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A Staten Island Education

BY HILENE FLANZBAUM

[Author's Note: *Although everything else in the article is true, (to the best of my knowledge), I have changed the names of the faculty and staff at P.S. 22R.*]

The first day that I wore my new peace button to school, my sixth-grade teacher Mr. O'Hara told me to take it off. Never permitted to deliberately disobey a teacher, I did as instructed. I unpinned it and put it in my desk where I could still see it, a hot pink bird's claw inhabiting a shiny black background. That night, I told my parents what Mr. O'Hara had forced me to do, and my father—a man who never lost his temper—shouted at me: "You are to wear that peace button tomorrow, and if he tells you to take it off, tell him that your father told you he forbids you to take it off. And if he wants, then send you to the principal's office!" He finished dryly, "Go." At that moment, my father had reached the limit of what he would tolerate as a parent of a child who attended Staten Island public schools.

In 1967, our family was not prepared for the political, religious, or social conservatism of Staten Island. Lost, leftist Brooklynites, we had crossed the newly built Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and landed in the reddest, most politically right district seemingly within 500 miles of New York City. Even today, in the bluest city, in one of the traditionally blue states in the country, the borough usually votes Republican. Although technically part of the City, culturally, in 1967—and some might argue even now—Staten Island might have been as far away from Brooklyn as Nebraska. "If you're gonna live on Staten Island, you have to learn to talk 'high school football



Hilene in the sixth grade. Photo courtesy of the author.

and septic," advised my friend, who had moved from the West Village to Grimes Hill, a posh area on the Island. But for

my parents—teachers who needed to stay in the City, second-generation Americans and first-generation homebuyers—Staten

Island was the only affordable place to get four bedrooms, a small yard, and an attached garage.

As public school teachers and also parents of school-age children, my mother and father experienced the current of the borough's backwardness mainly through its school system. From the start, I had trouble at P.S. 22R, but so did my father. An immigrants' son who had risen from poverty to barely middle class through attendance and employment in the City's public schools, my father could be cynical about almost anything, but he thought of teaching as a holy calling and thought of the New York City public education as a panacea to social inequality, injustice, and oppression. That was, until we moved to Staten Island.

2.

Six feet two inches tall and 30 pounds overweight, my sixth-grade teacher Mr. O'Hara carried all his girth in his gut. His belly hung out over his belt in a way that made him proud; often the shirt button right over his belt had opened, and we could see his t-shirt beneath. He wore ties that got lost on the wide expanse of his stomach. He compulsively ran his finger between the tie and his shirt, as if he were trying to rip it off, and just barely constraining himself. In fact, that compulsion is an apt metonym for all the whole of him—he seemed about to burst at the seams.

Mr. O'Hara had the kind of pale Irish complexion that easily flushed and became progressively more highly colored with each passing phase of excitement. As he spoke, he grew a little pocket of spit on the side of his mouth. No older than 35, probably closer to 30, he had buck teeth and a crew cut. He kept a flask in the bottom drawer of the right side of his desk—though I did not know then what he was drinking. It would be years before I would smell that same smell somewhere else and connect it to the sixth grade. As if all that weren't intolerable enough, he was a card-carrying member of the John Birch Society. It was 1970, and although I was only 11 years old, I saw myself as a torchbearer for

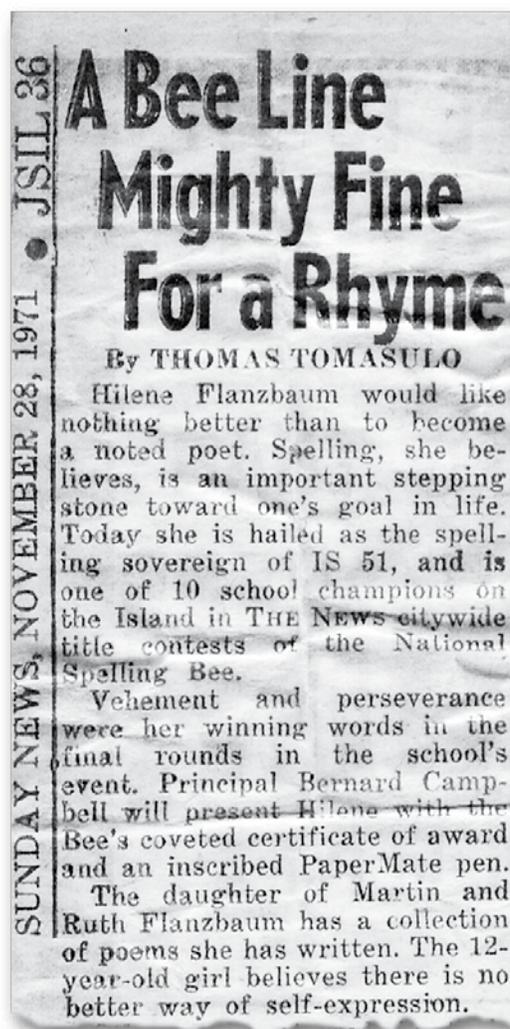
Woodstock Nation. Every afternoon when I got home from school, I played Jimi Hendrix's version of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

I wish I could say Mr. O'Hara hated me as much as I detested him—but that would not be the truth. Through it all, and I mean all, he retained affection for me—tinged with anger and frustration and a truly deep bewilderment—but affection, nonetheless. I was his project. He just really didn't understand how a girl, smart and pretty and well mannered, could be so terribly mixed up about things. Like a lot of people of the era, the political turmoil drove him into a kind desperate rage. Unlike many others, however, he had a captive audience—a classroom in which he could repetitively and excitedly elaborate his views. He paced quickly around the room, his footsteps heavy, his hands clasped behind his back. "Polarized," he fumed. "The two sides of this country are polarized.

The youth have declared war on the decent citizens of this country." He told us that we had to respect the great men who were sacrificing their lives for their county. He badgered us, "Weren't the demonstrators disrespectful? Wild? Out of control? Undeserving of the greatest nation in the world? Shouldn't flag burners and draft-card burners be put in jail? (He didn't say bra burners, but I knew he meant them, too.) His sermons (and the dot of spit at the corner of his lip) are what I remember most about the sixth grade. He told us over and over again why the youth movement was wrong, and why, if we left Vietnam, the communists would take over the world.

After May 4th, the Kent State shootings

drove my teacher to an even wilder frenzy. He bellowed, he fumed, and he preached to us the reasons that the National Guard had been forced to kill those four students at Kent State. College students were trying to take over the country. They had to be stopped—the youth of this country had to be taught a lesson. He had the class answering him, both as individuals and in chorus. He would look at a child in the room and ask his litany of questions: "Do you think the National Guardsmen should be held responsible for those murders?" "No," Mr. O'Hara answered his own question, and then the class repeated, "No, Mr. O'Hara." "Didn't those students break the law?" "Yes, Mr. O'Hara." "Isn't the Na-



Newspaper clipping from 1971, announcing Hilene's win in a school spelling bee, one of 10 on Staten Island in the "citywide title contests of the National Spelling Bee. Vehement and perseverance were her winning words..."

tional Guard supposed to protect the decent citizens of this country?”

He wasn't saying these kids deserved to die, you understand; he was only saying that they were asking for it, weren't they? If you break the law, you should expect to be punished, right? Wasn't that right? Didn't we agree? And the class answered in unison—*almost*.

For the three of four of us who did not answer with enough of the required zeal, he reserved special torture—you became subject to even worse grilling—but it was a perverse kind of inquisition; it contained enough humor to keep the other students amused. “Don't you agree with me?” Mr. O'Hara would say, “I'm right,” he continued, “or else my name isn't Abercrombie Alowishus MacGillicutty Smith?” He puckered his thick lips out like a guppie. His nostrils flared. It was altogether disgusting, but when I looked around, most of my classmates were laughing.

I was afraid to contradict him, but he knew I did not agree with him—and this provoked him. He aimed much of his oratory directly at me; he understood I was a smart kid, and he made it his goal to swing me over to his side. We spent an entire year battling each other. On my side, the battle was mostly silent. I didn't say yes, but I couldn't say no, either. Despite the nasty situation into which I had been thrust, I could no more talk back to a teacher than I could have to my father. Even if my parents knew O'Hara was jerk, they would never have supported me if I had shown disrespect. They knew I was having a hard time, and that my teachers were know-nothings—still, the proper response was to grin and bear it—at least that's what they had told me in the fifth grade, when the shit had first hit the fan.

3.

In the fifth grade, my teacher had been Mary Walsh, a grandmotherly woman, who, I overheard my parents say, did not “have a real college degree.” In her cardigan sweaters, floral blouses, and sensible shoes, Mrs. Walsh looked like she would not hurt a living thing. She bored me in-

sensate; she did nothing but stand at the board and put assignments on it: “Do now: complete pages 20–50 in your workbook.” I would finish quickly and then try to think of something entertaining to do, and my parents told me not to be too conspicuous, just bring a book to read quietly at my desk. Mrs. Walsh pretended not to notice. It was easier for both of us that way. But she didn't like it or me; that much was clear.

In the beginning of the fifth grade, New York City teachers had their now famous strike: it lasted 100 days—the longest in that city's history. The strike turned the City, but also our family life, upside down. First and foremost, my parents worried, of course, because they had no money; they had received their last paychecks at the end of June and would not receive more until the strike ended. Second, my father had been elected the Chapter Chairman of his school, which meant he led the teacher's union at his school: he picketed every single day, as well as provided morale for his fellow members, who were all as broke as we were. Around the City, teacher support for the strike was close to 90 percent but in Staten Island, not nearly as much.

Mrs. Walsh was a scab—someone who had reported for work even though Union teachers picketed in front of the school. My parents sorted through the numbers of strikers vs. scabs on Staten Island, and in general, were not happy. About P.S. 22, though, they were scandalized—there, the strikers just barely outnumbered the scabs. As children, we feel our parents' likes and dislikes with such force; still, I am not mistaken in thinking my parents furious on the subject of scabs. From them, I understood that being a scab was like being a criminal. No, worse—they said *scab* the same way my grandmother hissed the name “Hitler.”

In November, the teachers and the City finally settled, and the negotiators, the Board, and the Union decided that all that missed school would have to be made up. We would be in school from eight to four, instead of nine to three. My parents jumped at the opportunity to get back

some of their lost wages; Mrs. Walsh, however, did not share their exuberance. To her credit, she generously excused lots of bad student behavior, resulting from the especially long school day: “I know we're all under a lot of stress,” she would rationalize. According to her, we were “bearing the brunt of other people's foolishness.” Mrs. Walsh did not believe in labor unions.

Because I was a clandestine reader and the daughter of Union members, Mrs. Walsh had two good reasons to hate me. Even so, it seems clear that her breakdown couldn't have been completely my fault, rather more what I represented. Staten Island was changing, and her classroom reflected it. Six transplanted Brooklynites—four Jewish girls all who lived in my housing development, Richmond Country Estates, and two Jewish boys from nearby developments—dotted her classroom horizon. There we sat—the new kids—eager to be energetically and rigorously taught, and she was just too old to change her ways. Maybe she should have retired the previous June, as she had originally planned—because, though it may have seemed cataclysmic at the time, my provocation, in retrospect, actually seems quite small.

Mrs. Walsh caught me passing notes while she was writing vocabulary words on the blackboard. Enraged way beyond what the infraction warranted, she asked me to stand up and read the note aloud to the class. Mortified and red-faced, I read this one short sentence I had written only for my fellow Brooklynites' eyes: “These words are so easy.” Then she told me to sit down, and she went into what I might today recognize as a hypertensive rage; in fact, if I had been 30 years old instead of 10, I would have known enough to worry about her health. The first thing she made me do was prove that I did know all the vocabulary words—she asked me to go down the list and define them, one by one. I felt no sense of triumph; I blinked back tears. I had never gotten into trouble in school, never even been scolded. I was a good girl, widely appreciated for being a smart girl, and relatively shy. So the moment where

I had to decide whether or not I should actually define these words—or whether I should stand there silently and continue to look apologetic—constituted a personal crisis. Should I obey and be perceived as arrogant and obnoxious? Or should I ignore her request and directly disobey? Thankfully, my meditation on this point was cut short when she hissed, “Never mind. Why don’t you just tell us what the word *disdain* means? Do you know what the word *disdain* means? Or do you need to look it up?” I cannot remember whether I needed to or not, but when she handed me my dictionary, I did. “Come to the front of the room and read the definition to the class,” she told me. She could not have devised a more effective torture.

After I finished reading, my voice breaking, Mrs. Walsh continued, “Do you know you treat everything and everyone in this classroom with disdain? Admit that you think that you are better than everyone in this room.” Luckily, she did not wait for me to admit anything; she just hurled forward, at first focusing exclusively on me and my disdain, and then broadening the attack to my friend and other Brooklynite disdainers, calling us disrespectful, ill-mannered, and conceited. I cannot remember now, nor could I that very afternoon when telling my parents, any other specifics of her painful diatribe. I just remember that she became increasingly unhinged, and that all six of us were frightened and similarly shaken up when we gathered in the lunchroom that day. Even the native Islanders, who partially blamed us for the conflagration, had been terrified. When Mrs. Walsh did not return to the classroom after lunch, nor the next day, which was a Friday, I knew for certain that I had done something unforgivable. My parents worried that she had had a stroke.

The following Monday, however, she came back—much quieter and much more hateful. When she put up the vocabulary words, she also put up “challenge” words, for those of us who wanted an extra challenge, meaning, of course, me and my cohorts. Among that first group of chal-

lenge words, I found the word “ghetto.” I had thought I knew the meaning of this word—but was surprised to learn that our little *Webster’s* defined it as a place not where the underclass lived, as I had thought previously, but where Jews resided. Was this word related to our reading that week? I have no idea. Did Mrs. Walsh deliberately look for a word to demean us as a group? Forty years later, it seems clear that she did. Our little group of six had formed a ghetto in her classroom. It was her way of telling us that she was better than we were, and that we should return to the Brooklyn ghettos, or better yet, the Polish *shtetls*, from which we emerged.

Back at Richmond Country Estates, the four Jewish families buzzed about the incident, and my friends and I felt vindicated. To have actually been victims of anti-Semitism (of which we had always heard about, but never experienced)—well, this was more than our average complaints—this was real news. Surely now, we could expect our parents to rise up in protest. We couldn’t be asked to tolerate this. Mrs. Walsh would get into big trouble, maybe even be fired. But none of that happened. No one complained; no one accused her of anti-Semitism. Since we had moved to Staten Island, though, I had started to hear my mother whisper “*unte-semi?*” under her breath every week or so. “The Irish have always hated the Jews,” she blithely informed me. Nothing could be done. There was nothing to do but sit there and take it.

4.

So there I was, in the sixth grade, taking it. Little did I know what it was costing my parents, especially my father, to stay mum. When I was in the sixth grade, he was only 37, not nearly old enough to have forgotten the days he had spent campaigning for Henry Wallace. He practiced resistance first in January of that year, when the New York City Board of Education relaxed the dress code, permitting boys to take off their ties and girls to wear pants to school. My girlfriends and I greeted this news as if the Berlin Wall had fallen; we never would have believed that such a thing could hap-

pen in our lifetimes. But to others, especially Mr. O’Hara, such a change indicated that civilization had indeed fallen to the barbarians. He didn’t like girls in pants, and he told us plainly that he didn’t care what the Board of Education said—no girl would wear pants in his classroom. When I told my parents this, my father made no comment, but I knew I was going to wear pants to school, soon. My mother uttered her usual sage and fatalistic pronouncement at this moment: “He’s a nut,” she said.

The first day I wore pants to school, I was more interested in my classmates’ reactions than Mr. O’Hara’s. No one could believe I had done it—so brazenly disobeyed him. Looking back at it, I can’t believe I was willing to weather that storm—even with my father and “the law” on my side. At first, Mr. O’Hara looked confused. His expression seemed to ask, “How could I do this to him?” He seemed legitimately upset on my behalf, almost as if he had found out something new and terrible about my character—like I had once been a streetwalker. But in a few minutes, he recovered and returned to his more typical state of irritation. He threatened to send me home, or to the principal’s office, or to have me expelled. But when I went to the principal’s office, he had in his hand a new ruling from the Board of Education that expressly permitted girls to wear pants, as long as they were neat and not blue jeans. With much regret, Mr. Finkenbeiner sent me back to class. And Mr. O’Hara stopped fighting that battle.

The bigger battle was just around the corner. When my father told me not to take off the peace button, I knew what I was facing, and I was glad. A child of leftists who watched the Democratic convention in 1968 with rage and frustration, I listened to Dylan’s “Masters of War,” like a religious ritual and didn’t turn the stereo down or shut my door when Country Joe McDonald screamed, “What’s that spell? What’s that spell?” (“The Fish Cheer/I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag”). I was nervous, but I took it as my contribution to

the anti-war movement not to back down from a confrontation. It would be my own personal sit-in. So, when Mr. O'Hara told me that next day to take off my peace button, I said, just as I had been instructed, "No."

A few seconds of silence and then, "What?" he sputtered, the spit flying from his mouth. I had disagreed with him before but never been disrespectful. "No," I repeated. "My father told me not to take it off, and I am not going to."

His color rose so fast it looked like he had just gotten the measles. Off I went to the principal's office, which at that school constituted my second home. Due to overcrowding (too many Brooklynites!), the fifth and sixth grades were housed in portable metal classrooms that looked like large iron pods with rounded roofs that would be better suited to aliens than schoolchildren. With Mr. O'Hara at my side, I walked through an icy courtyard to get to the main building. He had finally been stunned into silence; my heart was beating out of my chest. When we got to the principal's office, Mr. Finkenbeiner, the decrepit old man who probably wished he, too, had retired before all the Brooklynites arrived, told me to do as my Mr. O'Hara told me to and take off the peace button.

I steeled myself for my next act of civil disobedience. I knew what I had to do: I continued to refuse. To further frighten me, Mr. Finkenbeiner told me he would have to call my parents. "Is your mother at home?" he asked. "No," I replied, "she's teaching." "Call my father," I offered. Mr. Finkenbeiner swallowed; suddenly, he understood that we were at war. He knew my father was a grade advisor at Susan Wagner High School, and the old man had gotten wind of some of his earlier complaints. "I think he wants to talk to you," I offered timidly. No one said, "Uh, oh," but my words fell down like a gauntlet slapped to the ground. "Go back to class, Kevin," he said to Mr. O'Hara. "I'll take care of this," Finkenbeiner said, probably thinking it best to remove one of the gladiators from the field.

When my father arrived, Mr. Finkenbeiner magically disappeared, like the little troll he was. He had left my father with the assistant principal, who always took over when our family was involved: the unofficial policy, perhaps, was that the Jews should talk to each other. Sam Goldman, a nice enough man, had stepped in once before when my father had arrived to question a Neanderthal school policy—when my father found out that kids were not allowed to read, or do homework, while waiting in the auditorium for the school bus. Sometimes we waited as long as 45 minutes—and we just had to sit there, without "moving a muscle." My parents found this policy idiotic, and my father had come to school to ask why such restrictions were necessary: "Surely, reading is something the school might want to encourage," he reasoned. Mr. Goldman had replied that there was too much noise and confusion to have children constantly shuffling papers, and losing things, and repacking schoolbooks, etc. My father may have laughed out loud at his answer; nonetheless, they reached a truce. The school did not change that policy, but the teachers left me alone when I read. This was the way Mr. Goldman dealt with my family: He would not change the rules for me; he would just suggest that teachers look the other way at my infractions.

In this instance, though, he was no happier to see my father than Mr. Finkenbeiner would have been. This would be a fight to the finish. Neither my father, nor Mr. O'Hara, seemed inclined to look the other way. And Mr. Goldman had to mediate. He said all the right things: he knew "Mr. O'Hara was unreasonable, but couldn't we just accommodate him just this once? Wouldn't it be easier for all of us?" I could "wear the button in the cafeteria if I wanted to." My father, for the first time not particularly cordial to a fellow educator, and not particularly interested in the easier path, held his ground. I could tell that the argument had ceased being about his daughter but was instead about his belief in NYC public education. He had

spent too many years believing in it and working for it to fold to these cretins who would, if they could, turn the system into a haven for reactionaries and tyrants. "In what universe do educators have the right to suppress political opinions?" he wanted to know. "This wasn't a Catholic school," he reminded them, "it is a public school and dissent would have to be tolerated." If Finkenbeiner didn't like it, he could expel me—but they should know that he was prepared to fight it. He would call the Board and the ACLU if they forced him to. He would go to the Supreme Court. I had a legal right to wear the button and I would wear it. Had no one in this school ever read the Bill of Rights?"

Sitting in my familiar spot, on the wooden bench under the time clock, I didn't hear Mr. Goldman's response. After that day though, I wore the peace button to school everyday; pretty soon the other Jewish kids wore them, too. Mr. O'Hara had to take it. For the rest of the term, he bullied and blasted us, took shots of whiskey from his drawer, and drooled about the collapse of civilization. In my neatly pressed pants, and black and pink peace button, I stared down at my desk and thought about Junior High. The revolution had begun. ▼



Hilene Flanzbaum lived in Staten Island until she was 17 when she left for college. Her parents lived there until 2006. Currently, she directs the Master's Program in Creative Writing at Butler University in Indianapolis. Her poems, essays, and literary criticism have appeared in various magazines, including *O!* (*The Oprah Magazine*), *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, *Ploughshares*, and many others. She is the co-editor of *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*. Photo of author with her dog, Millie, by Maggie Sweeney.

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