

The Gilbert Glare

by Garrison Benson

There was no doubt about it - Miss Gilbert was the most despicable, villainous teacher I'd ever had. Of course, back in the second grade, I'd only ever had three teachers, but she stood head-and-shoulders above the others, anyway.

Each morning she'd storm into the classroom with a scowl on her face and smoke on her breath. Her stringy gray hair would be in a tightly-wound bun. She wore a pair of glasses with thick maroon frames, the outside corners coming up to a point, like little horns. The lenses magnified her merciless black eyes.

Despite her smoking (rumor had it she was up to six packs a day), she was an enormously fat woman. She must have weighed no less than three hundred pounds - the room shook with each step she took. I'd never seen an elephant in person, but I imagined it couldn't be much different. And her weight didn't make her look jolly, matronly, or even harmless. It only meant that the pure, unbridled evil within her occupied a larger and thus more terrifying space.

As soon as her mouth opened, her screechy, spine-tingling voice would spill out. It was as loud as fingernails on the chalkboard, and twice as cringe-worthy. Her tongue flicked about her mouth like a serpent's, carving out sharp, violent consonants.

"Repeat after me, children: 'Good morning, beautiful, gracious, witty Miss Gilbert.'" In unison we'd grumble it back to her like mindless drones. She'd feign modesty as she basked in her painfully-extracted praise. "Good morning, smelly children!"

Whenever somebody raised a hand, she would stop teaching, look down at them through her horned glasses, and glare. We called it the Gilbert Glare - it was legendary! According to

classroom lore, the Gilbert Glare in its most intense, concentrated form was entirely capable of causing a child to spontaneously combust into flames. We knew it was true, because the fourth-graders told us they actually saw it happen once. Most of the time, though, the Gilbert Glare just made kids cry.

Especially Emily. Beautiful, graceful Emily. How I longed for her! For her long, flowing brown hair, which reflected a brilliant gold in the sunlight. For her eyes, deep and blue as the sea - I could have spent hours in them, drifting about. Plus, she had both her front teeth!

I knew Emily must have felt for me as I did for her. How could God have crafted this wholly perfect creature, without putting a place in her heart for me? It was destiny. She was The One.

Miss Gilbert had made my sweet, gentle Emily cry no fewer than six times. (I was keeping track.) I burned with rage at this grave injustice. Undoubtedly, she was pure evil.

And yet... Every once in a while, she was different. Every once in a while, she'd take off her horned glasses, lean against the front of her desk, and tell us stories about Peru. She'd taught children there for three years, and had amassed a plethora of fascinating tales about volcanoes, lizards, and ancient Incan civilizations. Each time we were mesmerized - lulled into a billowy, dreamlike state.

Then she'd put her glasses back on and go back to spewing her hatred.

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"That Miss Gilbert sure is a pain in the B-U-T-T."

"Yeah..."

I thoughtfully chewed it over, as I also chewed my peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The weight of the problem pressing down on me drowned out the ambient noise of the cafeteria.

The gears in my mind began to turn. Gradually I began to recognize a peculiar pattern in the clockwork, vague but undeniable. Then suddenly, with a thud, it all became clear. "It's the glasses!", I exclaimed. "They're the source of her evil power! That's how she does the Gilbert Glare!"

Tommy looked up at me. He forgot to keep chewing and some soggy Cocoa Puffs rolled out of his mouth and down his shirt. "How do you know?"

"Cause! The only time she's nice to us is when she talks about Peru. And the only time she talks about Peru is when she takes her glasses off." *It's so simple! How did I not see it sooner?!*

"Huh??" Tommy was my second-best friend at the time, but he wasn't exactly the sharpest crayon in the box.

"The glasses - they're controlling her! Like a demon. You know?"

Tommy stared at me blankly.

"Gee whiz, Tommy, don't you read *anything*? *Lord of the Rings*? *Ivanhoe*? *King Arthur*? *Chronicles of Narnia*?"

"Well... I like to read *The Berenstain Bears*..."

I shook my head in wholehearted disapproval. "Well, if you knew *anything*, you'd know that the glasses are controlling her. It's like... Ok, you watch Spider-Man on TV, right?" Tommy

nodded. "You know in Spider-Man, how that computer chip controls Doc Ock?"

"Yeah..." Tommy slowly turned it over in his slug-like mind. "Hey... it's like... it's like the glasses are controlling her!"

"Exactly!"

"So... the glasses are evil... So what?"

"Well," I said, quickly connecting the dots in my mind, "Don't you see? We have to get them away from her, somehow. Then she'll always be nice, and the Gilbert Glare will never kill another kid again."

So we hatched a fool-proof plan. Afterward, we raised our juice boxes in a toast to this auspicious occasion. "To freedom!"

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We're in the classroom, right after recess. Miss Gilbert marches to the front of the room. "Hope you've had your fun, maggots!" She stares us down, each and every one in turn. As she turns her gaze to me, I can see the dancing fires of hell reflected in her lenses. "Sit down and shut up! It's time for me to cram some geography down your nasty little throats!"

Geography! Ah! Perfect! As subtly as possible, I give Tommy the super-secret signal: a thumbs-up. He cautiously winks at me, pauses for a moment, and then his hand shoots up. "Miss Gilbert, ma'am, I have a question."

"What do you want, you filth-ridden mutt?" The Gilbert Glare almost fries him, but Tommy keeps his cool.

"Miss Gilbert, ma'am... Are there lizards in Peru?"

Peru - her Kryptonite! Miss Gilbert's eyes open wide and she staggers backward. With much effort she grasps the frames of her glasses and yanks them off her face. She gasps for breath as her posture gradually softens, and after a moment she puts the glasses on the edge of her desk. Then, fighting back tears of joy, she begins to recount her many adventures teaching in Peru.

Then I begin to slouch. Slowly, slowly, I sink lower and lower in my chair, while casually glancing around the room, so as to dispel any suspicions. After several minutes and many Peru stories, I make it to the floor. I lay flat on my belly and snake my way across the room, propelling myself with my elbows. Nobody sees me - all eyes are glued to Miss Gilbert. I take soft, carefully-controlled breaths.

Finally, I arrive behind her desk. I sit up - it's high enough that nobody can see me. I peek over the top and note the location of the glasses. I duck back down and lean against the desk. I gulp. Then, taking a deep breath, I reach my hand up to the surface and wrap my fingers around the glasses.

They're hot! My instinct is to drop them, but I prevail. I can hear my flesh sizzling as the demonic spectacles pulse with their white-hot evil. Quickly, I slip them into my pocket. I sit behind the desk for a few moments, nursing my hand. Then I slink back to my chair, once more unnoticed.

I raise my hand and ask to go to the bathroom. "Of course, darling! Take as long as you need!"

A minute later and I'm standing over the toilet. I reach into my pocket, grab the glasses,

and quickly drop them in. The water sizzles. The glasses begin to disintegrate. I can faintly hear them crying out in agony.

Then I flush, and watch the darkness swirl away into the mysterious void. I stay until I hear the toilet give a satisfied burp.

When I get back to the classroom, I stop and stand erect in the doorway. "It's done!", I cry. "It's done!" My classmates all jump out of their seats and run to me, cheering. Some of the guys hoist me up onto their shoulders. "Hip, hip, hooray! Hip, hip, hooray!" I clasp my hands together and shake them triumphantly over each shoulder, grinning ear-to-ear. As they put me down, Emily approaches timidly. Overwhelmed by passion, I take her into my arms and dip her. Her sunlit hair dangles gracefully as we kiss. The class cheers, and begins to sing together, "Ding, dong, the witch is dead! The wicked witch! The wicked witch!"

That's how it played out in my mind, anyway.

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As expected, we started geography after lunch. I gave Tommy the thumbs-up. He stared at me blankly. I pointed to Miss Gilbert, then to my eyes, then back to Miss Gilbert. Equally blank staring. Finally I gave up on Tommy and raised my hand myself. "Miss Gilbert, ma'am... Are there lizards in Peru?"

"Yes, there are," she said. But, alas!, she went back to talking about Idaho. *Curses!* I raised my hand again. "Miss Gilbert, ma'am... What about snakes? Are there snakes in Peru?"

"Yes, snakes too. But we're not talking about Peru now." More Idaho. *Foiled again!!*

It seemed that all hope was lost. We were doomed to be forever tormented by this devil-woman! *Oh, woe is me!* But finally, Tommy remembered his lines. Without raising his hand, he blurted out, "Miss Gilbert, ma'am... Are there lizards in Peru?"

Miss Gilbert thought for a moment. "You kids really want to learn about Peru, don't you?" The clouds lifted! I nodded eagerly. And then... then, she took off the horned glasses. At last, everything was going according to plan! I flawlessly executed the slouching maneuver and began to slither across the room. I heard giggling behind me. *When did Peru get so funny?*

As I passed Emily's desk, I thought, *This is all for you, my love!* Invigorated, I pressed onward.

By the time I got behind Miss Gilbert's desk, I was breathing heavily and my heart was pounding in my chest. *This, I thought, This is the stuff of legends!*

Finally I reached over and began feeling around for the artifact of evil. I knocked over a cup of pencils and winced. But then I felt them - the horned glasses. I quickly grabbed them and withdrew my hand.

That's odd, I thought. *Room temperature.* I sat with my back to the desk and tried to catch my breath, turning the glasses over in my hands. *The quest is almost complete!*

Suddenly I heard a voice from above. Startled, I looked up to see Miss Gilbert leaning over her desk, a puzzled look on her face. "Is something the matter?"

My heart kicked back into overdrive. Miss Gilbert took me by the arm and pulled me to my feet. Noticing her glasses, she stretched out her hand. "Alright, that's enough. Give 'em here."

I stood there, my mind racing. *I can't give them back - she doesn't know their power! She*

doesn't know how they control her! She was getting impatient. Then, suddenly, a dangerous idea took shape. *No, I can't. But... but... for Emily... I must... it's the only way!*

So I put the glasses on. A crippling fog enshrouded my vision, but I felt a dark, enticing power coursing through my veins. Tensing my eyebrows, I focused a glare at the large blur in front of me. "Die!", I screamed. "DIE!!!"

I stood there, trembling, until Miss Gilbert leaned down and plucked the glasses from my nose. She was chuckling and shaking her head. "There's one for the books." I glanced around the room. Everyone was laughing hysterically. Tommy was trying to hide it. Emily was rolling around the floor, unable to contain herself.

Miss Gilbert cleared her throat. "Settle down, children, that's quite enough." She turned to me and rested her hand gently on my shoulder. "Alright... have a seat, mister."

I solemnly returned to my desk, wiser than before, and learned a bit about Idaho.