

With Bells On

The tree is up, cookies are baking, and carols are playing on the radio. “I’ll be home with bells on,” sings the radio.

Bells on! My mind flashes back to 1960, my sophomore year in high school. I’m sitting in the middle of the room in Mr. Bertoute’s American history class, wearing my camel mohair, crop-top, three-quarter sleeve sweater, my Pendleton pencil-slim lined wool plaid skirt with the slit in the back that I made from the skirt length I won at the “Make It Yourself With Wool” contest, black flats, and my cowbell necklace. The necklace has two bells that really clank. Of course the tinkling is something I can control. I have to make a deliberate effort, especially when I’m sitting at a desk.



I need to explain about Mr. Bertoute, Peter Bertoute, or “Mr. Burptoot” as we have dubbed him. This man is a bachelor, which is no surprise to any of the girls in the class. To us, he’s definitely middle-aged, probably at least thirty-two. Now, Mr. Watson is probably that old too, but Mr. Watson wears middle age much, much better. Oh, I’m getting distracted. Mr. Watson is way more fun to think about!

Anyway, Mr. Burptoot is medium height and pudgy. He has beady little eyes, skin-colored hair he wears in a bristly buzz cut, and a snout. That’s right, his little button nose looks just like a snout under those beady eyes, and his thin lips are usually pursed grimly, or narrowed in a tight smile — just like a pig. Piggy Porky

Burptoot. He's our favorite teacher to persecute. It's so easy to tick him off, it's almost not fun.

Well, today I'm wearing my bells, and I just have to do it. I begin wiggling in my seat. I turn to look at the back of the room when he calls on someone. I drop my pencil several times and bend down to pick it up. Any wiggle I can think of to make the bells jangle without overtly shaking my chest. I do this for several minutes. Mr. Burptoot begins looking my way a lot. He frowns. I have him! It won't take much more here.

Sure enough, one more tinkle and he pops. "All right Sharon, one more tinkle and you are going to the office!"

The class snickers. I'm elated. I did it. I actually got threatened with the principal's office! Surely Mr. Gregory would just laugh. Surely he can't take old Burptoot seriously. I know in my heart that if I jangle again and he sends me out, the whole class will get up and walk out with me. I'll lead a parade.

These thoughts whirl through my mind. My muscles ache to jangle the bells. Burptoot continues to stare. He's waiting. The air sizzles with electricity. The class holds its collective breath. Do I do it? Can I bring myself to do it? Deliberately get sent to the office? Me, the model student?

Suddenly I see myself sitting at the supper table explaining to my father how much fun it was getting sent to the office for jingling my bells at Burptoot. Suddenly this is not funny. Daddy doesn't laugh. In fact, I see my bells in the waste basket and myself grounded for about a month. Suddenly I see myself walking out of class — alone!

My heart falls. I'm not going to do it. I look up at Mr. Bertoute, shrug, and say, "Okay." The threat was enough of an accomplishment. I don't need to test my luck on the rest. Besides, I might mess up a delicate balance if I call his bluff. This way we can continue the game. If Mr. Gregory got involved, he might make Burptoot shape up his class.

We continue taking turns annoying him. By Valentine's Day, Mr. B is in the hospital with an ulcer. We feel a little bit bad about that. Besides, the teasing is

getting boring. It's too easy. The rest of the year passes in relative peace. We've mastered this skill, and we'll hold it in reserve to refine yet further next year with Mr. Yates. But that's another story for another day.