

The Verloren Years

After a decade of teaching at Marlborough High School, I had decided that the time would soon come when I should try to move on and ply my trade somewhere else. Ideally, I would have liked to move to a different school. But the rules stated that if you went to a new school board, you started at the bottom of the seniority ladder. In my case, I would throw away 10 years of seniority. Since teacher layoffs were generally based on seniority, I felt I had no viable alternative to remaining in the school board where I had spent the last 10 years.

At Marlborough, I had developed as a teacher, but felt less challenged than when I started out. Fortunately, a department headship in Social Sciences became vacant at Verloren High School in the next municipality. In this position, I would be responsible for supervising about five teachers and the delivery of their program. In compensation, I would drop to a 2/3 regular teaching load, and receive an additional annual stipend of about 10% of my regular salary. To my delight, I applied for this job and was successful.

My years at Marlborough had taught me a lot for my new role at Verloren. One of the most important skills I learned there was how to multitask. In my first year I taught five different classes a day (six classes a day total) from Grade 9 to Grade 12. Each class contained around 32 students of varying interests and abilities. If I devoted just 30 seconds of time every day to each of my 190 (or so) students, that would occupy more than ninety minutes of my available instruction time (roughly 200 minutes) Clearly, few students could expect more than limited daily individual help from teachers.

But I also learned the heights that intelligent, skilful and energetic students could reach when they applied themselves. This made me more determined to push hard when I thought individual students were loafing.

Verloren, a new environment

Despite its physical closeness (only about 10 km in distance), Verloren was very different from Marlborough. Named after a former chair of the school board, George E. Verloren High School served a variety of family structures, many of which were low-income. Verloren's catchment area was more ethnically diverse than Marlborough's. Families of Italian and Portuguese background had emigrated to the area for decades and thought of Verloren as "their" school profiting from its programs. By the time of my arrival in the late 1970s, families from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia became more common in this community.

Verloren had been built in the early 1960s and had qualified for special federal government grants to equip new schools with the latest technical equipment. It was hoped that these new schools would produce a supply of apprentices to satisfy the needs of a rapidly-expanding manufacturing economy.

Quite quickly, schools like Marlborough and Verloren stamped their own marks in their communities. Marlborough was often called the “snob” school. Heavily into academics and sport, it housed the children of the older, established areas of town. Family income was among the highest in Canada. A high proportion of Marlborough graduates went on to university or community college. On the other hand, Verloren was the “immigrant school,” whose reputation was based more on finding entry-level jobs for its graduates. The two schools, one might say, existed in different worlds.

With elected bodies (school boards) and government bureaucracies (Ministry of Education) making all key decisions, it was inevitable that educational matters would soon become highly politicized. Verloren’s ultimate fate was soon caught up in this process.

Ontario’s provincial government suddenly reversed course, announcing that it would fund Roman Catholic separate schools until the end of Grade 12. Previously, government funding had only applied to the end of Grade 10. This development intensified the competition between the separate (Roman Catholic) and public (non-denominational) school boards. Student enrolment rose in the next few years for the separate school board while the public school board numbers plateaued or declined, depending on where they were located.

After a few years, our local separate school board found that it was lacking in space within schools, while the public school board had excess room to offer. Eventually, the idea emerged that it might be best for the public school board to hand over Verloren to the separate school board in the hope of (eventually) squeezing money out of the province to build a new school nearby. The two school boards eventually agreed on this mutually advantageous solution to the enrolment unevenness.

And what of the technical equipment that the public school board would lose in such a transfer? Well, it may have gleamed when it was first installed, but 30 years later it was out of date and badly beaten up. It was no longer a prize. Verloren’s days were clearly numbered.

School boards encourage the different schools in their jurisdiction to identify and celebrate the key features of their culture, so the economics of the communities spilled over into the schools. Marlborough students tended to dress in the latest fashions, Verloren students dressed casually. Marlborough students tended to see themselves as leaders in society, Verloren students rarely strayed far from their working-class roots.

Marlborough excelled at basketball and volleyball, Verloren was unbeatable at soccer. Students and teachers tended to identify with the local school culture and see their school as more than a collection of buildings. It was a place for which many teachers and students went beyond the call of duty, putting in many after-school hours to raise the profiles of their school and its students.

When the public school board eventually reached an agreement to hand over Verloren to the separate school board, it hit me like a ton of bricks. I had worked hard there for over a decade, striving to make Verloren's shadow even longer. I was not alone. Many teachers and students had worked harder than me.

The closure of Verloren in 1989 was the biggest professional calamity of my career. I loved the social and cultural mix of the place. I liked the students' lack of snobbery and lack of a sense of entitlement. I appreciated the honesty of its staff members. Losing Verloren sent me into personal counselling for a while. My colleagues and I had been re-assigned to different schools, along with the entire student body. I was assigned to Theodore A. Becket High School, less than two kilometres away. Over half of Verloren's study body was similarly placed.

My headship disappeared in the amalgamation of Verloren and Becket. I was no longer a member of my school's heads council. Heads were privy to many aspects of the school's daily operations not normally available to non heads.

There was nothing to do but accept the above misfortunes and get on with teaching, supporting the co-curricular program, and being an ambassador for the school board. The last of these was perhaps the hardest task, for I had always believed that the closing of Verloren was ill conceived.

Chapter 6 - Sandra's Story

Of all the stories in this book, Sandra's was one of the most difficult to watch as it played itself out in class. She caused many of her problems herself. But there was no doubt she had real problems in her life.

Sandra was 16, a member of my Grade 10 Canadian History class. She appeared to be in poor physical condition. Her clothing choices were limited to large dresses which were about the only thing that fit her at all. She was unkempt and sloppy in her general presentation.

Teachers could not win with Sandra. According to her, the classwork was either too easy or too difficult and she complained about it all the time. She would cry out at the merest frustration. She encouraged other students to complain to the teacher (me). Then she would say that my explanations were not helpful to the students. The classroom was too hot or too cold. The windows should be open or closed. Anything at all.

Like many students who studied mainly general level courses, Sandra exhibited reading and writing deficits. She had some problems with her sight and hearing that made it difficult to keep up with the rest of the class. No wonder she became frustrated.

Remediation might have helped Sandra. She could have joined a sub-group of fellow students. They would have spent some of our class time receiving coaching support from an educational assistant. But Sandra refused this support.

Sandra had put herself in an impossible situation. Her deficits meant that her educational prognosis was not good. Boredom and restlessness would set in and she would get further and further behind in her work. She was also likely to get caught up in the discipline process (detention, suspension, etc.).

All of this was made worse because some of her classmates urged her on. "She's strong," one member of the class observed. "She won't put up with all that crap out of the VPs office."

Some of the girls in the class were especially unfair to her. Debbie who sat just behind her, was constantly bugging her. One day when there was a lull in the noise in the classroom, Debbie whispered, "Sandra, have you ever had a boyfriend?" This question was calculated to annoy and frustrate Sandra. It succeeded. Sandra started shouting and told Debbie to shut up. As a temporary matter, I reorganized the seating in the classroom to keep the two of them apart.

In order to understand Sandra better, I had taken the time to go through her Ontario student record (OSR) file. Each student has an OSR and it records everything about the student's work and recreation in the school system.

Sandra's OSR indicated that she had witnessed much family discord, especially when she was in grades 7 and 8. She had been placed in a class of special needs students. In grade 9, she reverted to the main stream track. In other words, many attempts to meet Sandra's needs had failed. Indeed, she sometimes sabotaged all efforts geared to help her.

One day in class when Sandra was absent, one of the students pointed out that she wasn't there. "She's weird," one boy proclaimed. "I get tired hearing her complain," said another. "Why is she so odd?" a third student asked.

I decided to take the "tell them no lies" approach.

"Listen up for a minute," I told the class. "Sandra's not here today, I'm not sure why but what I do know is that she needs our help more than she needs people saying nasty things to her."

I went on like this for a couple of minutes and finished by encouraging the class to accept Sandra for who she was and to try and be her friend.

Fortunately, the rest of the class were in a receptive mood that day. They eased off her a bit and when Sandra came back to class the next day, she was accepted a bit more readily by her classmates.

I'm not saying that it was all peace and harmony till the end of the semester. But I referred to the agreement we'd made in class to treat Sandra better when I spoke to the students individually about their class behaviour. There's no doubt Sandra had been given a hard row to hoe in life. I'm glad that my Grade 10 Canadian History class cut her a little slack. Sandra did make progress, even if it was centimetre by centimetre. It is this sort of memory from the past that makes me glad that I was a teacher.

Of course, there were lots of Sandras at Verloren. I would have to deal with lots of difficult students there. But I hoped to learn from the staff new ways of doing things. I wanted to meet new colleagues with whom I could discuss ideas and explanations of problems plaguing most schools,

In large part, I got what I wanted.

Chapter 7: Laura's Story

It was spring, and a lovely breeze was blowing through an open window. I was teaching a class in Grade 11 World Religions. The gender balance was out of skew, as it often is in World Religions. I had 17 girls and three boys in this fairly small class.

We'd been watching a program about Judaism, its beliefs and rituals. Featured in this topic is, of course, the practice of circumcision. In the follow-up I was keen to get to the subject of circumcision to ensure that all the class members knew what it was. But I hadn't allowed for Laura.

I knew quite a bit about her. She was the fifth and youngest child in her family. All of her older siblings were male, and she learned at an early age that she had to defend her turf. She could be aggressive and rude, but she was no fool academically, or in life.

I began my explanation about circumcision using medical language. It did not provoke any embarrassment or giggles. I went on to note that while it is a religious rite for Jews, many families circumcise their male children, for health or other reasons. I observed that it was less common among families of today than it was 50 years ago.

"Are there any questions?" A girl in the front row asked if Judaism required its followers to leave some permanent mark on its female children as it does with its male children? Very slowly, Laura raised her hand. She has a highly amused look on her face, so I could imagine her response would be something inappropriate. Before the student who held the floor was finished, I turned my head to Laura, slowly shook my head from side to side, and glared at her. Very slowly, she lowered her hand and the incident passed with no mishaps.

The following semester I was teaching a Grade 11 History class. We were following up on previously done work, trying to answer the question, "What was the most decisive battle of World War II?"

Laura, a member of this class too, sat there looking thoroughly uninterested. "God, this is boring," she said in a low volume, barely audible. I ignored her. We continued with the next question, and she said more loudly: "Oh Christ, this is boring."

Laura sat in silence for a few more minutes, then said: "I'm going crazy. This is so f****g stupid."

I looked over, and said: "Laura, can you please wait behind at the end of class?" She said, "I'd be happy to do so," and she meant it. The thin smile that appeared at her lips meant she was having a good time. She thought she was in control. But I knew one thing about her that would help me. She could be persuaded, as the World Religions incident had shown, to be reasonable and not get herself into trouble over trifling matters.

Eventually, the bell went. The other students scrambled out of class, ready to go to lunch, and the classroom was not booked for the next period. We had the place to ourselves (which today would be unacceptable in case of an allegation by a student of inappropriate behaviour).

Laura had a slight smirk on her face. She had probably decided to have more fun with me. She would not accept that her behaviour was any big deal. In her mind, we would eventually end up in the vice principal's office. It would play out something like this - I would remind her of the need to keep a respectful atmosphere in class. She would say that such language was commonplace in high schools. None of her classmates had complained. The VP would cut some deal and we would leave his office promising better things in the future.

Laura had been around this track many times before. She liked the circus of it all. But I was determined to spoil her fun.

I stood about six feet from her desk. She looked down at some graffiti on the lid of the desk.

Years of experience helped me to develop two essential strategies for this type of student encounter. Teachers should:

1. Choose an unexpected method of framing the issue.
2. Resist the temptation to fill what broadcast journalists call "dead air." (Let the silences speak for themselves.)

I stood there, not moving. Laura sat, looking down, silently. Eventually, she looked up and we made eye contact at last. "Laura," I said, quietly. "I hope you don't think I'm embarrassed or shocked by your language."

Her eyes flickered. This was not what she had expected. Her smile disappeared. "What do you mean?" she asked.

I replied, "I'm not embarrassed or shocked with your swearing in class, because sometimes I use the same language myself." Another long pause.

"I don't believe you," Laura countered.

I shrugged my shoulders in an exaggerated manner, rolled my eyes, and raised my hands to the heavens. We stared each other down, in silence.

"Say, 'eat s***,'" she suddenly commanded. So I said it. "Say 'f*** off,'" came her second request. I smiled and repeated her words.

There was a long pause, and she said, "I'm sorry, I never knew that a teacher would use language like that. I was just trying to be smart."

I said, "In the right time and the right place, I might use the same language."

So why did Laura lose control of our friendly chat? Why had her goal of getting us into the vice principal's office floundered? Because she thought I'd give her the conventional guff she'd first heard long ago. She was familiar with how our conversation would go. Or so she thought.

Laura never swore again in my class.

In fact, our relationship as teacher and student began to improve immediately. The following year, she was in my Grade 12 Sociology class. Early on, I set up a demonstration about the unreliability of eyewitness testimony. I arranged with her for us to stage a mock argument at the start of the class. The next day, she came in and put her feet on her desk.

"Laura, get your feet off that desk," I shouted. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"You shut up," she yelled back. "Why is it that I always get the grief in this class? How come you never pick on the other kids?"

We went back and forth and after a while she stormed out of the classroom. I followed behind her, yelling for her to come back. We stood outside of the class for 15 seconds in complete silence, and then re-entered with big grins on our faces.

"Now," I said to the class, "write a one-page summary of the events you have just witnessed. Did either of us swear? Who started the confrontation? Who was louder?"

Then, as a final item in the staged activity, I revealed the camera that was recording everything from the back of the classroom. We watched the pictures it produced and found that many of the facts that the students had provided in their descriptions were imaginative and unreliable.

Laura's self-esteem was rising. She began to work harder in my class. She was polite, acted positively and helped in all my classes.

The following year, Laura graduated from high school. I had hoped she would apply herself well, but then I read a story in the newspaper some 10 years later. She had been arrested for co-managing an illegal cannabis grow-op whose stock was valued at over \$100,000.

I hope she didn't swear at the police officer who charged her with the offence.

Chapter 8: Stephen's Story

"Mr. Bain, please call the office." The PA (public address) system was busy that morning. The principal and vice principal were out of the school, attending planning sessions at the school board's central offices.

Just like many other leaders, principals and vice principals are generally ambitious people. The majority are focused on moving up the promotion ladder – and at a school, this requires includes attending many meetings and participating in required training that they must obtain outside of the school itself.

This also means that, inevitably, they will be out of their school when some crisis hits.

To compensate for a temporary gap in leadership, it is generally the practice to designate a particular department head to stand in for missing principals/vice principals, called a Teacher in Charge (TIC). It's a simple solution. But what if a crisis develops and the TIC is teaching a class as normal? It can be messy. Office support staff do a wonderful back-up job in times like these.

At Verloren, I was the Social Science head and that day, I was also tasked with the TIC role. As it happened, I was not teaching a class when the front office called me on the PA. I was in the Physical Education department office, where I was trying to get a couple of essays marked before my next class. It was quiet and slightly out of the way and I'd previously sought quiet time there on a number of occasions.

I picked up the phone and dialed the main office. "Colin here," I said. "Oh, thank goodness you heard my PA announcement," the secretary responded. "We want you to take Stephen to the hospital for admission to the drug rehabilitation unit."

When I asked for further clarification, the secretary said, "I'll tell you down here." I briefly mused that I did not have this sort of task in mind when I decided to become a teacher. But I tried to take an "all in a day's work" approach. Once in the main office, I received further instructions. "Take him to the parking lot, Entrance 5. Park your car there and walk with him to door 7 West. The drug rehabilitation reception desk is just inside."

I headed out to find Stephen. I knew exactly where he would be. He had only been in our school for a few weeks, and while he wasn't in any of my classes, his locker was quite near the Social Science office. I saw him spend hours each day staring into it or sitting beside it. "Hi Stephen," I would say as I hustled by his locker. A long pause would follow. "Hi, Mr. Bain," he would eventually respond. Detailed conversations were impossible.

Apparently, Stephen had been quite heavily into street drugs. His doctors were recommending a new therapeutic drug, but they had to ensure that there were no traces of the street drug in his system before starting the therapeutic one. The only way to guarantee that was to admit him to the rehabilitation unit where he would be gradually weaned off the street drugs.

Although he had just turned 18, Stephen exhibited the signs of having lived a hard life. His clothing was a bit tattered. His hair and beard were somewhat unkempt. His teeth needed some work. Add to all this his cognitive impairment from the drugs, and you had someone in need of help.

It was a nice morning, so I said to Stephen, “How would you like to go for a drive?”

“Where would we go?” Stephen asked in his usual slow conversation style.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I replied. “Let’s just follow our noses.”

We got into my car in the school parking lot and after 15 or 20 minutes, found ourselves in the vicinity of the hospital. Stephen stiffened in his seat. “Why have we come here?” he asked suspiciously. “Oh, I know a nurse who works here,” I announced to him. “I’m going to go in and see if she’ll go out with me on a date.” I persuaded Stephen to come in with me. (I’m still amazed at how compliant he was even though he strongly wanted to avoid re-admission.)

I approached the reception desk to check in. But Stephen stuck very close to me, with no sign of going away. I took him aside. “Stephen,” I said, trying to sound embarrassed, “will you wait in one of those chairs over there? It’s a bit difficult to ask the nurse for a date with you right next to me.”

It appeared Stephen was a man of the world, for he readily comprehended my discomfort and backed off a few feet, nodding his head to show that he understood what was going on. Another nurse appeared. She told me we had to get Stephen up the stairs to the third floor where admission to the drug rehabilitation facility was located.

There was a simple way of getting him to the third floor, the nurse explained. We’d go up the stairs in line – the nurse first, Stephen second, and me last. She would go upstairs quickly, and I would gradually fall behind. When I was far enough behind, I would simply turn around, descend to the ground floor, and walk away.

This protocol proved effective. Within five minutes, Stephen was admitted to rehabilitation. I returned to my car and drove to a nearby lakeshore park. I got out of my car and sat on a bench. A cool onshore breeze refreshed me. I was pleased to have had the opportunity to help Stephen and hoped that his rehabilitation program would work.

But I knew there might be some tut-tutting back in the staff room. Some fellow teachers felt that we should concentrate on core subjects (Mathematics, Sciences, Drama, etc.), instead of trying to backstop young people like Stephen who had addiction problems.

Some of my colleagues would probably say I had been asked to complete a task beyond my training or experience. What if Stephen had suddenly run away? Was I supposed to run after him and take him to the hospital by force? At what point should I have called my Superintendent, or 911?

I tend to see teaching as more than hammering specific facts and dates into the students. In Stephen’s case, I decided to take the whole child approach and cared about the human being

first. Others may take a more professorial approach and care primarily about their teaching subject. Of course, the tricky part of trying to satisfy the wide variety of needs was figuring out how a teacher had the time to accomplish it all.

As it was, various stories about Stephen's departure from school were circulating by lunch time. One version suggested that police officers had dragged Stephen out, kicking and yelling, and vowing revenge on his captors.

The seasons changed. Stephen was far from our minds. One spring day I slipped into town at lunchtime. I needed to buy some consumable supplies for a mapping exercise that was coming up in one of my classes. "Hello Mr. Bain," I heard from across the street. It was Stephen.

I greeted him warmly. His clothing was tidy, his hair and beard groomed, but his teeth still needed some work. He thanked me for driving him to the hospital that day. He said that he had really needed rehabilitation, and that he had stuck with the program.

He made no promises of a drug-free life well into the future. It was strictly "one day at a time" as far as he could see. He was at another high school in town and enjoying it. It was a nice conversation, but it was our last.

Did Stephen make it? I'd like to think so. But addiction is a tough enemy to defeat. Occasionally, when I saw a student gazing into a locker for some obscure item, I thought of Stephen.

I do hope he made it.

Chapter 9 - Ruby's Story

I first encountered Ruby when she was in Grade 10. I taught her during the middle years of my stay at Verloren H.S. She was having difficulty getting along with her Geography teacher. As the latter's department head, I was called in to adjudicate their differences. As a teacher, I first met her in Grade 12 when she was a student in my Sociology class. I already knew quite a bit about her background.

Ruby and her younger brother Dennis lived with their father, who was separated from his wife (Ruby's and Dennis's mother). This was not a common family arrangement – children of separated couples more frequently lived with their mother. It may have been one of the reasons why I kept a watchful and supportive eye on Ruby's progress.

Ruby's father was an air traffic controller who worked as an instructor in a college about three hours away by car from the children's school. During the week he bunked in with a colleague at the college. At weekends he drove home to spend time with Dennis and Ruby. There was much evidence to show that he was trying hard to be a good father in a difficult situation.

Ruby appeared to have adapted poorly to the family's separation. She may have resented having to act as a surrogate parent to Dennis. She certainly felt confined by the expectations of the family, part time job, school, etc.

In school she had demonstrated that she was academically capable, but she rejected any words of encouragement I gave to her on a continuing basis. Reports from her other teachers indicated that her performance was similar in all her subjects. She wanted to be left alone in class, if she turned up at all. "Don't push me" appeared to be the message she was signalling to me.

Her repeated lateness for class and her non-attendance record soon became an issue for most of her classroom teachers. Encouragement, negative reinforcement, criticism. It didn't matter. Nothing worked with Ruby. She generally clammed up and ignored everyone. It soon became time for the students to start to work on their Independent Study Projects. As the name suggests, ISPs were a project that the students researched and presented as individuals. These constituted a significant part of each student's final mark, on which their ability to win acceptance for post- secondary study is largely dependent.

Ruby was behind in submitting her ISP progress reports, which lowered her course mark. I reminded her of the seriousness of the situation. She suddenly exploded. Gathering her things, she made for the door. "Why don't you go f*** yourself!" she yelled as a parting shot. Don't take it personally, I reminded myself. She needs your help and she's crying out for it now.

I arranged with Ruby's father to meet one Friday evening. The drive would take three hours, so it was after 7:00 p.m. before he arrived. By arrangement, Ruby participated in the meeting. We met in one of the offices in the Student Services area. It contained a table with two chairs on one side and one on the other. (One chair was missing.) We each took a chair randomly. By sheer chance I found myself on the same side of the table as Ruby. Her father sat on the opposite side facing us.

I started the meeting by asking Ruby to give us a quick verbal report about her progress in my Sociology class as she saw things. She tried to brazen it out. Her mid-term mark had been lower than she would have liked but she was sure she could raise it by the end of the semester. She found it most valuable to learn the course content working alone, supported by textbooks and academic articles. But the teacher was always in her face. He would ask “Why weren’t you in class yesterday?” “Where is your assignment that was due three weeks ago?”

Ruby said she would put extra effort into the course, and she was sure of a satisfactory outcome.

Then it was my turn.

I began to lay out for Ruby and her father the problems that had been occurring in my class. I avoided portraying myself as aggressive, angry, or impatient. I presented myself (authentically) as a kindly onlooker and not anything to be feared. Suddenly Ruby began to sniff.

Try to imagine the impact on your parent/guardian having to sit there and listen to your exact words (bad ones as well as good ones), as reported by a kindly teacher.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a single tear roll down Ruby’s cheek. I continued slowly. In a level voice I described what had led up to her swearing at me. By this time Ruby was madly feeling in her pockets for a tissue, which she clearly did not have. I knew I had a clean one in my jacket pocket, so I fished it out and passed it sideways to her without missing a beat in my evidence-giving.

At this simple act of teacher kindness, Ruby lost it. She stared to wail “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I feel I’m under such pressure to be perfect at home, at school, and at work. I can’t take it anymore. I’m so confused and lonely.”

It was all I could do to avoid breaking into tears myself, and Ruby’s father had a moist face too. Ruby continued in this manner until she had laid it all out. She just could not hold it all together and needed to find some way to unload the stress.

We encouraged Ruby to leave the office to compose herself and talked in a friendly way about family counselling and whether this was the way for them to go. By the time she came back to the meeting, it was obvious that we were all on the same side.

Why did Ruby crack as she did that day? Was it just that she had reached the crisis point and our meeting was the final straw? Or did my handing her the tissue convince her that I was trying to help her, not to cause her more problems? Whatever the reason was, Ruby’s demeanour lightened once the family entered counselling. But I largely stayed in the background. Ruby graduated at the end of the semester and I never saw her again.

But I did meet Dennis once more. He had become a member of my Grade 12 Sociology class a couple of years after Ruby. He was much lower key than she was. A quiet and determined individual, he plugged away but left high school before graduating. I was wandering around the local university with a group of Grade 12 students on a pre-orientation tour when he saw me

(this was about five years after the above events.) He came rushing over to me and introduced himself. We had a pleasant conversation. He told me he had drifted around for a number of years, returning to university as a mature student. Things were going well for him.

“And how is Ruby?” I inquired. He hesitated.

“Ruby, your sister. How is she?”

“You do remember me!” he shouted excitedly. (He must have thought I was faking it up to that point.) He shared that Ruby had taken some time off, too, and dealt with her demons along with the rest of the family. She had just signed a contract to be an elementary teacher.

I wished them both well and went on my way.

In my reflective moments, perhaps Ruby decided to become a teacher to help kids in need, in recognition of the kindness that some teachers offered in her more difficult times. Yet I still like to think that Ruby’s life was turned around by that simple tissue.