

## Teach Your Children Well: The Back-in-School Nightmare and Memories of Teachers Past

I just had a [coffee date](#) that turned into a dinner date that turned into indigestion. My [gray-haired, ponytailed boomer](#) companion was obviously in a funk, depressed and [kvetchy](#). This was *dating old*--when conversations are more about your past than your future. At the next table, a blonde, slender twenty-something couple sipped lattes and suggestively licked the foam off their lips while looking into each other's eyes.



Unable to sleep that night, early memories assailed me. They were of teachers past, especially from the infamous junior high that I attended in Philadelphia at an undisclosed date in the last century. (Names have been changed to protect the innocent). When I finally got to sleep, I had the classic school dream/nightmare. I was about to take a Biology final. I hadn't studied, couldn't find the right room, had lost my notes. It was a vivid dream, although in reality it's been decades since I barely passed Biology. I suspect my teacher gave me a passing grade because he had placed a meaty hand on my thigh during a supposed tutoring session, then thought of the possible consequences. [Me, too](#) wasn't even a glimmer in any woman's eye at the time, and if anyone had said [sexual harassment](#) to me I wouldn't have known what they were talking about. But I did get up and leave because his action was weird. Even I realized that the misplaced hand did involve biology, but not what was going to be on the test.

I'm [far from the only adult still having bad dreams about school](#), according to Kelly Conaboy writing in [The Atlantic](#). She interviewed [Dr. Deirdre Barrett](#), a dream researcher at Harvard University and the [author of Pandemic Dreams](#) ... "It's a very common theme for people who are far into adulthood, who have been out of school forever."

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Barrett explained that these dreams tend to pop up when the dreamer is anxious in waking life, particularly about being evaluated by an authority figure. Coffee dates are all about being evaluated and evaluating. Was the kvetchy boomer male the authority figure I was afraid I wouldn't measure up to?

According to [Jane Teresa Anderson, a dream analyst](#) and the author of [The Dream Handbook](#), "in each of these dream scenarios, we revisit the space where we first experienced success or failure based on our performance"... "feeling tested in life, feeling that you have to respond to other people's expectations, and feeling that I'm not meeting those expectations. So you think back to school."

The reason school dominates as a go-to anxiety setting, she says "is because school is where we build our understanding of how life works."

Conaboy's guess at the evolutionary purpose behind these dreams: "reminding aging dreamers that being young was actually not that fun." Barrett's theory: it's about "what was important to survival."

My junior high school wasn't the toughest in Philadelphia—at least we didn't have our own police precinct on campus—but the school was famous for regular visits by local law enforcement and rumbles in the cafeteria. One memorable incident occurred when two feuding fourteen-year-old girls who had been tearing out each other's hair suddenly joined forces to shut the door on the police car—while the police officer was still in the door, trying to get out.

The Home Economics teacher, Mrs. Gatskill, and the Sewing teacher, Mrs. Gallagher, rumored to be sisters, were both huge women with arms as big as hams. Mrs. Gatskill was known for eating everything that the girls cooked during class. Imagine consuming thirty-eight underdone baked apples for five periods a day, five days a week. The two Mrs. G's

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must have been off duty the day of the police car door incident. They were the lunchroom enforcers. If any student went too far out of control, they could threaten to crush them.

In those days, [Home Ec. and Sewing were girls-only](#) classes. Boys went to [Shop Class](#) to learn how to play with their tools. ([Home Economics](#) and [Shop Class](#) are also the names of a recent sitcom and documentary series, and there are calls in real life to [bring back Shop classes](#) in schools).



According to [The Secret History of Home Economics](#), the field of Home Economics was founded by unusual women, such as [Ellen Swallow Richards](#), “a Vassar-educated chemist who in 1870 became the first woman to attend M.I.T. While earning her second bachelor’s degree, she researched water sanitation and analyzed mining debris. She appreciated chemistry’s application to everyday problems such as testing wallpaper for arsenic. In an 1879 lecture, she chose a subject that would define her life’s work: “Chemistry in Relation to Household Economy,” writes [author Diane Dreilinger, journalist and education reporter.](#)

Another [trailblazer was Margaret Murray Washington](#). “Born in Mississippi to a Black washerwoman and an Irish railroad worker, Washington received a classical education at Fisk College in Nashville. At her graduation dinner in 1889 she met [Booker T. Washington, the great African-American educator](#), who hired her on the spot to teach English at Tuskegee Institute. She soon became the Dean of Women, and in 1892 she married the twice-widowed Washington. She embraced his philosophy of practical instruction along with the liberal arts. For women, that meant domestic science. “As the homes among the Colored race make progress,” she wrote, “so will the race itself advance.”

Many of Home Ec’s heroines were actually career women who got themselves out of the house while telling other women to stay home. The field is full of other contradictions,

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according to Dreilinger, such as middle-class condescension to women Home Ec pioneers considered to be their inferiors, segregation, and eugenics, coexisting with the urge to improve the home. None of these issues were on my 12-year-old mind. I just wanted to survive both classes with two of the most frightening women I had ever met.

Gym and [sex education were also girls-only](#), so Mrs. Chalikian could instruct us on the mysteries of male sexuality. ([Sex Education](#) is also the name of a Netflix comedy/drama series. I'm not the only one with these themes on my mind). Never wear shiny shoes to a dance, she insisted, and never do a slow dance with a teenage boy—vertical or horizontal. Mrs. Chalikian was a five-by-five gym teacher with horn rim glasses and a stiff black pageboy hairdo. She looked like a clothes trunk with legs. Sex, she solemnly intoned, was only enjoyable for married couples. Pairing the thought of sex with Mrs. Chalikian provoked a real state of cognitive dissonance and disbelief. Who had married these redoubtable women? It was impossible to imagine a Mr. Gatskill, Galloway, or Chalikian.



Ms. Weissenhofer, one of the gym teachers, detested non-athletes such as myself, and liked to kick doors open. You knew she was coming down the hall by the thudding sounds. I remembered the humiliation of taking the subway to school dressed in my [hideous gym outfit](#) to avoid being late for class and enduring further torment by the dictatorial jock, who would make me climb ropes—and fail—in front of the entire class as punishment.

It was impossible to hide the gym uniform under normal street clothes because of the numerous bulges it created. The uniform was a one-piece of an industrial blue color with snaps up the front, puffy sleeves, a cloth belt that twisted and wouldn't lay flat, and large gathered puffs around the hips. It cut off at the top of the thighs for maximum chafing in the groin area, and to showcase the deficiencies of any thighs that were not thin and perfect. It was evidently designed by someone who hated the female form and targeted female adolescents for maximum discomfort and inconvenience. What teenage girl needs puffy protrusions on her hips?

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(Weirdly, old-fashioned [vintage gym uniforms are for sale on Etsy](#). Some kind of sexual kink, like nuns or nurses? Why?)



Ms. Weissenhofer liked to terrorize Mr. Proust, a neat, fussy, ([closeted](#), I now realize) French teacher, who always wore blazers with geometrically folded handkerchiefs in the breast pocket plus a tie or cravat. He would demonstrate his strong disapproval of her uncouth behavior as she razzed him in the hallway by pursing his lips.

There was the middle-aged history teacher (ancient to us) who still dressed like a femme fatale with V-neck décolletage and swoopy hairstyles, although her tight belts would disappear under the weight of the fat around her midriff. She hated me because I was a history buff, and some of the kids asked me history questions instead of her. She once accused me of being a [Trotskyist](#)--an eighth grade subversive. I now realize that she was probably in a relationship with Ms. Weissenhofer, who would kick open the door to the history classroom, then linger to share whispered conversations.

Mr. Stout, a Santa Claus lookalike, let me draw cartoons on the blackboard every morning before school, only revealing my identity at the end of the year. Mr. Price resembled a nineteenth-century bank clerk with his small features and granny glasses, like the [Christmas Carol's Bob Cratchit](#) in Mr. Scrooge's accounting office. He made history come alive for us--a brilliant teacher and unsung hero of middle school education. Mr. Stratotti looked and sounded like a frog, and taught Spanish and Italian *al vivace* with gusto and brio.



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Last but not least was Mrs. Robbins, who taught English literature. She regaled us with stories of how she used to meet her lover in Italy every summer, and of how much she loved what was then [Yugoslavia](#), where men embraced and walked arm in arm down sun-dappled streets. I wonder if she was still alive when her ideal destination exploded with fratricide and genocide and [broke into different countries](#).

I was amazed that I still remembered all these teachers so many years later. All or most of them must have retired years ago and are probably no longer among the living. Except in my mind.

We students were a motley crew. Our lot included Natasha Novack, who resembled movie star [Natalie Wood](#) but was even more photogenic, and a muscled senior with [Grease-style](#) slicked-back hair who bragged of assignations with older women. It was rumored that he was really in his twenties and was being perpetually held back, condemned to Limbo, a life spent in Junior High. The rest of us were oddly shaped, half-baked, uncertain, unlike the sophisticated, socially media-savvy youth of today.



We never thought of our teachers as having personal lives, romances, sex lives, or [sexual identification issues](#). They weren't real human beings—they were teachers—too odd-looking, too strange, too old, to be in love, feel romantic, or have sex.

Probably how my Boomer date and I appeared to the [golden young couple](#) next to us sipping lattes.

