

The Penguin: A True Story, Part 1

by [Paul Illidge](#) (April 2024)



Schaatsende uilen, Adriaen Matham (attributed to), after Adriaen Pietersz. van de Venne, 1620 – 1660

Word travels at lightning speed in a high school. Rodd

Leonard, our new principal that September, hadn't been in the building more than fifteen minutes on opening day before someone dubbed him "The Penguin" because of his spitting-image resemblance to the criminal character of that name played by actor Danny DeVito in one of the *Batman* movies.

While Rodd was taller than the four-foot, eight-inch DeVito, the physical similarities between him and the caped crusader's arch-enemy were easily apparent. In his mid-fifties at the time, like DeVito's Penguin, Rodd was bald at the crown and had long stringy salt-and-pepper hair hanging down over his shoulders. He had the same round face, long pointed nose, toothy mouth and slit eyes that always appeared to be half-closed. The baggy plus-size suits he wore had clearly been tailored to accommodate his button-buster of a belly. The gold earring he sported in his right ear, along with the oversize down-at-heel salt-stained loafers on his feet completed a look that no one would have mistaken for that of a high school principal. As uncanny as it was, Rodd Leonard *was* The Penguin.

At the end of period one that day while classes were changing, Rodd stormed down the main hall intent on exerting his authority. An imperious almost truculent look on his face, his barrel chest out, his receding chin up and jutting defiantly, he barked at students to close their lockers and get to class. *Fast!*

I watched him approach from the door of my classroom where I was standing waiting for the usual first-day-of-school commotion to subside before retreating to my desk to do some paperwork during my spare period. Students were making way for Rodd, not because he was principal, but because he was a heavy man barreling along at such a rate that they risked injury if they didn't.

A group of senior students from my first period class had lingered in the middle of the hall to talk. They were holding up traffic in both directions.

Rodd arrived, saw the source of the congestion and waded in without a moment's hesitation, snapping at the crowd to *Quit their loitering and get to class!*

He sent the textbooks in one girl's arms flying. He elbowed a ninth grader in the jaw. Two boys who hadn't noticed what was happening until too late he knocked off their feet, one banging his head hard on the floor, the other smashing into a girl checking her makeup in her locker mirror—

“Quack!”

“Quack-quack!!”

“Quack-quack-quack!!!”

A chorus of angry penguin calls shot up behind Rodd.

He wheeled around, glaring, searching the faces of suddenly silent students for guilty looks.

“*Who did that?*” he roared, darting his eyes at me while he waited for an answer, his accusing look hardening suddenly into an angry squint—as if he suspected me of having something to do with the quacking.

Thinking fast, I put on a friendly smile, took my hand out of my pocket reaching to shake his and introduce myself—when the P.A. blipped on and a secretary asked *Mr. Leonard to come to the main office immediately.*

Rodd turned and without a word stomped off the way he had come, the toes of his loose-fitting loafers pointing outward, slapping the floor tiles of the now empty hall as I could imagine a penguin's might.

Disciplinary matters being the purview of vice-principals, our V.P. Jay Hooper was run off his feet the first two weeks of school with students lined up in the hall outside his office throughout the day. Despite the rocky start, which everyone

felt should have told Rodd something about his inappropriate behaviour, he issued a stern memo to staff informing us that he was going to get to the root of the *insolent disrespectfulness* being shown him and teach offenders a lesson. There were daily update memos in our mailboxes, staff directed to *keep their ears open* and send him the names of *suspected ringleaders*.

He began slipping quietly out of his office on a random basis when classes were changing, bounding down the halls with a sheaf of papers in his hand that he pretended to be studying as he moved—only to stop suddenly and wheel around on the crowd fast enough to catch *quackers* in the act.

Students weren't fooled for a minute. They waited until he had turned and resumed walking before letting go with a barrage of quacks that had him spinning around yet again, pointing a livid finger at the first group of kids he laid eyes on. Ordering them to report to Mr. Hooper's office *immediately*.

"But sir—"

"GO!"

The subsequent meetings in Jay's office lasted about five minutes. He would ask students why they had been sent to see him.

Mr. Leonard accused me of quacking, sir.

Quacking ...

Yes, sir.

Were you quacking?

No, sir.

Can you give me the name of the persons who were quacking?

I don't know who was quacking, sir.

According to some of my students speaking from first-hand experience, if it was a first quacking offence, Hooper would let you off with a stern warning. In the event of a second, the quacking would be reported in a phone call to a student's parents, informing them that their child had been suspended for five days. The suspension would be noted on the official school record and could have repercussions *down the line*.

One day, two kids in my eleventh-grade class put finger-telephones to their ears and demonstrated the *parental call*.

"Hello, Mrs. Margeson? Sorry to inform you, but your daughter Dale is receiving a five-day suspension from school."

"She is? What for?"

"Insolence to Principal Leonard."

"What kind of insolence?"

"She made insulting quacking sounds."

"I beg your pardon?"

"She quacked behind the principal's back."

"As opposed to what, quacking in his face?"

"No, that's not—"

"I was kidding ..."

By the end of the second week of school, sixteen students had been suspended. With each suspension the quacking intensified in protest. After someone pulled a false fire alarm, Rodd confronted the student body on the playing field as the fire trucks drove away. The moment he started to speak he was drowned out by the taunting quacks of fourteen-hundred students. Even teachers joined in the fun.

By the end of September, Rodd was in the habit of positioning

himself in the hall outside my classroom three or four times a day, sometimes more, for no apparent reason that I could see other than to let me know, through his coughing, throat-clearing, thumb snapping, whistling, humming, pointed stares and other attention-seeking stunts, that he *had his eye on me*.

This would happen both when students were in the room, and when I was sitting at my desk alone marking. I could have closed the door at any time, of course, but I liked to have it open.

It was harassment, to be sure, childish *Dumb and Dumber* stuff which seemed to be Rodd's specialty. There could be no doubt at this point but that the man was deeply troubled. We had yet to meet except for our brief wordless encounter on opening day. If we ever passed each other or were in the same room together he kept his eyes straight ahead and made a show of ignoring me. Rumour had it that he was fixated on me as the instigator of the whole Penguin business and was working to dig up evidence on me that he could put in an incident report to the superintendent for "insubordination," such reports the administration's tool for making a teacher's life hell: three such reports in one's file and you were put on "termination track," a euphemism for the paperwork preliminary to being fired.

Colleagues warned me to be careful and watch my step: Rodd was known to be a vicious character. He had forced the heads of English at his last three schools to take emergency stress leave so miserable had he made their lives with his bullying and abuse. He had a well-known pathological hatred of English teachers in general and Heads of English departments in particular. Clearly the game was on; Rodd was hunting for another English head to put on his trophy wall.

The stakeout didn't bother me especially. I was getting my work done, classes were extra-entertaining with The Penguin carrying on the way he did, however one day when I was talking

to the Head of Special Education, Jan Percy, whose office was directly across the hall from my classroom, I mentioned the nutty goings on.

She laughed, closed the door to her office just in case Rodd was skulking about, and told me not to give it a second thought. She apologized for not realizing what had been taking place in the hall. It definitely constituted harassment—not that I could do anything about it one way or another of course. The truth was, Rodd was harassing Jan too. He'd become infatuated with her to the point that he'd begun stalking her, or that's what it sure felt like to Jan.

He stopped by the SpEd office half a dozen times a day, sometimes on the pretext of school business, sometimes not. If Jan was busy with a student or on the phone when he came by, hanging around in the hall outside my classroom watching me didn't make him look so obvious. Or so Rodd probably thought. The whole thing was creepy and pathetic as far as Jan was concerned, humorous at first, though worrisome as the extent of his obsession became clear.

The principal's office next door to the staff room, Rodd had a way of always turning up when Jan was there. The same with the photocopy room and the cafeteria. Rodd joked about it. Sometimes he popped up in the parking lot when she was leaving to go home.

Aggravating as it was, Jan confided she'd begun exploiting the situation for the needs of her department. She had been alerted ahead of time that Rodd, a former Phys Ed teacher and football coach, wasn't a fan of special education programs, even less of special education students, about whom he'd been heard making disparaging jokes, and of which Jan was keeping a careful record. As she was of his sexual intimations, innuendo and inappropriate remarks on her hair, clothes and jewellery, this last of special interest to Rodd: a sign, so he told Jan, that she was *one classy lady*, and he *liked his ladies classy*.

It revolted her, but she wasn't going to let him get away with it. She knew exactly how to make him pay if we ever needed to.

She asked to include our conversation in her notes, and suggested that from now on we document Rodd's "unprofessional" dealings with us and other staff or students jointly.

I didn't have to wait long for my first contribution.

Two days later, Jan's office door closed, Rodd loitering in the hall waiting for it to open, an idea came to me. I walked over to the door and, catching him completely off guard, invited him into my grade 11 general English class, kids who hoped to enter the workforce after high school rather than go on to college or university, for which many of them didn't have the marks. Sixteen-year-olds mostly, good kids, strong personalities, fun to teach, many of them with attention deficit hyperactive disorder which could make them rambunctious at times. While they weren't keen on *doing books*, they liked debating because they got to talk and didn't have to write anything, and in one of those education-system anomalies that sometimes occur, they especially liked grammar exercises. Not that they were interested in the finer points of language by any means, but they liked the fact that the questions called for definite right and wrong answers. In their opinion that made grammar enjoyable. Like a game show. And me the game show host, a persona that I couldn't have been happier to play.

Introducing Rodd as our *guest contestant* on the show that day, I had him join me at the front of the class. The kids kept polite straight faces as he walked over, his loafers clacking on the tile floor, hands in his pockets, chuckling at the novelty of the experience. His hair, I remember, was in a ponytail that day.

"We're doing homonyms today, Mr. Leonard!" I began in my best *Price is Right* voice, handing him the question sheet that kids

were to have completed for homework. "Words that sound the same but have different grammatical meanings.

"Homonyms. Right," Rodd said tentatively. "Always like a good homonym," he added, throwing the class a knowing grin as though they would get the joke.

They didn't.

"Are you ready to play?"

"Let's go."

I began taking up the homework. The first three questions I put to students who'd raised their hands. All three had the right answers. The fourth question I put to Rodd.

"When it was time to go," I said reading from the sheet, "the students picked up a) *their*, b) *there*, or c) *they're* textbooks."

Rodd studied the question. "C", he said confidently. *They're*."

I paused to consider his answer. "Sorry, Mr. Leonard, I'm afraid the correct answer was *their*, t-h-e-i-r. The possessive. The books *belonged* to the students."

Rodd checked the question sheet. "You sure?"

"I am—but no matter. Let's move on to number five. Kristy?"

"—No, I'll take this one," Rodd said glancing down at his sheet.

I snuck the class a warning look, ran a quick finger across my lips zipping them up and, knowing his reaction could be extreme in the event of another wrong answer, let them see my crossed fingers.

They took my point and remained calm.

Calmer than me. This was one of the easiest of our grammar exercises. I'd thought taking it up—something the kids were good at and enjoyed—would present them in a positive light, and that Rodd would have no trouble answering the questions correctly, thus rising in their estimation. I saw the gesture as a normalizing one to let him experience kids in a non-threatening classroom atmosphere and have them look at him with a less judgmental attitude as well. I thought maybe seeing each other in a different light might ease the worsening tensions within the school and improve relations between Rodd and the student body, which at that point couldn't have sunk any lower.

How wrong I was.

The correct answer to the next question was *Your*. Rodd selected *You're*. Again he kept his eyes on the answer sheet, frowning as though there'd been some mistake.

There hadn't been.

"Two in a row," one girl giggled.

Maybe a dozen kids laughed in response.

Rodd crumpled the question sheet in his hand.

More kids laughed. I ran a finger across my neck in an attempt to cut them off, but Rodd did. His face reddening with rage, he erupted in a Vesuvian rant: "—Laugh all you want! Go ahead! But you know what? *You know what?! You'll never amount to anything you people once you leave here! None of you! You don't have what it takes! I'm a high school principal! Do you know what it takes to become a high school principal? No you don't! None of youse will ever be a high school principal, ever!! Think about that next time you want to laugh at me. I'm a high school principal!!*"

With that he made for the door, his loafers clacking in the

stunned silence until as he walked out the door there was a lone derisive *Quack!*

Rodd stepped back in, coldly staring around the room for a few seconds before raising his arm and pointing to a boy named Ted Stanley sitting in the back row doodling in his notebook.

“You!” he called.

The girl sitting next to Ted nudged him.

“Bring that boy to my office at 12:45, Mr. Illidge,” was all he said.

And out he went, slamming the door behind him so hard that several pieces of chalk bounced off the blackboard rail and fell to the floor . . .

Ted and I met in the guidance office a few minutes before 12:45. Six-foot four, two-hundred and twenty pounds of solid muscle (he worked part-time at the family cement factory), Ted was a gentle giant, a simple and friendly guy who was amused by most things, though he wasn't that day.

“The guy's a complete asshole, sir.”

“You won't get an argument from me.”

“Maybe I'll tell him my name's Ted with two Ds.”

We laughed, walked across the hall to Rodd's office and went in.

Suit-jacket off, the ponytail gone, hair flowing freely over his shoulders, Rodd sat at his desk eating a submarine sandwich. He shifted back in his chair when we came in, his eyes widening noticeably when he saw how tall and muscle-built Ted was.

Talking with his mouth full, Rodd told him to sit down, that I could stand. Stray bits of lettuce, cheese and tomato lay

sprinkled on his shirtfront. He continued chewing.

Ted stared straight ahead. "I'll stand thanks."

"Take your hands out of your pockets."

Ted left them there.

Rodd swallowed his bite of food. "I told you to sit down."

Ted didn't move.

"What's your name?"

"Ted."

"Ted what?"

No answer, Rod glanced at me. "Mr. Illidge?"

"Ted," I repeated.

Poised to take another bite of his sandwich, Rodd threw me an irritated scowl. "What does your father do, Ted?"

"None of your business."

"You're not helping your case here."

"What case?"

"You were insubordinate to me."

"How?"

"Mr. Illidge, explain to him what insubordinate means."

"I know what it means. I didn't quack at you. There's a reason why people do. *Quack-quack.* "

"That's enough."

"They think you look like—"

“Enough!”

“—The Penguin.”

Rodd started to choke on a bite of sandwich. He sat forward in his chair, puffing with the effort, coughing, clearing his throat, using a shaky knuckle to clean crumbs from around his mouth. “I’ll make this short and sweet, buster.” He coughed. “Tell me why I shouldn’t suspend you for five days?”

Ted leaned forward, made his hands into fists and placed them on the desk in front of Rodd, who looked warily up at him. “You try suspending me and I’ll pick you up and toss you through your fucking window, asshole.” He raised his hand fast like he was going to punch Rodd. Rodd cowered in his chair. Ted lowered his hand, snatched the uneaten half of the sub, turned around and walked out.

Nothing for me to do or say at that point, I turned and walked out too, leaving Rodd alone with his humiliation.

I followed Ted into the main office where he was just tossing the purloined sub in the trash can beside Rita the attendance secretary’s desk—when the door to Rodd’s office slammed shut behind us with by now familiar fury.

Knowing retaliation against me was inevitable but not wanting any to fall Ted’s way, before we parted in the hall I explained to him that it would be best if we kept details of what happened in the office between ourselves. It was the kind of thing that could get quickly out of hand if it was picked up by the rumour mill. Leonard had grounds for involving the police, he still might, and that wouldn’t be good for anybody.

Ted agreed, said he had no problem keeping things confidential. He said it had all been worth it just to see the Penguin scared shitless. But he did want to notify me that he’d be spelling Tedd with two Ds on his assignments from now on!

Just before lunch on Tuesday of the following week, Rodd's secretary Judy beamed into the classroom on the intercom asking me with what sounded like fear in her voice to come to Rodd's office right away—pausing while he said something to her in the background. He sounded angry. Judy hung up.

I arrived to find him, Judy, a service man in overalls with a tool belt on and the four main office secretaries with a range of emotions on each of their faces as they regarded the closed door to Rodd's office where the service man had just installed a felt-backed, polished brass name plate with **ROD LEONARD, Principal** engraved on it.

Rodd was livid, as angry as I'd ever seen him. *"What the hell were you doing telling Judy my name was spelt with only one D? My name has two Ds!!"*

I looked to Judy. Clutching a handkerchief, she had been crying. Standing beside her, the service man offered a weak smile and a shrug.

"Not according to the school board it doesn't," I said to Rodd. "I phoned human resources just to make sure."

"I added in the D on the purchase order. Judy said you made her cross it out."

"I did."

"You had no authority to do that."

"Sure I did. I'm head of the English department. The short form of Roderick is Rod, one D. Like the short form of Robert is Rob, one B. I don't see that there's any problem, unless maybe they thought the extra D was a spelling mistake on your part."

He exploded. *"That I didn't know how to spell my own name?! Into my office. NOW!"*

Within seconds he'd slammed the door, grabbed me by the front of my shirt and shoved me up against the wall hard enough to make my shoulders hurt. Looking up at me, breathing hard, seething mad, he shook as he talked.

"You know what the problem with you English teachers is?"

"No idea."

"You do too many books! You know how many books I've read in my life?"

"No idea, Rodd."

"One."

"One book in your whole life?"

"Know what it was?"

"No idea."

"Shoeless Joe."

"The Iowa Baseball Conspiracy by W. P. Kinsella was the book. *Shoeless Joe* was the movie with Kevin Costner."

"No, I read *Shoeless Joe*. His picture was on the cover."

"Whose? *Shoeless Joe Jackson's*?"

"No," he tightened his hold, stopped shaking and started choking me, "*Kevin Costner's*."

"You'd better release me," I sputtered. "I wouldn't want to bring Ted Stanley in on this."

He ignored the threat, tightened his grip so it was hard to swallow. "Suit yourself," I said. "I'll send him down when we're finished here." After deliberating for a few seconds, he loosened his grip.

"Thank you."

"I'm sending this nameplate back and charging the new one to your English budget."

"Six-hundred and eighty dollars?" (I'd noticed that amount on the purchase order. Judy told me Rodd had declined the customary \$29.95 plastic one). "We can't afford that."

"Afford it you will."

"I have a book order going in for twenty-three hundred dollars next week."

"Not anymore."

"How do you expect us to teach English without any books?"

"You can teach your grammar."

"You can sit in on the classes."

He bristled. "For *that* you can say good bye to a grand on top of the six-eighty. Plus I want to put *Shoeless Joe* in the order. All the kids should read it. Now get out of here."

A screwdriver in one hand, a pair of pliers in the other, the service man stepped back from the door to let me pass before resuming work. I caught his arm. "Hang on," I said, and the next second Rod with one D Leonard's door slammed shut.

That was Tuesday. Jan and I met after work Wednesday to finalize plans we had for circumventing Rodd and submitting my department's fall book order by noon on Friday as originally planned.

Jan arranged a short meeting with Rodd Thursday morning at 10:15 for him to sign what he would think was a Special Education purchase order for \$2,300, when the money would actually be coming from the English budget thanks to a carefully orchestrated performance she would put on for Rodd

that would so distract him he'd sign anything Jan asked him to.

He was waiting for her outside his office when she arrived, looking chic in a navy skirt suit with matching heels, a diamond ring, diamond earrings, a stunning diamond pendant dangling just above her pushed-up cleavage, visible what with the top two buttons of her white silk blouse undone. Along with the flashing green eyes and teasing smile, Rodd was altogether entranced.

They entered his office, bantered while they sat down, Jan adjusting her chair to show her crossed legs to best effect.

Rodd was dazzled, unable to take his eyes off her, putty in her hands just as she'd hoped he would be. Between idly touching her fingers to the diamond pendant, smiling, and laughing lightly as she talked, Jan said he was so smitten when she stood up, leaned over the desk and put the purchase order in front of him that he barely glanced at it he was getting such an eyeful of boob.

Though she admitted that she felt like throwing up at several points, Jan said her revulsion passed when she remembered she was doing this for a good cause.

I wrote the incident up for our *evidence portfolio*, which Jan kept locked in a bottom drawer of one of her filing cabinets. If nothing else, seeing events written out and described validated that they were real, that we weren't going crazy, at least not yet. The school board had foisted a first-class lunatic on us. At some point they needed to hear about the damage being wrought in the name of education.

The book order made it in on time, Rodd none the wiser ...

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Paul Illidge's most recent book is the true crime financial thriller *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), a "fascinating story" (Frank Abagnale, Jr., author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a "gripping and intricate read" (Conrad Black). His book *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail* Best Book of 2014. Books in his *Shakespeare Novels* series *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, are all available internationally at www.kobobooks.com

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