



Inside The STOREFRONT

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Guy, Pablo, and Peter are seated behind the desk in the back of the storefront, trying desperately to look stern. Behind them, Vashti and Jacob are hanging from the glass partition that was originally intended to separate the storage area in the cleaners from its work space. On the other side of the desk, Buncey is sprawled all over a decrepit-looking brown easy chair with the legs removed. He too is trying to look intense but having a lot more trouble than the three stationed behind the desk.

PABLO: Are you prepared to devote full time to the cause of revolution?

PETER: Why do you keep calling yourself a surrealist now that you've joined the Communist Party?

GUY: How does your poetry aid the cause of the workers' revolution?

The questions were shouted out with a mixture of pretended anger and inquisitorial righteousness. Buncey was not intimidated in the slightest.

BUNCEY: I am committed wholeheartedly to the cause of revolution. I will work for the revolution in whatever ways I can. I'm willing to follow orders, to accept discipline. And my poetry takes up very little of my time. I usually write late at night anyway.

PABLO: If you were a true communist, you'd devote every waking hour to the cause of the revolution. How does your poetry speed the coming of revolution to France?

BUNCEY: My poetry is something I do by myself. It doesn't have to be revolutionary if I spend the greatest part of my day in the service of the Party.

This was our third or fourth surrealism class. I had been reading several books on the French surrealists for my dissertation. The kids had asked me what these books were about. We had had a long discussion on surrealism and dada, at the end of which they asked for a course on the subject.

We had spent the previous class talking about the history of surrealism and doing some "automatic writing" on our own. The present class was on surrealism and politics. We were discussing André Breton's relations with the French Communist Party, particularly his difficulties in being accepted by the Party hierarchy once he decided to join in 1927. I had briefly explained some of the differences between Breton's conception of the surrealist revolution and the Party's conception of a social revolution. We were now reenacting one of the meetings between Breton and a tribunal from the Party Central Committee intrusted to probe his commitment to the cause of proletarian revolution. Everyone in the storefront, including me and a visitor who had wandered in for the afternoon, had acted out the roles of communist and surrealist. It had been quite a class.

Classes usually aren't this lively at Elizabeth Cleaners, though they are never subdued. My first class is scheduled for ten in the morning. I'm often the first or among the first to arrive at the storefront. Promptness is not one of our school's virtues. Classes scheduled for ten almost never begin before ten-thirty or eleven. Students arrive at various times, then leave for hot chocolate or coffee or have things to talk about before class can start. When enough kids have assembled and are ready to hold class, we begin. Our classroom is whatever section of the storefront we sit down in. We have only three desks but a whole variety of couches and easy chairs rescued from the sanitation men.

Classes usually begin with about fifteen to twenty students. It's rare that we end with that many. The kids are free to leave whenever they want, and many do, wandering off to the store or simply going in the back of the storefront to listen to records, read, or rap with their friends. This freedom has eliminated any need for classroom discipline. As Lisa told WCBS reporter Ed Bradly during our radio series, "There is no such thing as discipline. . . . If you don't want to be in a class or if you're bored, you just leave; you don't have to disrupt the whole class."

Those who do remain in class are not required to sit stiffly at attention. No one feels the slightest inhibitions about doodling, writing letters, or drawing while the class is going on. Of course, many of the students in each class do sit attentively throughout the period, but those who would rather do something with their hands are free to. At first I was bothered by what I thought was a lack of interest in the class whenever I saw kids doodling, etc. I soon realized that there was no reason this had to be true. Some students just aren't comfortable sitting absolutely still. And furthermore, it's not my place to define proper classroom behavior as long as no one is seriously disrupting the class. When that happens, the students themselves ask whoever's making too much noise to go to the back of the storefront. Sometimes, of course, things do get a little out of hand.

In the middle of one of my best—at least I thought so—history classes, just as I was getting to the climax of my exposition Paul burst into the storefront and threw an entire bag of chocolate kisses into the middle of the circle of easy chairs that was our classroom. From every direction, my students scrambled after the candy, completely oblivious to the historical conclusion I was drawing. Another time, someone's sandwich had been licked by a dog who was visiting for the morning. As the sandwich had been passed from student to student, each discussed with the next where it had been licked and whether this was dangerous to one's health—a minor distraction for those of us who had no idea why a simple sandwich was getting such heavy attention.

We've begun this section about daily life in the storefront with a description of scheduled classes. This is not to imply that classes are the only activities—or educationally the most important ones—that go on "inside the storefront." As a matter of fact, one of the distinguishing marks of the alternate high school is its de-emphasis of classroom-centered education.

Classes are merely one form of educational experience. There are many others that fulfill student needs that classes cannot. The remaining parts of this section will—we hope—indirectly convey some sense of the ways in which education at the Elizabeth Cleaners Street School has been extended beyond the confines of the traditional classroom.