ESSAY

Silence

by Johan Smits



"Mask" by bad futa

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It was during that era when Michael Jackson introduced his moonwalk, Madonna pretended to be a virgin and Oprah first aired her TV show. It was the rise of AIDS, home computers, the Walkman and shoulder pads, while the news was dominated by Reagan, Thatcher, and Gorbachev — even in little Belgium, Europe, where I attended high school in the 1980s. A catholic all-boys school with a firm reputation for solid education. I've heard it has since turned into a mixed gender school, now representing a diversity that stretches beyond my era's mostly white-skinned population of supposedly straight, God-fearing boys.

Back then, visions were narrower and expectations set high. Prestige — and by extension, respect — was linked to chosen subject matter. Boys studying Latin and Greek occupied the top of the academic ladder, just above the ones who predominantly studied mathematics and other sciences. Then came my cohorts, who studied a 'lighter' mix of sciences with some humanities thrown in, and finally, at the bottom of the ladder, those who had mostly Economics added to humanities. We're not even beginning to address the poor souls in other schools that had chosen vocational training, or those in state-run schools whose reputations were overall poor. To us they were simply losers.

It should not have come as a surprise then, that two particular teaching subjects — physical education and music — were generally regarded as a waste of time or, at best, an opportunity for a bit of diversion. That they were being taught at all, was because they featured on the state's curriculum of compulsory subject matter, even if it was only for an hour a week. Equally unsurprising — when I come to think of it now — was that those two teachers, the gym and music teacher, would get away with occasionally landing a mighty slap on the face of some unruly boy. Although two very different characters, both men shared an imposing physical presence. The gym teacher was all muscle and clearly not someone to be messed with. His authority surfaced quite naturally, oozing out of him alongside his abundant testosterone. The music teacher, by contrast, was a clergyman — the only one at our school — also the canon of the city's cathedral and who conducted the cathedral's all-boy choir. He too was imposing. Heavy, tall, serious and, in general, unsatisfied. The man never smiled, and when he made an attempt of it, it always derailed into a grimace. You didn't mess with him either. Now, don't get me wrong, we didn't necessarily respect these two teachers. We'd deride them all the same, but only behind their backs, since taunting them to their faces was not regarded as courageous, but stupid.

Imagine our excitement then, when one day, a new music teacher was hired, to allow the canon to devote himself more fully to his ecclesiastical duties. Mr. Loden was his name, which, I now realize, must have been a nickname, for the coincidence would have been too stark: he always wore the same, heavy, dark-green loden, no matter what type of weather it

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was outside. Or could it be that his name really was Loden and he had chosen to wear that namesake garment as some kind of statement or affirmation of his being? I find myself wondering now. At the time though this question didn't even cross our fifteen-year-old minds. We were way too eager and impatient to try out this new target and explore how far we could push him. An opportunity had finally arisen to turn our deadly-boring weekly hour of music instruction, hitherto inflicted on us by that terrorist priest, into our rightfully-earned rarefied moment of entertainment. A time where we could let off steam and be free, until surrendering once again to the irritating enigma of algebra or the boring interpretations of history. Mr. Loden, therefore, was a godsend.

Our expectations exceeded from day one. Less than thirty minutes into his first class with us, Mr. Loden had himself firmly placed, in our eyes, within the category of loser. Failing quite spectacularly at maintaining order and discipline, he clearly wasn't born to educating. I remember wondering myself, with mirth, why someone like him had bothered to even consider doing what he did.

I estimate he might have been in his early to mid-thirties at the time. In addition to his aforementioned signature loden, his clothes were dull, old-fashioned and we assumed, given his lowly status, probably cheap too. His physical build was average in every way. He was of medium height, of medium weight, had dull hair and was unremarkable in every aspect, apart from that dark-green loden that rarely left his body. The only thing about him that felt different, was his general demeanor. He exuded a *lonely otherworldliness,* a kind of old-fashionedness that belonged in a past era. Even today I still can't put my finger on it, but it was clear he had been born a little too late. What struck us as funny, almost endearing I would be tempted to say, was his naivete, in the sense he clearly expected us to be respectful, merely because he was a teacher and we were his pupils, as if that were the natural order of things. It was a weakness we were quick to pick up on and exploit with gusto. The more we challenged him, the more he lost control and — our end goal — the more we had a good time. He also struck us as a sensitive being, Mr. Loden, which was yet another weakness we took full advantage of.

"Silence!" He would scream every other minute, sometimes even, to our delight, on the verge of frustration-prompted tears. "Silence!" In the beginning there were two or three kids, usually the brainy ones, who did take Mr. Loden seriously and occasionally posed a sincere question related to the subject matter. In those moments you could literally see his eyes light up with enthusiasm and perhaps, some joy, that from our perspective, almost made him seem human. They soon occurred less and less, those moments, since the more hardcore disruptors among us, did everything in our power to crush them.

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Indeed, Mr. Loden's desire to engage with us inspired us even more into finding yet other ways to taunt him. Some of us would start posing questions with false sincerity, encouraging Mr. Loden in believing that, after all, he might have ignited in his young audience, a little flame of curiosity about his craft, only for that hope to be doused in disruptive laughter or cold sarcasm moments later. "Silence!" he'd scream then, angry and frustrated for having been taken for a ride. For its effect was that Mr. Loden ended up full of suspicion of any perceived interest we expressed, even from those two or three well-meaning boys. Soon those boys, in turn, felt let down too and ended up abandoning their half-hearted attempts at paying attention. After that, Mr. Loden's eyes never lit up again. What did increase, was the frequency of his desperate shouts. "Silence! Silence!"

If all this gives you the impression that our classroom was a mini warzone, then I can assure you that there was never any physical threat or violence involved. We would leave that to those crass losers in vocational schools. No, we regarded ourselves above all that. After all, we belonged to an elite school with a stellar reputation and considered ourselves as being subtler and cleverer. For example, some of the wealthier kids had the habit of leaving a few cents in a plastic cup on Mr. Loden's desk, as one might for a street beggar. We all agreed that this was quite a clever way of making a subtle but nonetheless obvious class statement vis a vis Mr. Loden.

Now, you might ask yourself how on earth Mr. Loden ended up being so provoked and humiliated? There were two reasons for that: The first one had to do with his chosen teaching subject and its low ranking within the academic hierarchy. Together with physical education, music was the only other subject matter which a pupil could completely fail and yet still graduate into the next school year, as long as he achieved decent grades in all the rest. After all, it was argued, what was the use of understanding music when you were studying for a *serious* profession like say, civil engineering or applied economics. Being able to play *Frère Jacques* on the recorder might earn you some popularity as your family's circus monkey at weddings and christenings, but not help you get into a good university later on. Hence, Mr. Loden lacked the metaphorical stick to threaten us with during exam times, which all the other teachers could rely on. Secondly, it also had to do with Mr. Loden's character. Whereas the canon and our gym teacher wouldn't hesitate dishing out some well-aimed face slaps to those with an ambition for disruption, it was clear to us from the onset, that Mr. Loden would never raise his hand against anyone. In the end he decided to try and ignore the disruptions and just carry on, but his was already a lost battle. "Silence!"

It was almost expected then, when one day we were told our music classes were suspended until a suitable replacement for Mr. Loden had been found. Our music teacher, we were told,

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had resigned. Although there circulated a few rumors about ill health — even the word cancer was whispered — we all knew we had simply out battled him. Yet, ours proved to be a pyrrhic victory, for we had now effectively deprived ourselves of our greatest source of entertainment. Luckily though, there was still the prospect of yet again a new, hapless music teacher on which we could pin our hopes.

I saw him one more time, Mr. Loden, outside on the street, several months after his resignation. I found myself in the car with my parents, sitting alone in the back while my father was driving. I spotted him immediately. It was unmistakably our former teacher, still sheltering inside his dark-green loden and, new to me, wearing an old-fashioned felt hat. I remember finding it surprising that he should exist outside the confines of the school; that he might have another life. A little bit like seeing a circus clown standing at his doorstep in serious conversation with a neighbor. Yet there he was, talking to a lady. I managed to have a good look at him because my father was driving slowly while searching for a certain shop. His appearance shocked me. He seemed to have lost a lot of weight, which made his heavy loden suddenly look several sizes too big for him, draping off his thin frame like from a children’s coat rack. His eyes were buried deep inside their hollows and his face was drawn of all color. And yet, he was speaking animatedly to the lady, gesturing wildly with his thin arms, as if still full of life. I sat back and lost myself in contemplation. Sunk in silence.

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