



**A short story**

**by**

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Thirty-five years an educator, ten years a principal, and, yep, both the schools I led soared in the rankings.

You want to know what makes a good high school teacher?

Let me tell you about my first.

Not *that* first! My first school prom as a *teacher*.

Come to think of it, my first of the other sort *should* have been after *my* school ball as a dumb eighteen year-old.

Word got back to me that I offended my date, Mary-Anne Palmer, by leaving her cold when she made a pass at me.

*She made a pass at me? When was that? How did I miss it?*

I'd have given just about anything to see Mary-Anne's ... well, this isn't that sort of story.

Anyway, back to the early days of my professional career. Still wet behind the ears, six months out of uni — here I was, gifting teenagers the benefit of my extraordinary talent and insight until my professional sports career took off, and all I got for my sage advice and demonstrations of elite football skill were snickers and rolled eyes. I was a rising WA Football League star only a few years older than them. Dammit, I was cool.

And Sharon Kielty was one of the students. She set off every guilty instinct that comes from having a Down's Syndrome sibling.

Sharon went through Cannington High with the same bewildered innocence my sister took to school.

Remember Cannington in those days? The Year 12s bought their drugs from the Year 8s.

Sharon had to be on the autism spectrum. I'm certain. Somewhere between 'doesn't qualify for an in-class teaching aid' and 'no one gives a crap'.

If it wasn't the class asshole, Callum Frazer, hiding her lunch box, or making her cry by mocking things she said, right in her face in a dopey accent, it was the dimwit head girl's patronising, 'Oh, come and sit with us, Sharon, we are so inclusive'.

Watching it go down without being able to change anything for Sharon— my hands tied by teacher-student protocol, understanding at last what my sister had been through — well, it just about killed me.

I burned to do something for Sharon. For all the wrong reasons. To make up for what I should have done a few years earlier. When my sister suffered, I was a couple of years ahead in school and perfectly capable of banging some heads together, but I didn't because I was embarrassed by her disability.

I heard in the staff room that Sharon had been invited to the Year 12 Graduation Class Prom. My colleagues were so excited, 'how wonderful for her'. The saps. They had no idea.

We know what happens at the prom — and I don't mean pre-marital fornication in smelly panel vans — that would be bad enough, but, for Sharon, I'm seeing the full Stephen King, *Carrie*, horror show.

So, I got myself on the chaperone team and prowled on the fringe of the action like Marshall Matt Dillon sniffing out a saloon brawl.

Sharon clutched her corsage and beamed at the couples on the dance floor, swaying to the music, pretty in a pale blue dress just a little bit too large for her. Her date, I can't remember the dropkick's name, ditched Sharon in the first five minutes to hang out with his mates ogling the popular girls in the hope that one of them would burst out of her barely-there gown.

But this isn't that sort of a story.

Then the asshole Callum saunters up and asks Sharon to dance.

I know what's coming. Well, not exactly, but whatever it is, Sharon will be humiliated, destroyed on her biggest day.

The head girl is across the floor with her cronies, pointing and exclaiming. Salivating at the prospect of another Sharon Kielty train wreck, but making sure everyone knew how appropriately appalled she was.

I reached for the restraints which I wished I had strapped to my hip because I would so love to cuff Callum Frazer and march him out the door.

I took two steps to sort it out.

But Ben and Jerry got in my way.

Ben McPherson and Jercinta Winfield. Bible-thumping do-gooders with glowing haloes who preached love and understanding to the deaf ears of their classmates. There are one or two in every cohort, but these guys were an extreme form of the species.

Anyway, scrawny little Ben marched up to Callum and tapped him on the shoulder — cutting in. He had to reach up a foot.

Callum's about to rip his chest out. I'm looking for a shovel to scoop up the body parts, when Jercinta steps into Callum's arms and steers him into the crowd. She did a good job holding the toerag at bay until she could escape at the end of the song. Jercinta would have done all right in the ruck with those elbows.

Ben and Sharon stayed on the floor until the next band break. She put her head on his shoulder in the slow song. Ben and Jercinta exchanged compassionate grins over Sharon's back.

Courage and class.

Ben took Sharon back to her table and held hands with Jercinta for the King and Queen of the Ball announcement.

At this stage, I've shifted my votes to Ben and Jerry.

They didn't win. The King was — nope, can't recall — the usual suspect. Footy captain or whatever.

Queen of the Ball — Sharon Kielty.

And every hyper-sensitive, over-protective urge I've ever had fired into megadrive.

She's gasping, hand at her throat, hyperventilating, about to pop with misguided joy.

Everyone's pointing to the stage.

My heart's stopped dead while I wait for pig's blood to come crashing down from the ceiling.

I'm on the move again. There's no way I'm going to let that happen. But the headmistress, old Bev Gardener — remember her? She grabbed my arm and said, "Where are you going?"

Wise girl, Bev.

She held me up just long enough for the head girl to crown Sharon.

The cheering just about lifted the roof off that gym.

The fix was in. I found out later Ben and Jerry organised it.

So, what's the moral of this fairy tale, you ask?

I've never had much time for religion, for churches, but, I have all the time in the world for christianity. Note the small 'c' there folks. That's what I call living to a moral code, the ten commandments or maybe the Hippocratic Oath — do no harm.

It took me a while, but Sharon's prom night kept coming back to me.

After five or six years, I realised I wasn't superior to the clumsy slobs I taught. When I gave it a chance, I was stunned how many kids — Cannington kids! — turned out to be christians under all that emotional angst and defiant 'please-like-me' posturing.

That's when I stopped handing out unsolicited suggestions — hectoring the poor sods, let's be honest — or trying to impress them with goal kicking displays. What a waste of time that was!

I tried giving them a little space to show their worth, taking satisfaction when kids I'd known — maybe helped a tiny, tiny bit — turned out to be good, kind people.

I loved being a teacher from then on.

Gobshites like Callum Frazer?

No, I never worked that out.

Nature or nurture? No contest. Rotten people are born evil, nothing will nurture it out of them, and they reach a particular level of douchebag at puberty.

All you can do is contain the damage, I reckon.

The world needs more Ben and Jerry!