

Three

The Pitfalls of Potential

In high school, I never quite understood why so many of my extremely intelligent schoolmates—National Honor Society members with enviable grades who never forgot their homework or accidentally left their books at school—dreaded standardized aptitude and achievement tests. The time limits paralyzed them: they panicked and forgot everything they knew. Some of them even worried for days *before* the tests.

Me, I just *loved* standardized tests. I liked getting out of class to take them. The questions didn't bore me, and a little thought and concentration revealed most of the answers. Even better, nobody ever broadcast scores, handed out results in class, or announced scornfully to the class that "someone" had not followed directions. There were no obvious repercussions for messing up. For me, the tests were just fun. In fact, I found that, unlike almost everything else in the academic arena, I could actually focus on standardized tests long enough to complete them. Even the time limits helped. (I always waited until the last minute to do everything, anyway—and with a standardized test, the last minute is *now*.) I was like the contestant on the TV show *Jeopardy* who, when asked why he had become a *Jeopardy* contestant, replied, "Because my wife says I am a veritable fount of useless information." I was, too—and still am! Problem is, I just never seem to know the right stuff at the right time.

Unfortunately for me, the school system took the achievement scores quite seriously: They kept placing me in what would today be called the "gifted" classes even though I consistently made some of the lowest grades in those classes. Then, because I continued to "underachieve," teachers lost few opportunities to scold me for wasting my "potential."

Potential can be a horrible burden. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. My alleged potential has stalked me since I was old enough to know I wasn't measuring up. Whenever I went to see the high school guidance counselor—the football coach, who was famous for making his counselees cry—I always got a lecture about how hard college would be (*if* I got that far) unless I buckled down and did my work. I didn't cry; I'd heard it all before. In fact, official disapproval was one thing I had learned to cope with very early in my dealings with the Educational System.

It will probably not surprise you to learn that I did not shower myself with scholastic glory in high school. I goofed around in class, making it difficult for "Serious Students" ("Kate, there are some Serious Students in this class who have done their assignments") to get their work done. Teachers called me down like a fifth-grader, usually in front of the whole class. (Of course, this might have had something to do with my running back-row commentary, my habit of reading *MAD Magazine* in class, and my drawings of everything from the teacher to the Beatles.)

On the back row, I found an appreciative and entertaining group of guys (they were almost always guys) who could misbehave and *still* make Honor Society. These were folks who actually *belonged* in the gifted classes. Like me, they never had problems with standardized tests—but unlike me, they rarely got caught writing notes, drawing pictures, or commenting on classroom proceedings. On one occasion, however, one of them suffered by mere proximity to my desk. A teacher fairly shouted at me: "Kate, if you continue to behave as if life is just a big joke, you'll



Orrin, Ann, and Coke watch as Kate puts the finishing touches on her “work of art” for Mrs. Higginbotham’s Latin class.

never amount to *anything!* You and—Arthur!” My friend Arthur and I exchanged quizzical glances as to why he was singled out to share in my humiliation. We figured that Arthur had been caught laughing at some dumb thing I had done.

One day I drew Mr. Turner, my chemistry teacher, as a mad scientist. He confiscated the drawing, as most teachers did when they caught me, and continued with class. Later, Mama (who was by that time the school secretary) told me that Mr. Turner had brought the drawing to her—laughing so hard he could hardly talk. He wanted to keep it—I believe he even had it on his bulletin board for a while. (Every so often, I was lucky enough to find a teacher who understood that a person isn’t defined by her grades.) At the time, I was hanging onto “D” average in chemistry—a subject so impenetrable to me that I was scared to sit anywhere but in the front row for



Rosa D. Higginbotham

Mrs. Higginbotham, the only teacher I asked to sign my annual.

fear I’d miss out on some stray glimmer of understanding. Mr. Turner’s reaction to my drawing, though, meant more to me than a good grade in chemistry, which seemed out of reach anyway. Then came the exam, which accounted for a big chunk of our six weeks’ grade. And the exam was—yes! *A standardized test!* I made an “A” on the exam, and Mr. Turner told Mama that if I hadn’t been sitting right under his nose, he’d have thought I cheated.

Mostly, I scraped by with a “C” average—which brings us to one of the kindest things a teacher has ever done for me, although she probably did it to keep me from disrupting the class. Mrs. Rosa D. Higginbotham was the Latin teacher. We had to have two years of a foreign language to graduate from Orangeburg High. I chose Latin because you didn’t have to speak it. I had already, I think, almost flunked Latin once, and there was no way I’d graduate without passing every semester.

Fascinated by a huge, detailed illustration of “The Fall of Rome” in our textbook, I asked Mrs. Higginbotham if I could try to reproduce it in paint on brown paper all across the back of the room. She said yes—and allowed me to work on it in class! I didn’t know until later that she gave me enough credit for that mural to bump me up to a “D”!

I probably didn’t deserve the “D,” because after I had painted the outlines of the elements of the work and become familiar with which colors went where, I began numbering open spaces and mixing large batches of corresponding colors. After numbering each can of color, I encouraged classmates who had finished their work, or who had a free period, to go to Mrs. Higginbotham’s class and paint by the numbers. I had to clean up the painting—smooth out the rough edges—but did it look great! Some friends and I even had our picture taken for the school annual, pretending to work on the finished project, when, in fact, it had just been started.



An illustration for the high school annual.

I was the unofficial school illustrator, doing artwork for the school annual and making campaign posters for virtually everyone running for student body president my senior year. The only guy who didn’t ask me to do his posters actually won the election. His posters featured stenciled U.S. flags on either side of an inspirational patriotic quote. And then he blew everyone out of the water with his speech. (He’s a cardiologist now. He never had much trouble in school.)

Like many other cartoonists, I have not met with unqualified success as a member of the Work Force. It was a relief for me to learn, at our cartoonists’ conventions, that if you ask almost any one of us why he does cartoons for a living, you will get a variation on the reply, “Because it’s all I can do!”

How true.

My first job was after school and on Saturdays at a department store owned by the husband of one of my first cousins by marriage (which is partly how I got the job). I was a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore. My chief duties consisted of designing and changing window displays.

Having never made an actual study of merchandizing, marketing, or store window displays, the depth of my ignorance was so profound as to be merciful: at least I didn’t know how much I didn’t know.

Someone took me out back and showed me a warehouse stacked to the rafters with naked mannequin parts, Styrofoam arches, Easter-colored latticework, plastic flowers, gold-painted Greek columns, candelabra, and I don’t know what all—everything piled on top of something else and jumbled in front of other stuff that looked interesting until you pulled it out.

I did the best I could, figuring that they probably just expected me to fix up those windows using some of the stuff in the warehouse, dress the mannequins in some nice outfits, and scatter accessories around.

It later occurred to me that my reputed ability to draw pictures might have figured into my hiring. They probably thought I was an artist! Many people think that if you can draw, you have an eye for design. Not true in



My illustration for the Forensics Club.

INDUSTRIAL ARTS



MR. MANUEL P. BLACK—Agriculture; MR. W. J. STOUDENMIRE—Mechanical Drawing, Shop

my case, though perhaps I would have had a more developed sense of design if my high school had actually offered a course in art. The closest Orangeburg High School came to offering an art course was mechanical drawing, taught by Mr. Stoudenmire. I was the first girl in the history of OHS ever to take it. (Girls were supposed to take home economics.)

Mr. S. taught us how to use a T-square and triangle and to measure accurately; how to draw machine parts (and to read such drawings); and how to do architectural hand-lettering. But we learned nothing of color, line, form, texture, or composition in mechanical drawing. It wasn't really art. Which was okay with me, because—though I didn't know it yet—I was actually a cartoonist, the “real” artist's evil twin.

My window displays were fine, as far as I could see—which wasn't very far, considering my marketing and artistic limitations. I would crawl around in the warehouse looking for stuff that wasn't too beat up, tape it together, repaint over the last repaint, and drag it across the parking lot

and through the store to the front windows, which faced Orangeburg's main drag, Russell Street.

All the store buildings back then were bright, busy, and familiar: Fersner's Department store, Andre's Jewelers, J. W. Smoak's Hardware Store . . . and the magical, unattainable Fink's, where the financially gifted adolescents of Orangeburg bought their Villager blouses and sweaters, their Weejuns, their Gant shirts, their circle pins, and—the scents that *were* the '60s—Ambush (for girls) and English Leather (for boys).

The store where I worked was not cheap, but it was no Fink's. Our mannequins wore Bobbie Brooks and fake Weejuns. I posed them stiffly facing the sidewalk, in front of a spray-painted, fabric-draped wicker chair, which I had littered with more pocketbooks and jewelry than you would find at a DAR meeting. Everything in the window competed for attention. I had no clue what to do with the floors, though, so I usually left them bare—and my backdrops were always empty.

My cousin's husband came to me to register his concern and that of the salespeople who had become alarmed enough to report the horrors I was constructing. As we talked, and as the true depth of my ignorance began to reveal itself, he began to sweat. Did I have any plans for the Christmas displays? he bleated.

It was only October, I replied, logically; there was plenty of time. I thought I would just rummage around in the warehouse and see if I could find any Santas or elves or whatever. Maybe string some Christmas lights around the edge of each window, make a frame of lights . . . spray some fake snow all over. I really hadn't given it much thought. My cousin's husband blanched. His face took on the pale hue of those great big fish they used to sell at the grocery store, all laid out on the ice and staring at you with their round, round eyes.

Had I, he wanted to know several days later, ever heard of a man named Elvin?

Well, of course I had heard of Elvin. In fact, I was sick of hearing about Elvin. The salespeople—the glamorous lady in jewelry and cosmetics, the fellow in menswear who always smelled

of Hai Karate, the nice grandmotherly lady in accessories—they all talked about him. Elvin had been the window dresser before me. Elvin was a genius, they said. His windows had won awards, you know. He went to work in New York!

Everybody remembered Elvin's windows in detail—like the time he ordered Lord knows how many pounds of sawdust to be dyed green, pink, and yellow for his Easter windows. They told him he just *couldn't* dye all that sawdust, and Elvin just *did* it! And it was glorious!

But his Christmas windows—they were legendary! Why, last Christmas, right before he went to New York, Elvin did the best Christmas windows ever. He dressed the mannequins in shimmering white dresses, covered the floor in red velvety fabric, and wrapped huge boxes as colorful gifts, which he then stacked around the mannequins. He put smaller wrapped boxes on the bigger ones—and draped jewelry and other coordinating accessories on the boxes! But—most astounding of all—he then completely covered the windows on the inside with red paper! You couldn't see the displays!

“What on earth is Elvin up to?” everyone wondered. They couldn't *believe* it when Elvin climbed into those windows—and tore *holes* in the paper for the people to see through! Wasn't that just the most fabulous idea? Of course, it made customers curious, you know—and once they'd walked close enough to get a peek through those holes in the red paper and see those glittery dresses and gift boxes and jewelry and everything (all perfectly color-coordinated), they naturally came right on in to the store. Elvin was a genius; there was certainly no denying that.

Well, my cousin's husband said, he had spoken with Elvin in New York, and Elvin was willing to come give us a hand right after he got his windows done up there. No reflection on me, but they just thought I might need a helping hand. That's when I knew for certain that I was flunking the job. It felt like math or chemistry class all over again.

Elvin arrived right after Thanksgiving. He was tall and slender, with the fanciest hairdo I'd ever seen on a man. As soon as he arrived, Elvin took charge. He gave orders for staff from departments all over the store to follow. He had people climbing ladders or holding ladders for him to climb. He hauled stuff in from the warehouse and ripped it up and reassembled it to perfection. Elvin had a lot of charisma—personal magnetism. You just wanted to be around him all the time; he was so funny and smart. We started having a great time.

But then my cousin's husband decided that the store needed me in the gift-wrapping department, and I had to go work upstairs in customer service with three crabby ladies who all wished they were somewhere else. There I found yet another job I couldn't do. Complaints about me began almost immediately: I was too slow; I used too much paper, too much tape. I began to have severe chest pains and migraine headaches. I actually thought I was dying, but it turns out that it was only the first of a lifetime of anxiety attacks.

I kept thinking, “If only I can find something that I'm as good at as Elvin is at what he does, I'll be happy. . . .”

I never saw Elvin after that, but his Christmas windows were magnificent—though all I can remember is huge, sparkly, multi-pronged white stars hanging against a midnight-blue backdrop, with the mannequins in festive red.

My subsequent encounters with my cousin's husband have been interesting, though. Once, in the early 1980s, while I was the nationally syndicated political cartoonist for *The Greenville News*, there was a family gathering in Orangeburg. My cousin was there with her husband, my old employer. He and I discussed politics for a while. Then, as our conversation turned to the days when I had worked at his store, he said to me—in a resounding voice, using language that I repeat only out of faithfulness to his unrestrained style of speaking—“I swear, Kate, until a couple of years ago, I thought you were *retarded!*”

“Well, sure,” I thought. “Compared to Elvin. . . .”

The one time I can remember “living up to my potential” happened in the spring of my senior year in high school. Mrs. Cope, my English teacher, sent me—to my astonishment—along with the smartest people in our class to the University of South Carolina to compete with the rest of the smartest English students in South Carolina for a \$500 English scholarship sponsored by Governor Russell.

In the car going to Columbia, we all tried to figure out why I was there. We just assumed there had been some horrible mistake and that some deserving smart person was being unjustly deprived of a chance to compete. We joked about it, but I felt awful.

When we got to the competition, I had to sit in a large auditorium with smart people from all over the state and take a spelling test. I knew the words they called out but had no clue how to spell most of them. (My unique and creative spelling of “ecstasy” that day now pervades many aspects of the porn industry. Can you charge royalties on something like that?)

After the spelling test, we got to choose one of several topics and write a short essay. I chose the topic “In Defense of Idleness,” and wrote the essay—surprised at how easy the test had been. Except for spelling, there’d been no hard questions. All you had to do was write!

Comparing notes with the others on the way home, I realized that, not only I had hideously flunked the spelling portion of the test, but everyone else had written longer, more complex essays than the one I wrote. Chalk up another failure.

I *really* felt guilty when a girl in my English class (who hadn’t been chosen for the competition but who always made better grades than I) told me that “everybody” thought I had been chosen because my mother was the school secretary! I knew she was wrong, because I knew Mama wouldn’t allow such favoritism; but since I didn’t really know why I had been chosen, I couldn’t argue with her. (Mrs. Cope apparently told my mother at the time that she chose me because I had scored really high on a standardized achievement test, and because she thought I was “creative.” Mama remembers telling me this, but as I recall it, I had no clue why I’d been included until after the competition was over.)

When the scholarship winners were announced . . . well, they must not have counted spelling or something, because I was one of two people from Orangeburg County to win one of the governor’s English scholarships! I had beaten the smart people at something!

It did not keep me from secretly wondering, though, if maybe the people grading the test knew that my mother was the school secretary. . . .



MRS. CAROLYN W. COPE
English

"Hope we can
make 2 more years!"
'Mrs. Salley
(mother!)"



SECRETARY—Mrs. Myrtis S. Salley
ASSISTANT—Miss Brenda Singletary

Yes, Mama was the school secretary. But I believe her message in my annual sheds a bit of light on my precarious position as a student.



Jimmy Margulies' impression of me.