

Guilty by Reputation (continued)

Hands in my pockets, silently whistling a tune I stepped from the shadows of the office. It was quiet in the school. I expected the hallway to be empty of students, but hustling towards me, a long way from his classroom, was Marvelous Marvin. A wicked grin played on his freckled face. He looked hither and yon, jumped into the air to get a view out of the hallway window.

So oblivious was he of my presence that when I called out to him, “Marvin, why did you do it?” he jumped backward. His face looked like one who had seen a monster or who was struck suddenly by a guilty conscience. Feeling a little pity for the boy I continued to tease him, but this time in a much softer voice. “Aw, Marvin, why did you have to do that?”

He had collected himself. His eyes twinkled in absolute innocence and he said, “I didn’t do it, honestly.” Marvin had a habit of half whistling his words when he was in a jam, and he now whistled like a starling.

I had been pulling his leg, but now my suspicion was aroused. “Don’t give me that, Marvin,” I said in my best stern voice.

“No kidding, sir. I didn’t do it. I might have been there, but I didn’t do it.”

My mind started to race. That something had gone foul was clear. What it was, Marvin knew. Hearing him call me sir deepened my conviction that Marvin had been the engineer of whatever it was that had happened. I was playing for time to think of a way to get Marvin to tell me where the fire was. I stepped closer to him and whispered in a knowing way, “You and I know exactly what’s happened and who made it happen, Marvin.”

It was still early in the morning. This was no recess shenanigan I was groping to find out about. Not having received any training in my Master’s program on how to keep Marvin thinking that I knew what had happened, and at the same time have him lead me to the foul deed, I wondered briefly how a politician would have handled this delicate issue. “You’re going to show me right now what you didn’t do, and I’m going to show you what part of the mess is yours,” I said.

To use a word like mess is always good strategy in situations like this one. By its very vagueness it can describe a thousand sins. It seemed to have its desired effect now.

“O.K., but you gotta believe me, I was only there,” he said and led the way to the boys change room across the gym floor, a place out of bounds for kids except when supervised by a teacher.

Before he swung the first door open he looked at me and gave a little shake with his head that said, “It’s in there.” He used both his hands to push the second door open like a magician who was about to astound his viewers with something spectacular.

A scene of white hit my eyes. Everywhere I looked ribbons of toilet paper fluttered in the breeze created by the draft of the closing door. They hung from the light fixtures, the shower stalls; even the thermostat box had white streamers hanging from it. A vague memory stirred within me of an episode when I was about ten years old.

I shook my head trying to look sad and said, as if I had been wounded to the core, “Didn’t you promise me just last week that you were turning over a new page? I got to hand it to you though; you found a place for every scrap of toilet paper, all six rolls of them.”

Marvin danced and whistled, “Honestly, sir, I didn’t do this!” He threw up his arms in a desperate attempt to convince me.

It was a stretch to believe him, because of Marvin’s reputation, but when he was guilty, he always shed buckets of tears with his steadfast denials. This time I saw no tears. To keep the boy talking I shook my head like I had been terribly led down by him and moaned, “Man this sure looks like your work.”

“No, it’s not mine!” He now spoke much louder and with more desperation. “It’s Tommy’s and Joey’s, and Garth said to do all the rolls.”

I remained silent for some time. His demonstrations seemed genuine. There were no tears, and all I had to the contrary was the silent scene before me and his reputation. I had to believe him. I also had three names. The truth would be verified, I was sure. More than likely there would be three helpers for the custodian after school. Still, I didn’t want to make it totally easy on Marvin. After all, he was there.

“I don’t know, Marvin,” I said trying to sound undecided. “I can’t help seeing you on top of those shower partitions having a ball and throwing this stuff over the lights.

“Honest, I didn’t. I was standing right here.” He pointed to a spot near the door. “If I had done it, I’d have done the girls’ room too.”

How could I argue with that evidence, knowing Marvin’s reputation?