

Peter Cooper walked from desk to desk in the empty classroom, laying out worksheets in preparation for the morning lesson. One photocopied worksheet and one pencil per desk. There were six rows of five desks with a further three desks off to the side at the back for the purposes of isolation, something which his off-sider, the other relieving teacher, Chris, liked to call “the time-out zone”. Like a lot of things in the teaching profession, Peter thought, the term smacked faintly of bullshit.

The worksheets were science-related, electronics, simple circuit diagrams and ohms and diodes to keep the students engrossed or at least vaguely interested for the hour or so that the lesson took, not that it ever went for just an hour, not in the three weeks that he’d been there, every day the lessons had a tendency to go way over time.

The main door opened and a line of twelve and thirteen year-old students filed in, flanked on both sides by five security guards, great hulking bouncer types, who took their places against the walls on both sides of the classroom as the students took their seats.

Chris looked at Peter and rolled his eyes as if to say here we go again and Peter made his way to the front of the room past the rows of desks, past disinterested children, some of whom looked up as if to ask what the hell they were supposed to do with the worksheets they had been given, whilst others looked down at their worksheets or stared grimly straight ahead.

Peter started the lesson by explaining the first problem on the worksheet and asking the children to have a go at solving it. He and Chris then walked around the class as the kids worked, moving from desk to desk assisting the students and answering questions, returning to the blackboard to illustrate a point raised by a student for the benefit of the class or sitting at their desks at the front to get on with some marking when the kids were settled and working on their circuit diagrams.

Peter thought back to a time less than a month ago when he was teaching year eight and nine kids, 3rd and 4th formers in the old money, three days a week at the local High School. One morning at interval, Peter was sitting in the staffroom sipping his instant coffee, fresh from the Zip, when the school Principal sat down in the orange moulded plastic chair next to him and asked Peter if he had any other relieving work on.

Peter shook his head, so the Principal told him that there was a relieving position that had just cropped up at the local Juvenile Detention Centre. The father of one of the teachers at the Centre had been taken ill and the teacher had taken compassionate leave. The position would involve teaching maths and science three days a week.

Peter shrugged again and said fine, and to his surprise the Principal got all excited and right then and there offered to drive Peter out to the Centre personally. Peter also found it humorous that on the way out of the admin block to the car the Principal collared a very surprised Head of English and informed

him that he would be taking Peter's next class of year nine science students instead of the rather cushy teacher's prep. spell that the Head of English had lined up for himself.

As they drove out in the Principal's Jag toward the juvenile home, Peter was told that if he accepted the position, he would be on full scale pay instead of the rather stingy half scale that he was on at the High School. Peter's ears pricked up for the first time in the conversation. Full scale pay. This meant twice as much money for the same hours, which in turn meant that he could take an even longer break when this relieving gig finally sputtered out.

So by the next Monday, Peter had started in his new position as a relieving teacher at the juvenile detention home. He found it difficult at first to adjust to the fact that these kids weren't the nice, relatively normal twelve and thirteen year old kids he was used to teaching. These kids were instead a mix of young male skinheads and gang prospects with a few wayward and rather feral girls thrown in for good measure.

It wasn't the kids but was the endless rules, protocols and guidelines that he had to follow which Peter found really hard. The kids were not allowed to draw anything that was gang-related. If they did it was confiscated and they spent the rest of the day in solitary. The kids were allowed to do photocopying as long as it was not gang-related and as long as they were supervised.

The children were awarded gold and silver stars for effort and good behaviour throughout the week and on Friday afternoons a movie would be shown and the kids would be given lollies and sweets based on the number of stars they had attained.

Toward the end of his second week, Peter felt that he was making some progress with his students and singled out one troubled youth named Clarence as a kid who'd really taken an interest in some of the lessons and who Peter thought deserved some encouragement. He'd suggested to the other staff at the lunch table that Clarence should get a gold star for his efforts that week. A few of the staff glanced at one another.

Clarence isn't getting any gold stars, said one staff-member.

Clarence fucks six year-olds, said another.

When Friday afternoon finally rolled around and the lollies were handed out, Peter would often start to question the wisdom of filling these kids full of sugar and inflicting an old rental copy of an action film such as Lethal Weapon III on them, particularly one Friday when a young gang prospect sidled up to him just before the start of the movie and whispered in his ear, "when the lights go out, Mr. Cooper, I'm going to fuck you up the arse". Peter watched the entire film with his eyeballs like stalks, prepared for the least furtive movement in his direction by any of the boys around him.

At the end of the lesson, Peter and Chris collected the worksheets from the students for marking later. All the pencils had to be collected too, this was

another one of the rules. Invariably they were a pencil or two short. Peter or Chris would inform Tau, the senior security guard, that there were pencils missing.

Tau would then inform the class that no-one was going anywhere until the missing pencils were found. Sometimes the pencils would be forthcoming and at other times a rather tiresome blinking contest would develop with the students sitting impassively in their seats and the guards standing in their positions against the walls with their arms folded, with a “we can wait longer than you can wait” expression fixed on their faces.

As the minutes ticked by, Peter and Chris would stand at the front of the class looking uncomfortable, the thought that the record for one of these was something like an hour and a half going around their minds, until WHACK! they were startled by the sound of a student defiantly smacking a pencil down on the desk in front of them.

Today, however, the lesson ended without incident with all pencils being accounted for and no attempt by any of the children to do anything disruptive such as scrawl gang insignia on the back of their worksheets. Peter and Chris were standing at the front of the class congratulating themselves on an uneventful lesson, watching Tau and his colleagues arrange the children in a single line in readiness for the escorted journey back to their cells. The door of the classroom was opened and children and guards were heading towards it

when Peter mentioned off-handedly to Chris that he didn't seem able to find his keys.

The blood drained out of Chris's face and he yelled "STOP!" at the top of his voice. Tau instinctively stood in front of the door to block it and glared at Chris. "This guy can't find his keys," said Chris, pointing at Peter by way of explanation.

Tau looked at Peter who was nervously conferring with Chris and searching his pockets for the fifth time. Every fucking time we get someone new in, something like this happens, he thought.

Tau quickly assessed the situation. Better get Pauline down here, he said to one of his colleagues who acknowledged the instruction with a raised eyebrow and headed off toward the Admin block.

Pauline Fergusson had a great deal of authority and presence not only due to her physical size but also to her experience and temperament. Technically she was only in charge of the administrative functions of the centre but in reality she ran the place. She was a big woman but she was also a kind one. She had three kids of her own so she understood and empathised with the day to day goings on of the juvenile detention facility. These were her kids, whatever they'd done, whatever they would do. She walked down the steps toward B Block forcefully and with a sense of grim determination.

She wore the designated uniform, a blue suit jacket with a gold brooch and a nametag over a loose white blouse. Her skirt reached just below the knee, as wide at the hem as at the waist, its diameter and perpendicularity giving the impression that it had been wrapped around her straight from the bolt. The gold brooch was hers, bought at the local flea market on a distant and far more relaxed Saturday.

She strode into the room and spoke to Tau then looked toward Peter and motioned for him to come over.

When did you last see your keys? She asked.

Peter looked down at his shoes. He had never been very good with things like keys and credit cards. At his last school, the remark was often made about him that he would “forget his balls if they weren’t in a bag”. He also knew that one of the keys on the missing key ring would open the main doors of the detention block. With that key anyone could get out or in.

The last time I remember seeing them, said Peter, was when I took Alicia to use the photocopier and I needed to unlock the door to the resource room.

And then what happened to them? asked Pauline.

I don’t remember, said Peter, I’m really sorry.

Ok, said Pauline, well, you wait for me in the resource room and we’ll talk some more.

Peter walked over to the adjoining resource room and sat at a table next to the photocopier and waited for Pauline. Pauline summoned Alicia and asked her if

she knew where the missing keys were. Alicia shook her head. Pauline then spoke to Tau and directed him to take the children to an adjoining room to be searched.

Pauline knew that if they didn't find the keys before the children were taken back to their cells, the keys would be quickly split up and distributed between the children and eventually smuggled to the outside world. In short, if the keys weren't found every lock in the entire place would have to be changed. Word of such an exercise was bound to leak out to the newspapers and cause embarrassment for the Minister for Prisons.

Tau and the other guards once again organised the children to stand and form a line to be escorted to a room two doors along where they would be cavity searched one by one.

Tau Hohepa came from up North in NZ. Tuhoe country. He could have been a bouncer instead of doing this shit, he thought ruefully. Could have been? Fuck, he was a bouncer back home until an incident at 2am at Shed 5 on the Wellington waterfront ended his career in the security industry. Threw a punter into the water, didn't he? Fucker nearly drowned. Shed 5 to their credit stood by him throughout the ensuing court case.

Tau laughed to himself that the prick didn't fight nearly as much once he hit the water as he had attempted to do on dry land. Shouldn't have built the fucking place so close to the water, should they? Wellington harbour shouldn't be so full



of used condoms and brown trout, should it? Judge didn't see it that way. Six month suspended sentence. Shed 5 said they couldn't offer him employment "under the circumstances". His goose was well and truly cooked. Plane to Sydney seemed to be the answer. A job outside a nightclub in the Cross. Where the most dangerous thing he would encounter was some well-bred young blonde pulling a tanty 'cos she wasn't on the door list. A nice idea which his criminal record well and truly put paid to.

This gig looked good on paper. Twelve and thirteen year old kids. What could they do to him? Fuck with his mind was the answer. Especially during cavity searches which occurred with a disconcerting regularity every other day or so. You enjoying that, Boss? they'd ask him in mid-search.

It made him feel sick.

Fucking Sydney, he thought. Hotter than Hades in summer and colder than a bucket of penguin shit in winter.

He almost felt homesick for Wellington. Almost.

Pauline sat down opposite Peter at the desk in the resource room. She sympathised with Peter because he was new but she thought that regardless of that, he should know the rules.

Can you tell me again where you last saw your keys? Asked Pauline.

Yes, said Peter, Alicia asked to do some photocopying so we went to the resource room. She asked me if she could unlock the door and I might well have given her my keys at that point.

You gave her your keys? Asked Pauline incredulously.

She wanted to unlock the door herself, said Peter feebly.

Hang on, let me get this straight: You gave her your keys? Pauline stared at Peter with her mouth half open.

Peter knew only too well that he was in the shit. It was merely a reflex. All his instincts and experience as a teacher told him that there was nothing wrong with giving a twelve year old girl your keys if she wanted to open a door. It was only here in this place that it seemed the stupidest thing in the world to do.

Well, said Pauline, Alicia tells me that she doesn't know where the keys are, so it looks like we're going to have to look for them. All the kids have been taken next door to be searched, so you can start going through the lesson kits to see if they're in there.

Peter's heart sank. One of the walls of the classroom was shelved and each of the shelves was piled with plastic bags full of lesson resources. There would be at least a thousand individual plastic bags on those shelves and Peter was going to have to go through them individually.

As Peter started searching the plastic bags containing teaching resources, Pauline went next door to supervise the searching of the children. An hour later she returned to check on how Peter was progressing. He shook his head dejectedly to indicate that he hadn't found any keys.

Just then, to Peter's surprise, a young skinhead kid named Joshua was escorted into the room by a security guard and pointed to a plastic bag on the second row of shelves which Peter ruefully remembered searching fairly early on. The children had undergone the cavity search without complaint but quickly capitulated when told that the evening meal would be delayed if the missing keys were not found forthwith.

The plastic bags were searched again, this time by Tau and his staff, which revealed a number of keys but not the key to the main doors. The children were then escorted to their cells with Joshua and Alicia being put in separate solitary cells for their misdemeanours.

The missing main door key was found at about ten that night halfway down a u-bend in the girls' toilets where it had lodged while an attempt was being made to flush it into the waiting hands of a gang member lurking expectantly above the drain outside armed with a rubber glove and a coathanger.

Peter drove home that night glad that he still had a job and making a solemn promise with himself that he would take more care to look after his keys in the future. He would stay in the job for a further six months grateful for his full-scale pay. Chris gave a month's notice almost immediately, sick of the rules and almost daily humiliations inflicted on both the students and himself. Tau and Pauline quickly forgot about the incident. To them, it was just another day at the office.