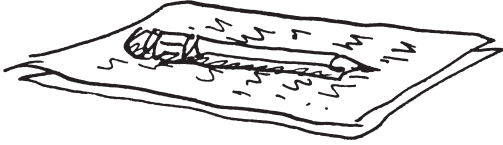


# The New Art Teacher



Charlie hated art. If you mentioned art around Charlie, his stomach would gurgle like a clogged drain. If he even thought about art, Charlie's stomach would go *Spurt! Squeak! Pop! Grrrrrrrrrr! Pip! Pip! Grrrrrrrrrrrr!*

Nothing Charlie ever created during art period came out the way he wanted it to. His drawings looked like scribbles a kindergartner had done. Every animal he made out of clay looked more like a vegetable. Any project he tried with glue became a smeary mess. Watercolors? Forget it. Charlie's paintings of mountains became brown stains, and his ocean paintings turned to blue blotches.

So now you know why Charlie's stomach erupted every Friday afternoon. Friday after-

noon was art period in the room at the end of the hall. And the worst moment of Friday afternoon, the time that sent Charlie sputtering the loudest, was the time when the art teacher hung the completed art projects on the bulletin board.

What could be worse than to have your embarrassing drawing or painting on display for everyone to see? The art teacher always found something kind to say about Charlie's artwork, but how could Charlie help noticing that his pictures ended up hanging at the bottom of the display or behind the door or, worse yet, upside down?

One Friday afternoon Charlie felt lucky. The art teacher was late. Charlie sat at his desk in the front row, both hands on his stomach, his eyes glued to the clock.

"Maybe the art teacher got sick," he said. "Maybe she won't come at all today. Maybe she was fired and we'll never have art again."

After ten minutes of waiting, the class



became squirmy. The noise in the room grew and grew.

“So where is she?” asked Clara, who was the best drawer in the class and was eager for her weekly opportunity to show off.

“We will probably make some sort of turkeys today,” said Howard, who remembered Thanksgiving was next week. “Pinecone turkeys, paper-plate turkeys, apple turkeys, or handprint turkeys, what will it be this year?”

And for reasons no one could explain, Roger kept saying, “I hope we do chalk sketches. I mean, I hope we make lots and lots of chalk-dust.”

When the classroom door finally opened, Charlie’s stomach twisted into a knot. *Spurt! Squeak! Pop! Grrrrrrrr! Pip! Pip! Grrrrrrrrrr!* The sounds rolled out from his lap.

Into the room walked a lady who looked quite different from the one Charlie expected. For one thing, this lady was extremely short, no taller than the shortest kindergartner. For another, she was extraordinarily broad, nearly as wide as two desks pushed side by side.

She wore a long red coat that reached down to a pair of bright yellow boots. On her head was a floppy blue hat that hid her face. A big white daisy bobbed back and forth from the top of the hat as she stepped into the classroom



and waddled like a penguin toward the teacher's desk.

“Maybe she’s a sub who hates art as much as I do,” Charlie said. “Maybe she’s a kind person and will let me do math every Friday. Anything—anything but art.”

At the blackboard the lady’s gloved hand reached for a piece of chalk. In large block letters she wrote: MISS TRA-LA-LA

Spinning around on the heels of her yellow

boots, she faced the class. From beneath her floppy blue hat came the words Charlie feared: “Good morning, folks. I will be your new art teacher. Your former one has moved to Paris to become a struggling painter. Miss Tra-la-la is my name.”

In the front row a low rumble escaped from Charlie’s stomach. He quickly dropped his math book onto his lap.

“A new art teacher!” he said to himself. “Now someone else is going to see how lousy I am in art.”

As if reading Charlie’s thoughts, Miss Tra-la-la stepped forward until her red coat brushed against his desk. “You know, folks, I can tell some of you are not as fond of art as I am,” she said, pressing a gloved finger onto Charlie’s desktop. “Perhaps today your attitude will change. Now please take out a pencil. Today we shall draw. We shall begin by drawing people.”

*Spurt! Squeak! Pop! Grrrrrrrrr! Pip! Pip! Grrrrrrrrrr!* went Charlie’s belly. It sounded like a garbage disposal.

“People!” he groaned to himself. “People are the hardest thing to draw. Maybe we will have an earthquake. Maybe I can hold my breath and try making myself sick. Anything to get out of drawing people.”

“Now, folks, some of you might think

drawing people is difficult,” said Miss Tra-la-la. “But soon you shall see that those thoughts are silly. In fact, I shall be your model. You shall draw me.”

What is she talking about? thought Charlie. A person is a person, and drawing a person is torture.

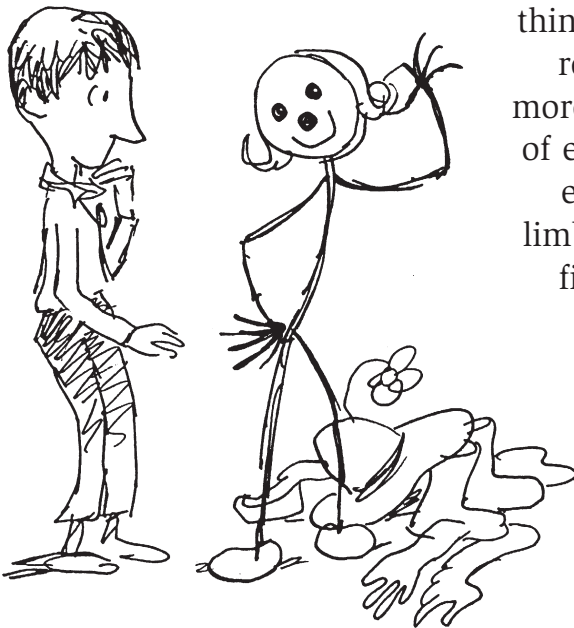
Miss Tra-la-la stood by the teacher’s desk and held out her glove-covered arms. “Now I must take off these wraps,” she said. “First, my gloves.” And when she removed her long white gloves, Charlie got the shock of his life.

“Your arms!” he said aloud. “They’re nothing but sticks!”

This was true. Both of the woman’s arms were long, wiry, and thin like licorice

rope. What is more, at the end of each of these extraordinary limbs, five stick fingers poked out straight.

“Now for my boots,” said the art teacher.



Charlie sat in a trance as Miss Tra-la-la pulled off her yellow rubber boots. Sure enough, her legs were just as thin as her arms, and her feet were the shape of pickles.

“Now for my hat,” said the new art teacher.

One of her stick arms now reached up to remove the floppy blue hat. Here was a bigger surprise, for the woman’s head was as round and flat as a tiddlywink. Her hair was nothing more than two enormous curls draping down the sides. Two black dots served for eyes and a bigger dot for a nose. Stretching from one side of the circle head to the other was long, thin U of a smile that looked so jolly it was impossible to imagine it ever turning upside down.

Last of all, Miss Tra-la-la removed her red coat. Now it was clear what type of person she was.

“You’re a stick woman!” said Charlie.

“That is correct, young man,” said Miss Tra-la-la. “A stick woman I am.”

“Why, I drew stick people when I was in kindergarten!” said Charlie. “I never imagined they really existed.”

Naturally, the appearance of a stick woman in front of the flabbergasted class released a flood of questions.

“Are there many stick people like you in the world?” asked Emily.

“Oh, many, many,” answered the art teacher. “Stick people come in many different shapes and sizes. Beautiful pictures of us appear in every elementary school and on many refrigerator doors.”

“But where do all the stick people live?” asked Rosalie. “I’ve never seen a real stick person before.”

Miss Tra-la-la strutted up and down the aisles of desks, passing out white construction paper. “Why, none of us live in the city,” she answered. “We live in the sticks.”

As Miss Tra-la-la waddled by, Charlie had a closer look at her stick figure. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the new art teacher was that her entire body was no thicker than the paper she was passing out. If you looked at her sideways she almost disappeared. You would think that the slightest breeze would have sent her flying up to the lights like a kite. But no, she made her way up and down the rows of desks, sturdy and erect upon those big boat feet of hers.

When everyone had drawing paper, Miss Tra-la-la waved her antenna arms into the air. “OK, folks, start drawing,” she called out. “Feel free to use a crayon to color me any color you chose.” Then she stepped up onto the teacher’s desk, stuck her stick arms and fingers straight out, and stood perfectly still.



At first Charlie did what he usually did when a blank sheet of drawing paper lay front of him: He stared at it. He twirled his pencil in his fingers and stared at the paper some more. This



time, however, something was different. Not only was his stomach quiet, but after studying the stick woman posing on the teacher's desk, he thought, "Maybe I can draw that person. Maybe I will give it a try."

With a firm grip on his pencil, Charlie started to sketch. In the center of his paper he drew a circle for the stick lady's body. Next he

tackled her head, adding the two dot eyes, dot nose, U-shaped mouth, and curls of hair.

Charlie sat back in his chair to study his drawing. “Drat,” he mumbled. “My head looks more like an egg. It’s not the shape of Miss Tra-la-la’s head.”

Yet when he glanced up at Miss Tra-la-la again, she had changed. Her head was now egg-shaped, precisely the shape Charlie had drawn it.

“Not bad. Not bad at all,” he said, admiring his artwork. “Maybe I can do this. Maybe I can draw this person.”

With more confidence he added the lady’s stick arms and stick legs and stick fingers and big pickle feet.

Now Charlie said to himself, “I wonder what would happen if I drew giant ears on the head.”

He did it, and sure enough, the stick lady posing on the teacher’s desk now displayed the very jumbo ears Charlie had drawn on his paper.

“Young man,” Miss Tra-la-la scolded, “it’s grand that you are exploring new ideas in your art. However, it’s embarrassing to be standing up here with these elephant ears.”

Quickly Charlie erased the offending ears and sat admiring his finished drawing.

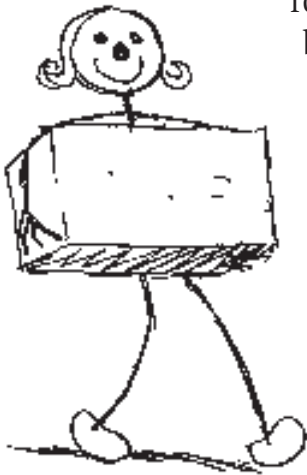
Miss Tra-la-la lowered her arms, wiggled her fingers, and stepped down from the teacher's desk.

"Lovely! Lovely! Lovely!" she said, wandering up and down the rows of desks, admiring each picture.

Back at the teacher's desk, Miss Tra-la-la announced, "OK, folks, for our second picture we shall draw an animal. I'll be back in a jiffy." And she sailed out of the classroom.

*Spurt! Squeak! Pop! Grrrrrrrrr! Pip! Pip! Grrrrrrrrrrr!* Charlie's stomach started to erupt again. "An animal," he grumbled. "Just when I was beginning to get the hang of drawing people, I have to draw an animal. Maybe I can hide in the coat closet. Maybe I can ask to go to the Boys' Room and never come back."

Miss Tra-la-la returned to the classroom lugging a large cardboard box. "Now, folks, some of you might think drawing animals is difficult," she said, placing her load on the teacher's desk. "But wait until you see my pet." The art teacher opened the box. Out trotted an animal that Charlie at once recognized as a stick



dog. This curious creature had a long, hot-dog-shaped body with four stick legs jutting out from the bottom and a shorter hot-dog head



with floppy ears. When it opened its mouth two written words—Arf! Arf!—floated upward and hung in the air.

“That’s how cartoon dogs talk,” Charlie noted. “Miss Tra-la-la’s pet is like a cartoon. It’s easy to draw cartoons.”

Like its owner, the stick dog was flat. When it wagged its wiry tail, its entire body flapped like a flag. But when it lay on the desk, the dog was impossible to see at all.

Miss Tra-la-la passed out more paper. “OK,

folks, you can start drawing,” she said. “Up, doggie,” she called to her stick pet. “Now stand perfectly still for these children so that they can draw you.”

At once Charlie made a long oval on his paper. He added a shorter oval to one end.

“Maybe drawing this dog is as easy as drawing Miss Tra-la-la,” he said to himself. “Maybe I’m not such a bad drawer after all.”

At two o’clock Miss Tra-la-la packed her dog back in its box. “OK, folks, that is all the art for this week,” she said. “But before I leave I must hang up your masterpieces for exhibition.” And she flounced from desk to desk, collecting the drawings.

“Lovely! Lovely! Lovely!” she sang out while pinning each picture up on the bulletin board. “Oh, look at this one! That’s me to a T. Look at this and this and that. Lovely! Lovely! Lovely!”

Charlie could have sworn the art teacher’s dot eyes opened and shut in a wink when she picked up his two pictures. “Lovely! Lovely! Lovely!” she said, holding the pictures out at stick-arm’s length. “Very original! Very avant-garde! These belong in a museum!”

When all the pictures were hung, the art teacher put on her wraps. It took her a full minute. On went the red coat, the yellow boots,

and the white gloves. After she covered her head with the floppy blue hat, it was completely impossible to tell that she was a stick woman.

“Next Friday, folks, if you feel comfortable with what you drew today, we shall draw some more things,” Miss Tra-la-la said, strutting toward the door. “I shall bring in some photographs of my house and yard out in the sticks. We can practice drawing buildings and trees. Toodle-oo.” Then she was gone.

While waiting for the tall teacher to return to the classroom, Charlie admired his drawings pinned up in the middle of the bulletin board.

“Maybe I’m not such a bad artist after all,” he said to himself. “Maybe next Friday I’ll try a harder drawing.”

And as he thought about how his drawing would be, his stomach remained silent.