

The Menagerie

Now don't get me wrong. I think Mindy is one of the best teachers I have ever seen. But sometimes she can be a little ... impulsive. Like the time she decided, on the spur of the moment, that her science class needed to have a 'Bring Your Pet to School' day.

We'd done that before, several times. A few kids would bring in their cats. Maybe a dog or two. We even had a few ride their horses to school once. That wasn't too bad ... except that you really had to watch where you stepped when you went out to the parking lot.

But Mindy didn't just want a *few* pets. She wanted *all* her kids to participate. She advertised for a week. She made posters. She made announcements where she made funny animal sounds into the microphone and exhorted all the kids in her classes to bring their pets.

Mindy never does anything half-way.

It was the week before Christmas. Tuesday morning Bonnie came to find me. "You'd better come down to Mindy's room and have a look ... it's wild!"

I headed in that direction. But I noticed that Bonnie wasn't following. "Aren't you coming?" I asked.

"Not a chance! There's a snake down there!"

When I got to the room, many of the kids were still in the hallway. When I looked into the room, I could see why.

The floor was filled with boxes, cages, bags and various other containers. Several cats were prowling around the room. There was a small goat munching on some papers in the corner.

One cage held the largest snake I had ever seen. It was eyeing up the goat; I think it hadn't been fed in a while.

A large box with a screen over it held what looked like ferrets or weasels. I wasn't sure. But whatever they were, they looked shifty-eyed.

And there were rabbits everywhere. Cute little bunny rabbits. Giant rabbits that looked like they could take on any cat in the neighbourhood. Rabbits with long ears. Rabbits with short ears. And several really ugly rabbits that looked more like muskrats with bad haircuts. Maybe they were muskrats.

Another cage was full of mice of various sizes and colours. I was hoping the owner of the snake hadn't brought along its lunch.

OK, it was looking like all the kids had brought a pet. Good. Everybody would have some fun and learn something. But we had to round up all those bunny rabbits!

“Mindy, who owns the rabbits?” Mindy was looking a little distracted. I think the success of her ‘Bring Your Pet to School’ day was just sinking in. Or maybe she was thinking about all the rabbit poop she was going to have to clean up. I could see that they had been busy.

Mindy brought over the owner of the rabbits. It was Elize. I bent down to talk to her.

“Elize, honey, we need to round up all these rabbits so they won’t get lost. You wouldn’t want to forget any when you leave at 3:30.”

“Oh, that’s OK, Mr. Willis. My mom says I’m not allowed to bring them home. She wants me to give them away to my friends. Would you like one?”

“Uh ...” I was looking for a polite way to say ‘not on your life, kid!’

“Besides, I don’t think my bus driver will let me take any back on the bus.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“Well, a few got out on the way here. I think I’m still missing some. They may still be on the bus.”

“That’s nice.” I wasn’t sure how we were going to get rid of ...

“Uh, Elize ... exactly how many rabbits *did* you bring?”

“Well, Mr. Willis ... not counting the ones that escaped on the bus, I think there’s about thirty.”

Thirty?? And by 3:30 there’d probably be a hundred. I knew about rabbits.

“Well, do your best to round them all up, OK?”

I decided to get out of there before someone told me there was a cow in the boys’ washroom. As I passed, I had to look. Nope, no cow. But there was a chicken sitting in one of the sinks, and a small pig getting a drink out of one of the urinals.

I kept walking.

Having several classes to teach, I managed to stay away from Mindy’s classroom for most of the morning. I was occasionally distracted by the occasional bunny rabbit hopping by my doorway, and one of the ferrets (or were they weasels) stuck its head in

the door, and only disappeared when I threw a chalkboard brush at it. But other than that, the morning was quite uneventful.

It was during noon recess that things started to go bad.

I first knew there was some sort of problem when I heard a loud bellow from somewhere in the vicinity of Darren's office. Of course, I had to see what was going on. When I stuck my head in the door, I immediately noticed the goat standing on Darren's desk. I'm pretty observant. I noticed it right away. The goat was eating Darren's lunch. Darren was watching it, and he wasn't looking very happy.

Bonnie came screaming into the office. Bonnie doesn't scream very often, so when she does, we usually notice.

"Someone let all the animals loose. They're everywhere. Snakes. Mice. Rabbits. Weasels."

So they were weasels.

I was pretty sure the mouse problem would take care of itself, what with all the weasels, cats and snakes on the loose. I hoped the owners of the little rodents weren't too attached to them.

"OK, let's start rounding them up!" I noticed that the office was full of people, and the doors had been slid shut.

"Are you crazy?" It was Kate. "There are hundreds of mice out there in the hallways. I'm staying right here!"

"Well, I don't think there are *hundreds* ..."

"And snakes! Don't forget the snakes!" That was Bonnie. "We aren't going anywhere!"

"And I really can't stand weasels!" Wait a minute. That was Mindy!

"Mindy, what are you doing in here? You're in charge of this ... you have to deal with it!"

"I wasn't counting on weasels. You're on your own. I'm staying right here!"

Kathleen was in here too. "Kathleen ... what are *you* afraid of?"

"Me? I'm not afraid of anything. But all that pig poop in the hallway is making me nauseous!"

Pig poop?

I looked at Darren. He'd just come out of his office. "Well, I guess you and I will have to ..."

Darren looked at me a little sheepishly. "Mindy says there's at least one chicken out there ..."

"Darren is terrified of chickens" Kate explained. "Unless they're cooked."

Things weren't looking up. Like an East Indian friend of mine used to say: "I am thinking we are now in deep excrement". Yes, indeed.

So I headed out to round up all the critters.

The pigs were easy. There were two of them, and I lured them out of the boot room with a piece of sandwich. They squealed as I stuffed them back into their cage. Too bad.

I found the snake just in time. He had one of the goats cornered in the washroom, and he was looking mighty hungry. I stuffed him into a bag, and grabbed the goat at the same time. I didn't stuff the goat in the bag. But part of me really wanted to. Just to see what would happen.

Goats smell really bad. Did you know that?

I didn't know what to do about the mice. I figured we'd be hearing screams off and on for the rest of the week. Maybe they'd all be gone after Christmas.

We never did find the weasels. Maybe the cats got them. I didn't tell Mindy. Let her be surprised one snowy morning in January. I was looking forward to it. I can be so vindictive sometimes.

I spent half an hour chasing the chicken down the hallways. I finally cornered it in the woodworking room, and pounced on it. I was beginning to suspect that they didn't pay me enough to do my job.

One by one I managed to round up the rest of the animals and return them to their owners. Except for the bunnies. They were everywhere.

But with help from the grade one class, who saw bunny hunting as a big adventure, eventually most of them ended up in various boxes and bags in Mindy's room.

But we still had to get rid of them.

It was now well past three o'clock in the afternoon. We decided to send everybody home a little early. We got busy stuffing bunny rabbits into kids' lunch bags and backpacks. Darren wanted to take three of them, but at the last minute he remembered

that Kate had allergies, so he snuck them into Kathleen's briefcase when she wasn't looking.

Val put two rabbits in everybody's vehicle. I got the ones that looked like muskrats. I think they *were* muskrats.

Melanie was in that afternoon. We weren't sure whether she'd come for a visit, or to help out, or whether she was just skipping classes at college. She'd been hiding out in the staffroom. It was the pigs. Apparently she doesn't get along with pigs. Unless they're barbecued.

But we gave her four bunnies. She kept protesting that she didn't really think she was allowed to keep bunnies where she lived, but we talked her into sending them to Michelle. Olds College probably had lots of room for bunnies.

In fact, maybe we could mail them some ...