hurt anyone."

“That’s great, Mr. Foster. I was thinking about peanut butter and ...”

I left him with his planning.

A week or so later I talked to Leslie. “How is our problem child doing, Les?”

“Great, Keith. You wouldn’t believe the change in him. Right now Kenton and I are building a catapult out of popsicle sticks. It’s supposed to be able to shoot an eraser right across the room!”

I wasn’t too sure about that one. “Is it safe?”

“Don’t worry, Keith. I asked Kenton to figure out a way to make it safe to use in the classroom. He came up with the idea of using marshmallows.”

So Kenton didn’t turn out to be evil, after all. Just a misunderstood kid. I was happy about that ... I wouldn’t know how to deal with an evil kid.

Our secretary isn’t speaking to me this week. Kenton and I did this thing with peanut butter one morning before school ...