

Idiocies abound in our little corner of the Milky Way. I don't know why, they just do. They seem a lot like mosquitoes to me, now that I think about it. I mean, there's probably an explanation for their existence; it might even be plausible, rational. But the bottom line is, you'd like to kill every last one of them. They do nothing but make life miserable for the rest of us and have absolutely no discernible function.

This particular story began as a tease with one of my sixth graders when I first started teaching, years ago. The girl's name was Celeste Premal. Don't ask me how and why I remember her name after all these years; it's just one of those quirky grey matter things, I guess. Anyway, in its original form, which bears little resemblance to this version, it won second place in a short story contest sponsored by the URSUS Press out in San Diego many years ago. It also netted me \$150.

The incarnation of the story as it exists today is intended to teach a little about Isaac Newton and gravity, but more, about the fact that ignorance wends its way to the top of humanity like cream to the top of a milk bottle, and there's not much any of us- especially kids -can do about it. Except go quietly upstairs to bed.

THE PLANE TRUTH

Mr. Pipkin was shocked and nearly dropped his forkful of spaghetti. "*What?*"

Emily, his ten-year-old daughter caught a glint of the chandelier light overhead in her dark marble eyes and repeated her statement. "I said, we learned in school today how scientists discovered that the earth is round."

Mr. Pipkin swallowed his bite of pasta and studied Emily's gleeful expression. "Is that what they're teaching you in school?"

"Uh-huh."

"I think it's delightful she's learning so much at her young age," said Mrs. Pipkin,

clasping her hands in admiration, “don’t you dear?”

Mr. Pipkin growled. “I most certainly do not! I think it’s a travesty. I pay outrageous taxes to have my only child educated, not lied to.” He looked to his wife at the opposite side of the table and shook his head in disgust.

“But, Daddy, nobody lied to me. The world is round, everybody knows that. All the teacher did was tell us how scientists proved it.”

Mr. Pipkin clanged his fork and spoon down on his plate in disgust. “You’re serious! You really believe that nonsense?”

Mrs. Pipkin batted her false eyelashes at her perplexed little girl. “Well, you know, Edward, the world is changing fast. Maybe they’ve made a new discovery since we were kids.”

“No, no, and no! I tell you, the earth is flat! It’s a scientific fact.”

Emily scrunched her face into a wrinkled pout and said,

“Dad, the world is *not* flat. You’re trying to trick me, but it isn’t going to work. I surf the ’Net, you know. I read books. And I get A’s in science. Even Albert Einstein—”

“Oh, now don’t you go quoting that nut. In fact, Emily, before you refer to any of the great deceivers of yesteryear, let me remind you that facts, like numbers, need to be kept accurate and in order. If they aren’t, you eventually wind up with an illogical mess — a slop bucket of words.”

“Yes, Daddy, I understand,” she insisted. “But we were talking about it in science today and our teacher said the earth is round. Besides, it’s what all the scientists say.”

Mr. Pipkin led her to the window. “Emily,” he said, “look out the window and tell me what you see.”

“I see the Franco’s house, and a coupla cars, and over there is the Hayes farm. That’s the tree I like to climb, see? Where all the cattle are?”

“Very good. Now, suppose you and I could walk through the glass, across the street, up the Franco’s driveway, and we just kept right on going? Would we ever reach the horizon and start to slide down? No, of course not. We’d walk around trees and up alleys, over hills and through valleys until eventually we’d run out of earth to walk on and we’d fall off. It’s only logical.”

Satisfied that he had closed the case expeditiously with the ease of a Zen master, Mr. Pipkin patted his perplexed daughter on the back and said, "Don't be so quick to believe everything you read and hear, sweetheart."

Emily cast an innocent's gaze up at her father, held his stare, and then collapsed to her knees under an avalanche of laughter.

"Emily, get yourself under control, child!" said Mr. Pipkin. "What in the world is so funny?"

"*You* are!" she squealed, struggling to her feet amid continued laughing spasms. "You really had me going there for a minute."

"You- you think I'm joking?"

"Oh, Daddy, of course you're joking," she said, catching her breath at last. "That's the stupidest thing I ever heard. Fall off! You're too much."

Mr. Pipkin growled like a lawn mower. "The world *is* flat, Emily." He looked at his wife still seated at the table and addressed her with indignation in his voice. "You see? You see, Edna? I told you we should have home schooled her. Now listen what she's learning! Teaching a preposterous lie as scientific fact. It's a disgrace!"

The look on Emily's face grew solemn. "Oh my gosh. You really do think the earth is flat," she moaned. "What'll the other kids say when they find out?" Then, a vibrant, though somewhat labored thought surfaced and her face lit up once more. "What about Eratosthenes?"

"Where's that?" asked Mr. Pipkin, returning to his seat at the head of the table.

Emily took her place again as well. "It's not a where," she said, "It's a who."

Mr. Pipkin tore off a piece of garlic bread and bit into it. "Well, then, *who* is it?" he mumbled.

"We learned about him in science on Monday. Eratosthenes proved that the earth was round in the third century, B.C."

Mr. Pipkin stabbed at the mound of spaghetti on his plate and twirled some around the tines of his fork until he had a large pasta cylinder. "He did, eh?"

Emily imitated her father's actions, but with minimal success. "Mother, can you do this for me?"

"Certainly, dear," her mother answered, reaching across the corner of the table to

twirl Emily's spaghetti for her.

"Thanks, Mother." Emily slurped her bite of spaghetti and continued. "Eratosthenes saw how a stick standing straight up and down in Syene, Egypt, at noon, didn't cast any shadow. But in Alexandria, eight hundred miles to the north, a stick just like the first one cast a real long shadow at the exact same time of day. He figured that if the earth was flat like everybody said, the two sticks should have the same shadow or no shadow at all, but they didn't. The only way to explain it was if the earth was round- on account of the sun's rays are parallel."

"So he was out on the beach poking sticks in the sand."

"Wull, I guess he put sticks in the ground . . . but . . ."

"Then what's your point, Emily?" Mr. Pipkin wrapped another bite of spaghetti around his fork and ate.

"The point, Daddy, is that parallel rays of the sun hit a curved surface at different angles. So if two sticks are standing up eight hundred miles apart and the earth is round, they have to cast different shadows. Which they did. It's simple."

Mr. Pipkin winced. "Emily, do you remember that slop bucket of words I mentioned a few minutes ago?"

"Uh-huh."

"You just fell into it."