**TELLING:** Mrs. Jones **said I’d done the assignment wrong**, that **my drawing was “dirty.”** **I tried to argue** that **she wasn’t being fair with me.** **I was nervous** because **she was so intimidating**. **I stood my ground**, though, and **made her rethink things.**

Look to see how I try to show details rather than just tell things. Also, notice how I add reflection into the mix to shape the scene’s meaning/focus.

I stood before Mrs. Jones, both hands shoved in my jeans pockets as she clutched my artwork in both of her meaty hands. It was a drawing of an apple—only my apple was upside down and had face, arms and legs, and a stem where a penis might be (it might have been a cartoonish and overly big stem).

Along the bottom of the page, I had a scribbled a title: “You Are What You Eat.”

At least some of my classmates had found it funny.

Not Mrs. Jones, though; she was perched atop her thick-heeled shoes, staring down at me through the glasses across the bridge of her nose. Her forehead was pinched, and she might have been grinding her teeth.

Looking back, I recognize that it was something of a façade. She was a fifth-grade teacher built to terrorize, sure, but I think she was only *trying* to be scary. I would spend several more months in her class, and I remember her now as a woman afraid of losing control. We all know how a soft-spoken schoolteacher can be usurped by class clowns, especially show-off, fifth-grade boys. She wanted to prevent that, and frowning over her glasses from atop her tall shoes was her means.

So, we had a stare-down.

I felt a fat bead of sweat slip from my underarm, slide down my ribs, and disappear into the band of my Fruit of the Looms, but I stood my ground and looked into her unblinking eyes.

I’m not sure why I really felt the need to stand up to her at the time. I knew the drawing was “obscene.” That’s part of why I drew it that way, after all. I certainly didn’t have any true concept of censorship at that age and was probably just being ornery, but I do think there was something inside me that knew my imagination was important and that my artistic freedom was in jeopardy, even if that term wasn’t part of my vocabulary. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was defending my art . . . not just my orneriness.

Generally, when I got in trouble, I just took my medicine. Something told me not to swallow this, though, that my creativity, my urge to expand the boundaries of the assignment, was more important that the petty “obscenity charge” of my teacher.

My creativity hadn’t hurt anyone, had it? No, it was an apple with a stem posing as human anatomy, that’s all.

“That was *not* the assignment,” she said.

“I know, but—”

“No *buts*. You were supposed to draw the apple. You were being smart. And don’t tell me the stem isn’t supposed to be a . . . uhm, you know.”

“A big penis,” I said, and another bead of sweat slid down toward underwear territory.

And even by saying that word, the scientific term, rather than “pecker” or “dick,” I was exercising a form of self-censorship, I see now. But this *was* a form of censorship in which I believed: my dad called it “respect your elders’ or “be polite to women.” I wouldn’t say “dick’ in front of Mama, so I wouldn’t in front of Mrs. Jones, either.

She didn’t look away or even flinch; she simply said, “What do you have to say?”

“My apple looks just like the one on a table that we were supposed to draw. It just added to it.”

That drawing, as simple as it sounds now, means a lot to me. I wish I still had it and don’t know what became of it. It had a lot to do with how I would be viewed in school later on: either as rebellious, or as creative. When I think about it now, if I had backed down, “rebel” would have been the label given to me. Rebels generally backed down once they’d gotten attention; they had no real sense of priorities.

Even back then, I wanted to go against the norm. But that wasn’t just rebellion, I don’t think. It was about actually making Mrs. Jones see the possibilities, not the problems.

*Don’t cry, don’t cry*, I thought over and over to myself. *Stand your ground.*

“Your apple has body parts. *Appendages*,” she said. She made the word sound like it was a pile of maggot-infested crap. *Ah-peeen-duh-geees*. Like merely having an appendage went against some strict religious doctrine.

“I know, but . . . Look at my apple.” I pointed to it. “If you turn over the paper, other than the other parts, my apple looks just the same. It even has the same dark spot. I just added other parts.”

She did not turn over the paper, or even turn it around to look at it. She still held it before me like a cue card. “Did I *tell* you to add to it?” she asked. She was definitely grinding her teeth now; I could see her jaw working.

I said nothing, but I still forced myself to meet her eyes. This was the first time I could ever recall having a nervous sweat. It was at my temples and upper lip now, not just my armpits.

“Did I?” she said again.

“No,” I whispered.

“You’ll stay after school and wash my boards for the rest of the week, okay? You’ll take the second bus home, okay?” She paused. “Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I reckon.”

“’Yes,’ not ‘Yeah, I reckon.’”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So what have you learned from this?”

I considered this briefly, and then before I could “zip my lip,” as she’d sometimes say, I said, “That you ain’t got no imagination.”

I though she was going to wear her teeth down to the gums, her jaw grinding got so pronounced.

Silence hung in the air for what seemed like a full minute, but then she pointed one meaty finger at me, letting my drawing hang limply in her other hand, and she said, “Maybe you’re right. Maybe. And don’t say ‘ain’t.’”

We got along well enough the rest of the year. I’m sure I continued to test her, and she tested me. I’ve continued to things my own way with art, particularly writing, and with life. If you don’t hurt anyone, I see no issue.

Was the apple’s “penis” the most important thing I’d done? Maybe then it was the focal point, but now I see that it was about not being made to feel ashamed of my imagination. As for that incident itself, Mrs. Jones didn’t call my parents, and she only made me wash the board during a couple days of recesses, saying it was for talking back and saying “ain’t.”