Mr. Kravitz

By Mitchell Silver

Richard wondered whether Mona Kravitz, the schlock novelist whose obituary he was now reading, was the daughter of Dr. Kravitz, his elementary school principle. True, "Kravitz" was a common enough name in New York, but the obit described Mona as the daughter of an elementary school principle, and that tidbit surely brought his speculation into the realm of plausibility. There may have been more than one mid-20th century NYC school principle named Kravitz, but there couldn't have been that many. And the ages were right. Richard figured that putting Dr. Kravitz in his mid-fifties in 1956, might well give him a daughter born in 1928, the year, the obit said, of Mona's birth.

It was not, however, the possibility of Mona's being Dr. Kravitz's daughter that excited Richard's interest. That alone would only have elicited a routine "small-world" reflection. Richard never read Mona's Hollywood novels, and Dr. Kravitz himself was a very minor character in Richard's childhood. Richard doubted that he laid eyes on Dr. Kravitz more than three times during his seven years at P.S. 36. His only image of Kravitz was of a man, looking like Jim Backus, alone in his office, working on his putting game behind the School Principal's door. Richard doubted that this was an actual memory. It must have been some T.V. provided archetype for the ineffective, out-of-it CEO. That's probably why he remembered Kravitz as looking like Jim Backus. While there must have been some vague resemblance, Backus, the actor who played a boob husband in some fifties sit-com, and was the voice of the unwittingly blind Mr. Magoo, was the culturally apt representation of a school principal whose most salient feature was his moral and physical absence from the lives of the children attending his school.

In the experience of the pupils of PS 36, the real power in the school was wielded by Assistant Principle Milton Levy, known to the older kids as Liver Lips Levy. Levy, in spite of his ethnicity, gave off more of a "Sister of Perpetual Disciple" than a Jim Backus vibe. Levy wasn't given to screaming, but he was strict and punitive in a chillingly quiet way. He was a small, trim man, with horn-rimmed glasses, and, as his street moniker suggested, full lips; if he wasn't the one making policy, he sure was the one enforcing it. To all appearances, Levy was the only one who could dispense grace for a transgression, which he rarely did. One often looked at those juicy lips, the only moist part of this otherwise dried -up man, in hope, not of mercy or forgiveness, but just of inaction. It was enough that he didn't speak, that he didn't pronounce verdict and sentence. From Levy the children looked for no favors. They simply looked to be overlooked.

But it was Mrs. Kravitz, Dr. Kravitz's wife, Mona's possible mother, that aroused Richard's interest in the novelist's death. Richard's memory cast a hybrid of the Margarets, Dumont and Hamilton, as Mrs. Kravitz. She only had two scenes in Richard's childhood. But they were important scenes, and Mona's obit cast them in new light.

Richard was seven years old, in second grade, when, one morning, instead of the regular teacher, the young, kindhearted Mrs. Camins, Richard discovered the school secretary in front of the class, seeing to it that each student hung up his coat, got to her seat, and started the busy-work up on the blackboard. Confirmation that something substantial was up, came in the form of Mr. Levy's entrance and the secretary's departure. In a matter-of-fact manner that betrayed indifference to the import of his announcement, Mr. Levy told the class that Mrs. Camins was ill, and would be absent for the day. Richard immediately steeled himself to the thought of a day with Mr. Levy as his teacher. Not a happy prospect, but a comforting daydream compared to Levy's next words: the substitute teacher, due to arrive within the half hour, was to be Mrs. Kravitz.

No name could have more horrified Richard. Deep into his adulthood, when he wanted a concrete example of dread, he would call up the emotion he felt in second grade when Liver Lips Levy told him that he was to spend the day under the authority of Mrs. Kravitz. Theoretically, Richard knew that the stretch of time between Mrs. Kravitz expected 9am arrival and the 3pm end-of-school bell was finite, but he could only conceive of it as an endless terror. What did it matter if it had a theoretical end if it was unendurably long? Seven year old Richard was unfamiliar with the name Auschwitz, (though he had heard of "Concentration Camps" --Aunt Basha had been in one, had the number on her arm that he knew it would be impolite to refer to in her presence), but whenever the grown Richard recalled his feelings of that morning, he thought of them as what he might feel if told he had to put in a 9 to 3 shift in Auschwitz. If every minute constitutes an eternal hell, 6 hours might as well be six centuries. And Richard's panic was commensurate with that fearful temporal expanse.

Richard remembered Mrs. Kravitz only from the single day she had been his substitute teacher in first grade. While he vaguely recalled an overall stern women, his terror derived from the memory of a particular event: Mrs. Kravitz had slapped Eddie Canstoga across the face. It was just one slap, but it looked hard, and it was shocking. By the mid-1950s, it must have been illegal to hit kids in the NYC schools, or at least hitting was sufficiently disapproved of to make it very rare. Richard had never seen it before Mrs. Kravitz wailed on Eddie Canstoga.

In Mrs. Kravitz's defense, Eddie could be pretty provocative. Had he been a schoolboy a few decades later, he would be the carrier of a panoply of diagnoses. Even then it was obvious to the other seven year-olds in the class that Eddie couldn't stay with the program much beyond 45 seconds at a stretch. Richard remembered a period of weeks where Eddie would pop out of his chair a dozen times a day and do a jaunty little jig while rapidly reciting "*Lincoln, Lincoln, I been thinkin, what the hell have you been drinking. Looks like water, looks like wine, oh my gosh, it's turpentine!*" Richard found the act amusing, even on its 134th performance. He wasn't confident that it was actually clever--he doubted that there was any historical evidence tying Lincoln to turpentine-- but Eddie clearly was very impressed by the ditty, and although Eddie was nuts, Richard couldn't help being impressed by just how much Eddie was impressed. Perhaps there was something more to it than the rhyme and the image of Lincoln drinking that-which-was-meant-not -to-be-drunk, and Richard hoped to discover it on every new hearing. But it was understandable that teachers, with their own agendas, which did not include deconstructing the "Lincoln, Lincoln" lyrics, would be irritated by Eddie's antics.

It may have been the "Lincoln, Lincoln," bit or some other shtick of Eddie's that elicited the slap. Whatever it was, it was on the level of talking out-of-turn, or laughing too much, or getting out of his seat without permission, or making a face, or some such forbidden, perhaps obnoxious, certainly disruptive, but not dangerous or grossly offensive behavior that brought Mrs. Kravitz's hand suddenly and smartly across Eddie's cheek.

One slap. But it was shocking to Richard. It challenged his assumption that, although he spent his days in an oppressive institution, there were clear limits to what the authorities would do and allow. Mostly, they could bore you and berate you--not pleasant-- but a manageable burden. But the public infliction of physical pain at the whim of a teacher, a substitute teacher, apparently an absolute sovereign in the classroom, violently shattered Richard's sense that he knew the school ropes, and that they were fundamentally safe. Sure, the other kids were wild cards, indeed you counted on the powers to keep the other kids in check. But discovering that the government was more threatening than anarchy was appalling.

The slap was pretty hard, but Richard didn't think it could have caused that much physical pain. It was, however, humiliating. Not just to Eddie. To all of the children. This was a forceful demonstration that they were without rights. If she could slap one of them, she could slap any of them, and if she could slap them once, why not twice, or a dozen times. When other kids hit you, you could fight back, or seek the protection of teachers. But you couldn't hit the teachers back, and who was there to protect you from them? Who could protect you from the protectors? When your parents took an occasional swipe, you were protected by the love you were sure they bore you. They weren't going to seriously hurt you because they cared as much (if not more) about your well-being as you did. But in the face of the unconstrained power of the school authorities, your sole

protection was their personal kindness and civilized self-restraint. Mrs. Kravitz demonstrated she had neither. Richard didn't doubt that he could keep a low enough profile to avoid being hit for the day, but spending the day under her rule would convert the normally tiresome time into terror time.

Richard was desperate. He had to get out, get home. He lived two blocks from the school, a four minute walk. At seven years old, like most of the kids in the class, he was already, walking to and from school unescorted. If he could get back home, he could explain to his mother that Miss Camins was absent and that a day with Mrs. Kravitz would be nightmare. His mother was bound to be his savior, his refuge. But first he had to get to her. The walk was easy. Permission to get out of the building was hard.

He approached Liver Lips .

"Mr. Levy, I need to go home, I forgot something. I'll come right back."

"What did you forget?"

"Something I need. I'll come right back."

Clearly, Richard hadn't thought through his approach. Panic, by definition, will do that.

"Sit down, son."

"Please, I'll be right back." Richard wasn't bawling, but he was visibly weeping.

"Sit down."

Bowels churning, throat constricted, Richard returned to his desk. Sitting there teary-eyed, trying to compose himself, from the seat diagonally behind him, Richard heard Sophie Mimucci say to Terry Serrio, "Richard is blue."

This was becoming the worst of all possible worlds for Richard. He had failed to avoid the day of dread with Mrs. Kravitz, and now he was being pitied by Sophie Mimucci and Terry Serrio. Richard was mortified. Although he normally sought the attention of Terry and Sophie, he felt degraded by the condescension he perceived in their pity. He wanted to be admired, adored, respected, by these pretty, slightly exotic girls (they got early release on Thursday afternoons to attend something called "catechism" school). Instead, his panicky ploy, and his crestfallen reaction to its failure, had revealed him as a pitiable coward. Social dynamics with Terry and Sophie were not always easy, but even when they poked his head with pencil points, he received it as egalitarian horseplay, even as flirtatious. He might wish their interest took a less painful form, but an attack on his head was no slight on his manhood. But pity? Only the pitiable are pitied.

Richard's mortification was tempered by perplexity. "Richard is blue." What an odd locution. Not "sad" or "scared," but "blue." He tried to console himself with the thought that maybe it connoted an almost romantic description, the melancholy of a sensitive soul. On the other hand, it could be pointing at timidity, indicating the trait known as being a "baby" or a "chicken." Perhaps it was a sort of euphemism, meant to describe his weakness without sounding too harsh. That would be sweet of Sophie. She may not have admired him, but at least her compassion was real.

Richard was determined to salvage what was left of his image. He would play the stoic. Yea, though he walked through the shadow of the evil valley of Mrs. Kravitz, he would show no further fear, for Terry and Sophie were with him, sitting in judgment. (Richard began to learn that morning, what later life would further confirm-- his moral pride and his lustful aspirations were his primary motivational counters to his powerful instinct to flee or crumble in the face of danger.) Bring on Mrs. Kravitz; anything Terry Serrio and Sophie Mimucci could take, he could pretend to take, proving himself worthy of their hoped-for adoration.

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When Richard went home at noon for his lunch break, three hours after Mr. Levy's announcement, he marveled at the morning's events. Mrs. Kravitz had turned out to be perfectly acceptable. If not as gentle as Miss Camins, she was still well within the disciplinary norms of the day. The morning was reasonably relaxed, and at times Mrs. Kravitz was downright cheerful, seemingly enjoying the children's company. True, that provocateur, Eddie Canstoga, was not in the class, nor any of the other semi-lunatic kids sprinkled throughout Richard's school years in those pre-ritalin days. But even taking into account the lack of Eddie or his likes from the class, Richard was struck by how mistaken he had been. How could he have been so wrong about Mrs. Kravitz? How could his feelings have been so disproportionate to the evidence? Mrs. Kravitz couldn't have changed *that* much. He must have had a faulty memory of her from the year before, or he must have over-generalized from a single slap, or he had simply been so traumatized by that surprising slap, that he suppressed the evidence, that must have been there, that Mrs. Kravitz was quite tolerable as a substitute teacher. In any event, poor judgment had led him to ill-grounded certainty, which led to unjustified terror, resulting in avoidable embarrassment. Richard decided that henceforth he'd have better grounds before allowing himself to be overcome by emotion. Even if Mrs. Kravitz *had* proven a bit nasty, how could he have thought getting through a school morning would have been an unmanageable task? How could he have been so terrorized that he became unmindful of his standing with Terry Serrio and Sophie Mimucci? The sole and overwhelming desire of his heart three hours earlier, to be home with Mommy, was now realized, and he hadn't the least desire to stay there and skip the afternoon school session with Mrs.Kravitz. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He had embarrassed himself unnecessarily.

Reading of Mona Kravitz's death nearly half a century after her speculated mother had been his substitute teacher for the second and last time, Richard smiled to read that Doris Kravitz, Mona's mother, had been highly regarded for her charitable efforts on behalf of kids with polio. It confirmed Richard's ancient conclusion that his original opinion of Mrs. Kravitz's monstrous nature was without substantial foundation. But he was given pause by the next to last paragraph of the obituary: "Ms. Kravitz was deeply shaken when her sister, bother-in-law and their two children were murdered during a burglary in their Brooklyn home in the Fall of 1956." Richard figured that would have been just a couple of months before Mrs. Kravitz slapped Eddie Canstoga.