

Apple Island

or The Truth About Teachers

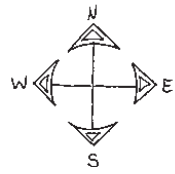
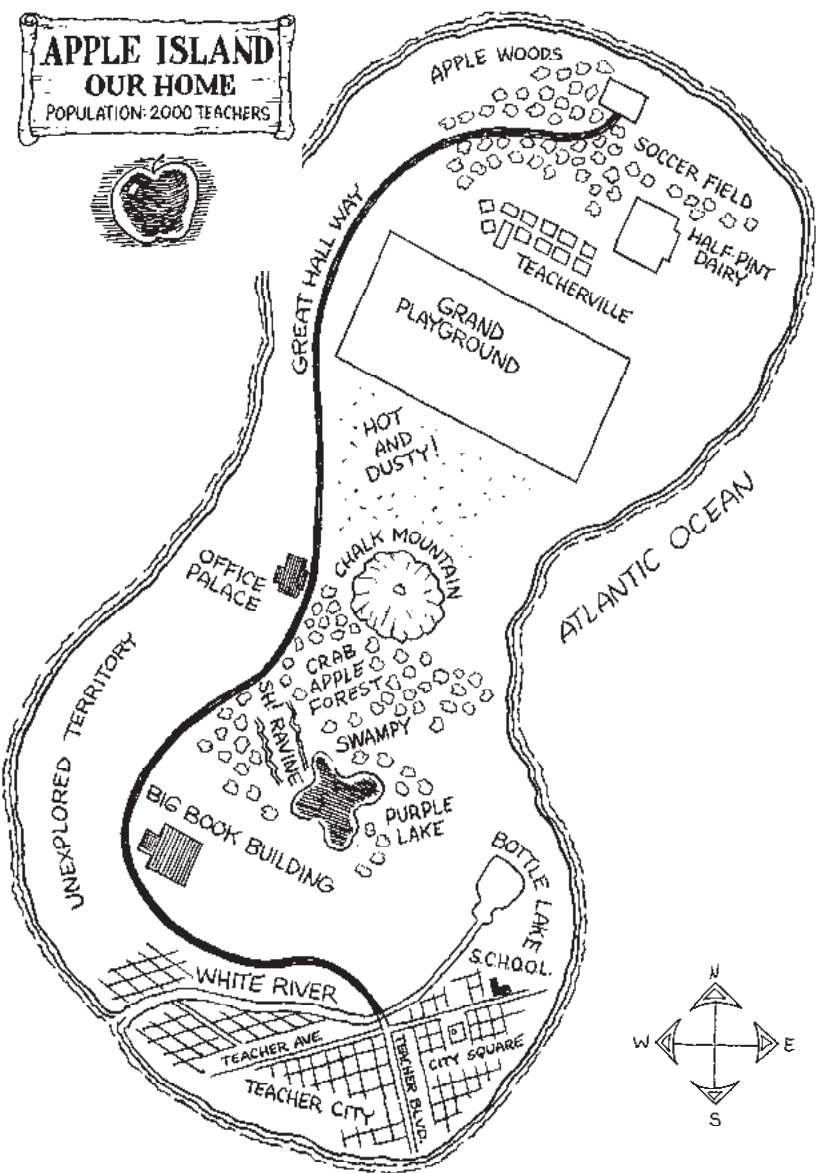
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APPLE ISLAND
OUR HOME
POPULATION: 2000 TEACHERS



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The School Day Begins

“She’s a crabby old fat lady who hasn’t taught us a thing! I hate teachers! I hate school!” Bradley announced as he trudged toward that very place one October morning.

The sun was up, but not far enough up to warm the chilly air. Puffs of steam shot from Bradley’s mouth as he spoke.

“Boring, boring, boring! That’s what school is. I wish all teachers and schools would disappear forever!”

Duncan, Bradley’s friend and classmate, strutted two steps ahead, trying to pick up the pace. “School is school



and teachers are teachers,” he said. “And since we have to go to school we’d better hurry or we’ll be late. Nothing makes the teacher crabby than when kids are tardy.”

Bradley stomped on a pill bug that had the misfortune of crossing his path. “But Mrs. Gross is crabby all the time,” he said. “The only time you see her smile is when she’s dishing out punishments. You do one little thing wrong, like forget your homework, and she screams her head off.”

“Mrs. Gross is new at our school,” said Duncan. “Maybe she’ll get better. Who knows?”

Bradley reached around and slapped his backpack. “And think what books she makes us read. Boring! And the math sheets she makes us do. Just problem after problem of the same boring stuff.”

“What about story writing?” asked Duncan. “Mrs. Gross puts a gold star on all my papers.”

“She flunks everything I write,” Bradley said. “She says I’ll never be a good writer since my handwriting and spelling are so bad. I don’t think she even reads my stories.”

The boys stopped at a street corner. A woman wearing an orange vest marched out to the middle of the street. She held up a stop sign on a stick, and a yellow school bus squealed to a halt. Bradley and Duncan strode by the woman, forgetting to stay within the crosswalk.

“I wonder where Mrs. Gross lives,” Bradley mused. “Where does any teacher live? Do they cook and do house-cleaning? I can’t imagine teachers doing anything normal.”

“Teachers are teachers,” Duncan repeated.

The pair walked through a gate in the chain-link fence that surrounded the school grounds.

BRRRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIING!

The morning bell sounded across the playground. From all directions students streamed toward the beige, L-shaped school building. The American flag flying from the flag-pole waved good morning to them.

As Duncan ran ahead, Bradley stopped to slug a tetherball and watch it twirl around the pole.

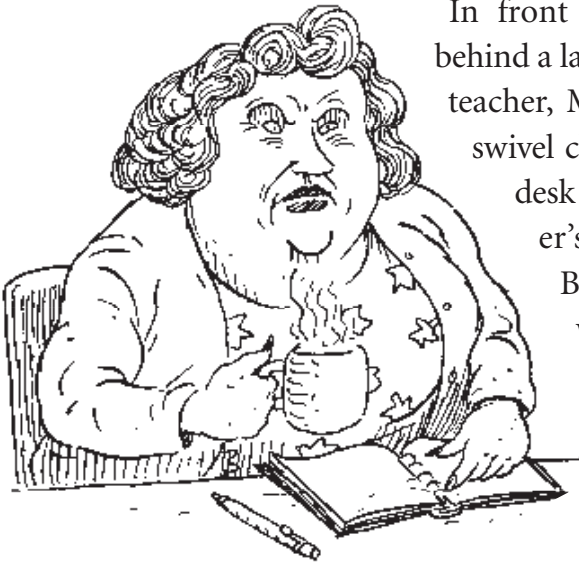
“It’s Monday,” he said. “Eight hours until the day’s over. Five days until the week is through. Twenty-seven weeks until the year’s over, and eight years until I graduate. School! Who invented it? Why is it here? I hate teachers! I hate everything about school!”

In class

Bradley shuffled into the classroom. After dumping his jacket on the floor of the coat closet, he slunk into his seat in the third row. He frowned at the WELCOME BACK TO SCHOOL sign still on the bulletin board. He scowled at the empty aquarium on the counter. He glowered at the blank walls and bare bookshelf. He shook his head at the blackboard filled with long, tedious sentences to copy, and then he checked the clock above it.

Turning, he said to Duncan behind him, "One hour and forty-eight minutes until recess."

In front of the blackboard, behind a large metal desk, sat the teacher, Mrs. Gross, in a large swivel chair. Even though the desk hid most of the teacher's tremendous bulk, Bradley could see the width of her shoulders, the thickness of her neck, and the flabiness of her cheeks.



The chinless face, the squinty eyes, and a thick lower lip pushed out in a permanent scowl reminded him of an overripe apple.

The teacher coughed into her fist, smudging her red lipstick. She lifted a coffee mug off her desk and took a long slug. After patting her puffy brown hairdo, she picked up the attendance book.

“Morning, stooodents,” she said in a raspy voice that caught everyone’s attention immediately. “Say ‘Here’ when I call your name. Not ‘Present.’ Not ‘Yes.’ Only ‘Here.’ Understand? Good. Now we begin . . . Celeste-Marie Aardvark!”

“Here,” peeped a small girl in the back row.

Bradley slumped in his chair as far as he could without slipping off. One quick look around the classroom told him that the entire class was present, but he didn’t mind this daily chance to day-dream before schoolwork began.

“Why did Mrs. Gross ever become a teacher?” he asked himself. “She seems to hate kids. She seems to hate being at this school. I wonder how she became a teacher. Teachers! I’ll never figure them out.”

“Bradley Zimmerman!”
Mrs. Gross’s voice thundered.





Bradley jerked straight up in his seat. “Present,” he piped out.

The teacher gave him a frightening scowl before dashing off a final check in her attendance book. She took another long gulp of coffee and wiped her lips with the back of her hand.

“Good, stoo-dents,” she said. “Everyone is here today.” Pushing her knuckles onto the desktop, she slowly stood. “Time for mathematics!”

The classroom filled with the usual groans and gripes following this announcement. Yet before anyone took out a math book, Mrs. Gross said something extraordinary. “No need for books today, stoo-dents. No need for pencils and paper. Today we are going to learn a new type of math. And since the math we have been learning was a new form of the new math, we shall call this math the New New New Math.”

The students stared at her in stunned silence. Not only had Mrs. Gross’s announcement been a shock, but now a rare smile spread across her face.

The teacher straightened her dress over her chubby legs and stepped in front of the desk. She picked a large card off her desktop and held it up for all to see:

$$6 \times 9$$

“Looky here, stoo-dents,” she said, continuing to grin. “See what I have. A big flashcard. And see what the flash-



card says, six times nine. Now can anybody tell me, what does six times nine equal?”

A hand shot up in the front row and waved frantically back and forth like a windshield wiper set on double speed.

Mrs. Gross pointed a sausage finger at a boy with a face full of freckles and shiny braces. “Yeeeees, Errol,” she called.

“Six times nine equals fifty-four,” the boy spouted out.

“Yeeeees, Errol,” said Mrs. Gross. “That is absolutely correct. Did everyone hear Errol? Did everyone notice how Errol is paying attention and raised his hand before answering? Good boy, Errol.”

Errol turned in his seat and flashed a silvery grin toward his classmates.

Bradley squinted at the boy. “Teacher’s pet,” he muttered. Errol was a show-off. Errol was a tattletale. Errol had gotten Bradley in trouble many times. Bradley despised him.

“Now, stoo-dents,” said Mrs. Gross. “Pay close attention. Watch what I do.”

With a great deal of ceremony she turned the flashcard upside down. It still read:

$$6 \times 9$$

“Now, stoooodents, tell me the answer.”

Several voices repeated, “Fifty-four!”

Mrs. Gross’s thick lips spread wider. “Remember, stoooodents, this is the New New New Math,” she said. “Six times nine right side up equals fifty-four. Upside down, it equals forty-five.”

In the third row, Bradley, who had been daydreaming, sat bolt upright at his desk. What? What did the teacher say?

Mrs. Gross held up a second flashcard:

$$1 \times 1$$

“What is the answer, stoooodents?” she asked.

“One!” the class chorused.

“But . . . ,” said Mrs. Gross. Again she turned the card upside down. “Now it equals eleven! So you see, stoooodents, in the New New New Math any problem that looks the same right side up as upside down has two answers. This is true with eleven times eleven, sixteen times ninety-one, and so forth. Any questions? Good. That is all the mathematics for today.”

Bradley sat in his seat without moving. What was going

on? Everything the teacher just said was wrong. The New New New Math made no sense at all. He waited for a classmate to say something, but no one did. Bradley couldn't help himself. Something deep inside him demanded that he speak up. "But . . . but . . . that's ridiculous!" he blurted out.

A hush fell over the classroom. Everyone stared at Mrs. Gross. Her smile collapsed. She clasped her hands behind her grand behind and rocked back on her heels. One thick eyebrow crept up her forehead as she glared at Bradley in the third row.

"Well, Mr. Zimmerman," she said. "Well, well, well, well, well. So you think mathematics is ridiculous, eh?"

Bradley's armpits grew hot. "No," he said. "It's just hard to believe that the answer changes just because you turned the flashcard upside down."

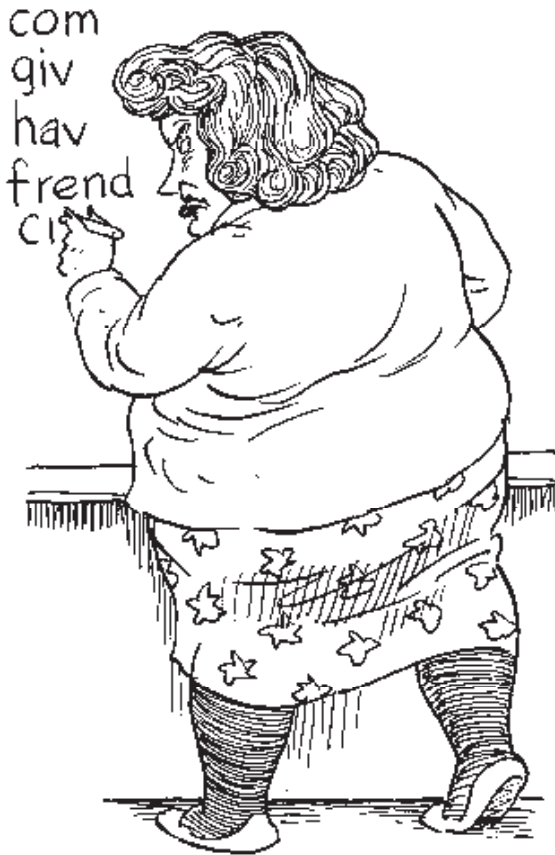
Mrs. Gross smiled around the room. "Well, well, well. Just listen to Bradley, stoooodents," she said. "He thinks he knows more about math than the teacher does. He thinks he is a math wizard or something."

Snickers surrounded Bradley.

He felt a tap on his shoulder. "Come off it, Bradley," Duncan whispered. "The teacher said math was over, so it's over."

Before Bradley could say another word, Mrs. Gross had turned toward the blackboard and grabbed a piece of chalk. "Time for spelling, stoooodents," she announced. "And guess what? Spelling has also changed."

Her chalk squeaked against the board as she wrote a list of words:



“You see, stoooodents, teachers have made spelling easier for you. Dictionaries are incorrect. All those nasty silent letters in words are preposterous! From now on you can leave off the silly *e* at the end of *come*, *give*, and *have*. Forget that idiotic *i* in the middle of *friend*. Why bother putting

the dumb *b* at the end of *climb*? And never write *phone* with a *ph* or *laugh* with a *gh* again. Enough already! If you hear an *f*, just put an *f*!”

Again Bradley spoke before he could stop himself. “But you can’t change spelling like that! No one would understand what you were writing.”



Groans filled the air. Duncan let out a long sigh.

Mrs. Gross spun around and pointed her chalk at Bradley. “Doubting the teacher again, eh, Mr. Zimmerman? And since when are you such a fine speller? Eh? I do believe you fail every spelling test I give. In fact, Mr. Zimmerman, you flunk most things in this class. I’ve rarely seen such little ability in any stooudent. And, dear boy, report cards are coming out next week. Not a good time to question the teacher. Eh? No, no, not a good time. I’ll have to make a note of this.”

By this time sweat was dripping down Bradley’s forehead. He wanted to speak out again, but the teacher’s frightening glare kept him silent.

Next Mrs. Gross pulled down the map above the blackboard. At once Bradley saw that this map was different. It showed the normal outlines of the United States, but within the borders more black lines had been added.

“Now, stooudents,” said the teacher. “If there are no more interruptions, I will teach you about the seventy states in the United States of America.”

At that moment the recess bell rang. The teacher turned and said, “You have done an excellent job this morning, stooudents. Now please remember, the things I taught you this morning are very new. Your parents won’t understand them. Perhaps it is best not to talk about anything you learn in school from now on. Understand? Good. Class dismissed.”

The Teachers' Lounge

The students filed down the hall toward the playground door. Bradley walked with his hands in his jacket pockets, eyes on Duncan's head in front of him. "Did you hear what the teacher was trying to feed us, Dunc?" he said. "That New New New Math made no sense at all."

"Math never makes sense to me," Duncan replied.

"But I'm telling you, something strange is going on. The teacher is teaching us wrong things. I don't mean like in the old days, when teachers taught that the earth was flat or that the sun traveled around the earth. Back then they didn't know any better. No, Mrs. Gross is teaching us wrong stuff, and she's doing it on purpose."

"Come off it, Bradley," said Duncan. "It's recess time. You're supposed to forget about learning and teachers for ten minutes."

Bradley, however, was in no mood for playground games. He slowed his pace to let the rest of the class go on without him. As he passed his last-year's classroom, he looked in longingly at Miss Purdy, the greatest teacher in the world. Why couldn't all teachers be caring, smart, and funny like Miss Purdy? His former teacher must have just

told one of her great jokes, because a blast of laughter came out of the room as Bradley moved down the hall.

“How can some teachers be so kind and others so crabby?” he asked himself. “Something strange is going on with my teacher, and I’m going to find out what it is.”

At the drinking fountain he took three slurps of water. He nodded to the janitor, who was washing sponges in his small room that smelled of ammonia. Farther down the hall he stepped into the library to say hello to the librarian in his soft library voice, then waved to the school secretary through the office window.

He stopped before the next door. The black words stenciled on it read:



“I’ve passed this room hundreds of times since kindergarten, but I’ve never been inside,” Bradley said to himself. “In fact, I’ve never seen any kid go in there.”

He put his ear to the door. Hearing nothing, he leaned forward and the door opened a crack. He checked up and down the hallway, then slipped into the room.

What struck Bradley first about the Teachers' Lounge was the mess. He made a face at the counters cluttered with wads of paper towels, Styrofoam cups, thumbtacks, half-eaten bagels, newspapers, coffee grounds, eraser crumbs, broken crayons, felt markers, pencil shavings, cupcake wrappers, gold glitter, and reams of paper.

"Look at this dump," he said. "And teachers tell us to keep our rooms clean!"

The room smelled of coffee and Magic Marker. A five-gallon coffeemaker hissed on a table. Announcements about substitutes, assemblies, parties, and special meetings were scribbled on a large white board.

In one corner stood an impressive-looking Xerox machine. Bradley lowered his face onto the glass top and pressed the COPY button. Out came a picture of his squishy nose and cheeks.

"I've always wanted to do that," he said. With a blue felt marker he wrote I WAS HERE on the paper and left it on the counter, certain that no teacher could recognize his mashed face.

On the back wall of the room hung a map. It showed a peanut-shaped island, and the extraordinary words printed along one side caught Bradley's immediate attention:



“Apple Island?” he said aloud. “Is that map for real? How could there be an island inhabited only by teachers?”

Suddenly he heard voices in the hall and the door began to swing open. With the lightning reflexes that had won him many games of four-square on the playground, he dove under a counter. He curled up by a stack of old textbooks just as two pairs of legs stopped inches from his face.

One pair of legs, thick, with black knee socks, Bradley recognized at once. He mouthed the words “Mrs. Gross.”

The second pair was a mystery. Through her thick nylon stockings, he could see that this woman’s ankles were stained purple.

The woman with purple ankles spoke first. “So! This is it, Miss Eraser, typical school, on a typical school day, in a typical American city.”

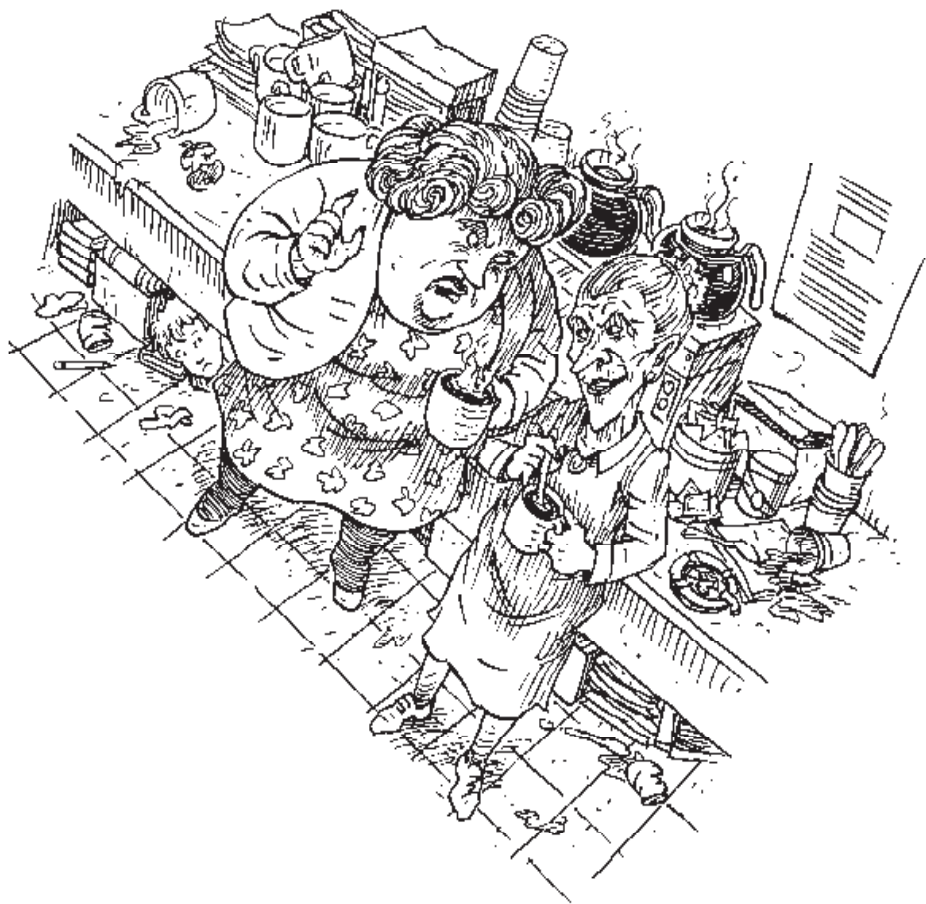
Coffee splattered on the tile floor by Bradley’s nose.

“It’s been a great honor to have such a distinguished visitor in our schoooool today, Head Teacher,” came his teacher’s voice. “But, please, in this building call me Mrs. Gross. That’s what the stoooodents call me. Hee hee! Mrs. Gross.”

“Indeed, Mrs. Gross,” said the first woman. “And today it was super to see typical schoolwork being done by typical small creatures. So! What did you call them again?”

“Children, kids, youngsters, or juveniles. Some are called boys, some girls. At school you call them pupils or stoooodents. Collectively they are called a class.”

“Whatever they are called, they are messy, giggly things,”



said the lady with purple ankles. “They know so little. Their heads are filled with nonsense. They constantly ask why, why, why and they never stop fidgeting. Some squirm in their chairs even when the teacher is giving a beautiful long lecture. And these juveniles get excited at the silliest things. I observed one boy on your typical playground chase a butterfly and one girl squeal with delight when she caught a lizard. Ridiculous.”

“But that’s the beauty of Operation Misteach, Head Teacher,” said Mrs. Gross. “Children will believe anything teachers tell them. We can mold them like clay in our hands.”

“So! How did your class react to Operation Misteach on the first day?”

“Beootifully, Head Teacher,” Mrs. Gross answered.

“Any troublemakers?”

“Only one, Head Teacher. A whining, sniveling boy named Bradley Zimmerman. He asked many questions. He questioned my answers. Luckily none of the other stooedents listen to him. They snicker at him. Hee hee! I gave him the old report-card threat, and that I believe will keep his trap shut. We will have no more trouble from Mr. Zimmerman.”

“So! You’ve done well, Miss Eras—Mrs. Gross,” said the woman with purple ankles. “I’m looking forward to this afternoon. Shhh! Here come the other teachers.”

The Teachers’ Lounge door swung open. Soon Bradley was peering through a forest of teachers’ legs.

“What was that conversation all about?” he asked himself. “Who’s that Head Teacher? What’s Operation Misteach? What’s going to happen this afternoon?”

With a dozen chatting, coffee-swigging teachers surrounding him, he rested his head on a book and waited for the end-of-recess bell to ring.