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Model Student Days

As a shy, obedient little girl, I conformed to the rules of the school I attended and of the teachers whose classes I attended - an ideal student? Well, sometimes, even mostly...but not always. I had my moments, most of them accidental but a few of them maliciously planned and executed.

The first one I remember occurred in the second grade. Late one Friday afternoon when I was thoroughly bored, I discovered a decrepit art gum eraser under the lift-top of my desk. I moved it to the top of the desk and further shredded it, lining the crumbs up across the back edge of the desk. Emulating my current reading in *Penrod* and *Sam*, I flipped the fragments, one by one, as hard as I could into the empty space of the classroom, using my cocked middle finger. Most of them went harmlessly where I aimed them, but one wayward piece hit Jane West on the neck. Jane and I lived next door to each other, but there was no love lost between us. Jane apparently had been watching me flip eraser bits even before I hit her. She, turned, glared at me, and complained to Mrs. Anderson, "Mary Frances has been shooting SPITBALLS at me, and she HIT ME." Mrs. Anderson expressed the appropriate horror and asked me if I had hit Jane with a spitball. When I replied, honestly, that I had not, the teacher began scolding me just as the dismissing bell rang. That was the extent of my trial! After the class left, she further rebuked me (no! she thoroughly "bawled me out") and told me that I must come to class on Monday morning with a note from my mother in order to be allowed in class. Mrs. Anderson lived on the street behind ours; Mother knew her slightly and had taught her unruly son in Sunday School. Mother was not impressed with Mrs. Anderson's competence as a mother or a teacher.

I suffered through the whole weekend in silence wondering how I was going to tell Mother and Daddy about my terrible misdeed. Finally, on Sunday night, in hysterics, I told them that I had to take a note to school the next morning. When I explained that I was shooting bits of art gum eraser and that Jane had "told" on me, Mother reacted with her own dislike for Jane (she had found Jane "sneaky" as she skulked about the neighborhood) and her doubt about Mrs. Anderson's teaching abilities. The outcome was that I went to school with the necessary note, followed shortly by Mother who complained to Mrs. Anderson about my summary trial and conviction. I have no idea what the outcome was; despite Mother's anger, she was not much on confrontation. At any rate, I continued in the second grade without any more trouble.

My next school trouble occurred the following September. I had worn a brand-new pair of rubber overshoes to school because of an early morning shower. The school ground was the usual Dallas loblolly of gummy black mud, interspersed on this occasion with small sprinklings of gravel. The gravel appeared to me to be an invitation to explore a large deposit of gravel some fifteen feet away. Alas, I discovered on my third hop onto the thin layer of gravel that the little islands were too far apart and too thin to keep me from sinking into the black mire. The school custodian had just scrubbed the muddy wood walkway that led from classroom to classroom; he reacted with a roar, called me

back to the solidity of the walk and took me indignantly by the arm to the principal's office, where he denounced me as a trouble maker. Mr. Whittlesey was a kindly man who must have felt sorry for the frightened little girl before him and who may have recalled his own childhood fascination with overshoes and mud. He chided me mildly and sent me back to my class, properly chastened. Since that time, I have studiously avoided stepping into mud whenever I could.

The next problem I remember happened when I was in my second year of college. During final examinations I had reported to my Spanish class only to discover that I was scheduled to take a French exam instead. I had taken Spanish all through high school and for my two years in college; I was not so familiar with French, for this was my first class in the language. Despite the mix-up, I felt I had done well enough on the French exam until I passed the French professor on the walk in front of Dallas Hall the next day. Mr. Rickey grinned at me and said he would grade my paper if I would come to his office and translate into French. I had written the exam entirely in Spanish.

I maintain my innocence in those three events. The next one, however, occurred when I acted on impulse and with deliberation in graduate school. One of my favorite professors was John Brooks. In his course on the Augustan Age in English literature, I was fascinated with the thick pack of well-worn three-by-five cards from which he lectured. Actually, he read from them, one by one, then placing the front card carefully at the back of the pack. The class was small; all of us in the class were well acquainted. One day when Dr. Brooks was called from class, I couldn't resist a long-standing desire born of my fascination with his apparent rote reading of his note cards. I went to his desk and shuffled the cards. There was an audible in-taking of breath among my fellow students, but no one said anything to me when I replaced the rearranged pack just where he had left it. Dr. Brooks returned, picked up his lecture where he had left off, appearing to read from the next card in sequence, although we all knew it was not the proper card. He methodically went through his usual routine of turning the cards and reading from each one until the class was over. The tension in the class was palpable but could not compare with my anxiety, for when Dr. Brooks sat down, he took a fraction of a moment to cast a knowing eye in my direction as he went on with his customary lecture, recognizable now as a magnificent tour de force. By the time the class was over, I was appalled at my daring action and fully expected to be called accountable. I had no excuse except that I had not really disrupted the class, and I had truly wanted to know just how dependent he was on the words on his cards. He never mentioned the incident; he and I continued the good relationship which we had already developed. He eventually supervised my Master's thesis and was my champion on my Master's orals when my nerves almost kept me from getting my degree.