

An American Sings the Blues

Singapore is not just for caning anymore. The national brouhaha stirred up some months ago in this country over an act of vandalism in Singapore by some young enterprising non-diplomat's son, which had earned him the definitely British-influenced punishment of a good flogging, had not yet been long past when I started to think to myself, where were my countrymen when I needed them most? Just before Mr. Skinner was about to give me some of his eastern wisdom in the form of six of the best for exactly the same event. Where was my president when I needed him most? Now a days I shudder to think. Or I think to shudder, I am not sure which. I suppose it depends whether I am in the mood for a good shuddering.

I have since learned that the lack of attention to my situation was due primarily to a lack of public relations work on my part. Had he known, had the American public known, surely they would have risen to the occasion and threatened to send a few Tomahawk missiles towards Dorset should the Housemaster in question still consider tanning my sacred American bottom. Why? Because we Americans are men and women of principle, and that principle is we do not believe in the use of violence as a method of determining behaviour when that violence is directed at us. Enough said. So there I was standing with four other kids who were about to have the fortune of receiving the guided discipline of Mr. Skinner, the then head of Gate House. It was after lunch and just before field hockey. We were to play on the pitch behind the classrooms - the details are etched, so to speak, in my memory. We had been told that Mr. Skinner, Clayesmore, the Singapore Government and the entire British Empire, did not approve of vandalism - apparently especially in the art shack, which qualified us for special treatment- we were all asked to go put on our pyjama bottoms. (Now this pyjama bottom idea could have been a great equaliser, since the other three boys involved were in Manor House, and subject to the Jimmy Carter of Beatings treatment of Mr. MacDonald, the then House Master of Manor House. It was told of occasions where the boys being beaten by Mr. MacDonald have actually burst out laughing because the experience was so surprisingly not painful and Mr. MacDonald, upon hearing the outburst of sound, started to apologise for being too brutal. Now if these Manor boys were made to wear pyjamas and perhaps sprinkle their bottoms with hot sauce, and the Gate boys made to wear history books in their underwear, there would be some sense of justice in the world. But as Mr. Skinner taught me on another occasion, justice does not come for free. This was not to be. So we all were standing there with our pyjama bottoms. I, of course, was concerned with whether or not we should remove our underwear as well. I did not want to make Mr. Skinner more angry than he already was. Well, of the five of us, three had never been caned before. So when we were standing there and Mr. Skinner turned around, shut his big tick mark book, and said, "Gentlemen, I am going to beat you," two of the group winced, and their knees buckled; myself and the others did not twitch and looked at each other, thinking this should be interesting. We had no idea.

So I am there waiting for the beating in these nylon thin silk-type pyjamas that my mother had sent me. Most of my friends were wearing thick flannel, and most had decided to wear their underwear. I reasoned if the man said pyjamas he wanted us dressed like we were going to bed. Both the boys who had been caned before insisted that it was a good idea not only to wear underwear but actually extra underwear and chamois leather and handkerchiefs and anything else you could get your hands on. (It

is actually an interesting gambit because each new thing you put on has a diminishing effect on the amount of pain you receive, but each new piece of clothing geometrically increases your risk of getting caught and being forced to remove all your padding, thus maximising the pain. I know it sounds like it could be a science, but it really is much more of an art than it sounds.) Both these boys insisted on going first as well. I had not yet done the calculations in my head as to which would be best, and I sort of saw arguments on either side.

After padding the next major topic of conversation was the number of strokes we would be getting. The thought was that it would be between four and six. The experts in front said the protocol was you could ask before. Well, the moment had come, and Mr. Skinner stepped out and picked someone in the middle of the group. The two experts actually went next. I guess he did not want us to have chosen the order, but after the first boy he probably he had made his point.

My thoughts as I heard the sound of the cane swishing through the air like some sword going the speed sound? I thought, hey this does not sound fun. Is he allowed to hit boys that hard? I would like to talk to the American ambassador.

The second guy went in, and more whooshes and more sounds of bamboo hitting flesh. I started to get really scared. I was desperately trying to think of some way out of this. But there appeared to be not much time for discussion prior to the event, only enough time for the how many protocol. The second guy came out with a different expression than the first. The first person had never been caned before and looked like he was in shock. He was pale looked like he was dazed his eyes were glazed over. The second guy came out smiling. His underwear, etc. had protected him. (For you behaviourists out there, there is a theory that a punishment that is less than expected actually on future behaviour more like a reward. The animal or person is more likely to repeat the behaviour and, anecdotal to this point, this guy, last I heard, was in prison somewhere in England for some offence I am sure he did not commit.)

The third person came out not blanched, not smiling, just matter of fact. At this point I am beginning to believe in the underwear method of pain prevention and start to have a debate with myself over whether there is time to back and change into something a little more appropriate. But before I could get past opening arguments, out came pyjama no underwear boy, with a blanched face and glassy eyes and not a smile in sight. I was next, and there nothing I could do about it. I walked in, my nylon silk type pyjamas were no match for the spring winter weather felt a little cold as they flapped as I walked. This should have alerted me that something was going dreadfully wrong. How many? Four. Well, four did not sound too bad; after all, it was at the low end of the range we had been discussing. I guess I was fortunate. Little did I know. I could see the cane in Mr. Skinner's hand; he was flexing it. It bent moved like a whip when he released it. He must have linseed-oiled it because it was made of wood even though it was thin like bamboo and flexed like bamboo as well.

He had a chair facing the corner and told me to stand behind the chair and bend over the back of it and grab on to the seat with both hands. I thought of some witty remark, which left my mind a few seconds later at the feel that followed the first whoosh and slap. The thought has never come back. Instead, the only thing I could think was this hurts. Whoosh and slap two. (I would later remark that the sounds coming off my

bottom were distinctly higher sounding than those of the flannel pyjama boys and certainly the underwear / pyjama boys before me. Why would Skinner not notice.) I decided at the time to look back at him for the third stroke. And he was winding up like American baseball pitcher. This was a real opportunity for him to get some exercise apparently.

I had been looking at a spot on the wall for the first two strokes and put on my getting an injection altered state of consciousness. When I had discovered to my surprise that it was painful, I had looked back to see the wind up, for my last stroke I just looked forward.

Unlike the two boys with the armour and more, much more than my two friends with the flannel and underwear, my beating did not end when I leaned back up from the chair and walked out. My friends were all gathered around for a debrief, but I was still suffering. It still hurt. Like some cartoon character, I was running around looking for some bucket of water to sit on. Like having chewed on some hot pepper, the effect lingered on for about five to ten minutes.

The upside on the whole thing was that I had three parallel strips across my bottom and one like a gate cross bar (when I turned around to look?). The welts stood up as high as my little finger and were bleeding in a string of little dots at the top. Not a lot of blood, maybe a drop or two on the whole bottom, but enough to confirm blood an display to my field hockey group. No one had gotten as bad as me. I won.

Actually the most insane part of the event was the fact that, as I was putting on my pyjamas, I thought, now I'll have something to tell the grand-children. But I forgot to think that it might be painful. A detail that might just have clarified my thinking a bit.

I would not forget this most valuable lesson. The next time I came out of Mr.Skinner's study was after having received six of the best for smoking. My padding was so thick that it sounded to me like he was hitting a pillow. The formula, four pairs of underwear, one layer of chamois leather and two layers of handkerchief. I wonder what the wore in Singapore. I hope for his sake it wasn't something his mother sent him.

Randy Bergerac (1969-74)

This incident occurred, I think, in the winter of 1970. But I might be mistaken.

JV. Skinner writes:-

"EnclosedComment"

Although I remember Randy extremely well, I'm afraid I have no recollection of the event he records. After memories of distasteful experiences do fade more rapidly than those of happy occasions, and for me the inflicting of corporal punishment was always a distinctly unpleasant duty.

I am quite ready to accept Randy's word that the incident actually occurred, but as far as the details of implied attitude are concerned ("flexing the cane", "linseed oil". "winding up", "exercise") my memory suggests that Randy has a great future as a creative writer, and I wish him all the best, (NOT "six of.....")