

## When Adventists Riot! | BY RAY GARTON

Although it may be hard to believe for Seventh-day Adventists, who have long been discouraged from reading fiction, the fact is that sometimes fiction is the best way to tell the truth. "When Adventists Riot!" is a work of fiction—but it really happened in 1981. It's fiction because all the names have been changed—I've used the same fictional names I'm using in my novel, *Dismissed from the Front and Center*, a work-in-progress about my two years at Rio Lindo Academy—so these aren't really the people who were involved. And yet the story tells certain truths about some of the real people involved—but without involving the real people.

**W**hen I tell people my high school graduation ended in a riot, they don't believe me. Even after I tell them the story, they're doubtful. Of course, there are more than a few things about my two years at Rio Lindo Academy that people not familiar with the Seventh-day Adventist Church find odd.

Like the day I was walking through the administration building and the academy's principal, Elder John Gash, stepped in front of me and said, "Go back to the dorm and change your shirt."

I looked down at my shirt—a perfectly normal pullover with a V-neck. I checked for rips and stains, sniffed for B.O., found nothing wrong. Confused, I asked, "Why?"

"Because I can see your chest hair."

I smiled, thinking he was joking. But no, he was quite serious. When I asked him why a little chest hair was offensive—and really, there was only a little of it visible, I wasn't an ape, or anything—he never gave me a straight answer, just kept telling me to go back to my room and change the shirt. So, I did.

I puzzle over that to this day. I'll never know what it was about a few chest hairs that set Elder Gash off. Maybe I'd rather not.

Strange incidents like that were so commonplace that

none of us students really thought of them as strange back then. Sometimes, we simply acquiesced to the arbitrary dictates, but more often, we just laughed them off because that was what they deserved. So many of the policies were nonsensical and actually quite funny once we figured out they were based in something other than reason.

Rio Lindo is a boarding academy—boys' dorm at one end, girls' at the other, with the administration and science buildings and cafeteria in between, and the gymnasium and athletic field in back. I was there for my last two years of high school. At that time, church services were held in the large auditorium attached to the back of the administration building. For Friday night vespers, the boys had to sit in the left column of pews, the girls in the right. We were allowed to sit together for church on Saturday and other functions, but on Friday nights, as if there were something in the air—perhaps the faculty suspected an overabundance of human pheromones?—we were kept apart.

But I digress. Back to that graduation riot—the graduating class of 1981.

I was class president my senior year. This was due largely to my ventriloquist dummy, Chester, who was universally loved at Rio Lindo and had become a kind of unofficial school mascot. Chester and I performed with the Lindaires (Rio's student singing group), in speech class performances, in Sabbath School, in church, and various student shows, and even gave impromptu performances in the dormitory throughout my two years at Rio. Yep, everybody loved Chester. Girls used to line up to kiss that vinyl doll—meanwhile, I couldn't get a date. I think it was really Chester who was elected class president that year. But of course, I had to do all the work—Chester simply took all the glory.

The weekend of our graduation, Elder Gash and I were somewhat at odds. By the end of my second year, I'd



begun to get frustrated by all the strange little things that, until then, I'd simply laughed off, like the mystifying chest-hair incident—and the equally mystifying Week of Prayer accusations, the Senior Talent Show scandal, the utterly ridiculous Christmas Banquet movie debacle, and so many others (you'll have to read the book for those).

The source of most of these strange things was Elder Gash himself, undeniably a strange man. He was very tall and burly, with a broad face pockmarked by the ghosts of long-dead acne. His black hair was always well combed, maybe a little greasy with product. He seldom smiled, and when he did, the smile did not quite look at home on his

was bringing that tradition to an abrupt end. This did not sit well with the class—nor with me.

"Elder Gash, this is the last time many of us are ever going to see our friends in the junior class," I explained in an attempt to change his mind. "We've become very close to some of the juniors. Seeing them line the aisle for us as we march out is a memory we'd like to take away with us, like so many graduating classes before us."

"But it offends some of the older constituents," Elder Gash said.

I frowned as I thought that over. "Wait...the junior class lining the center aisle offends some of the older con-



**explosive disaster**

face. His full lips were a deep red and usually puckered, as if he were about to kiss someone. His tongue frequently moistened them in a gesture that was more than a little reptilian. His dark eyes were stern and piercing, and even when they weren't meant to, they looked accusing. More often than not, they looked downright angry.

The first major problem to arise in the preparation for our graduation was the detail that eventually led to the explosive disaster at the end of that ceremony.

It had been a beloved tradition for many years at Rio Lindo for the junior class to line the center aisle on each side as the graduates marched out after the commencement ceremony, just to see the graduates out on their final departure. It was a tradition that each class looked forward to at the end of the school year.

Until 1981. That year, Elder Gash announced that he

stituents?" I asked, trying to bend my brain around that one. Over those two years, I'd gotten a number of brain-benders from Elder Gash, but this one was a winner.

"When the seniors march out," he explained, folding his arms across his broad chest like Darth Vader, "they too often stop to hug, and sometimes even kiss, some of the juniors who line that center aisle. This presents too great a temptation for the students, and the public display of affection offends some of the older constituents."

Ah, the old familiar sin, the toxic offense immediately recognized by anyone who ever attended a Seventh-day Adventist school: the dread and insidious PDA—Public Display of Affection!

I did not know how to respond to that. Sure, hugs and kisses were exchanged, but they were the kind one would expect to see at a final gathering of students who've spent



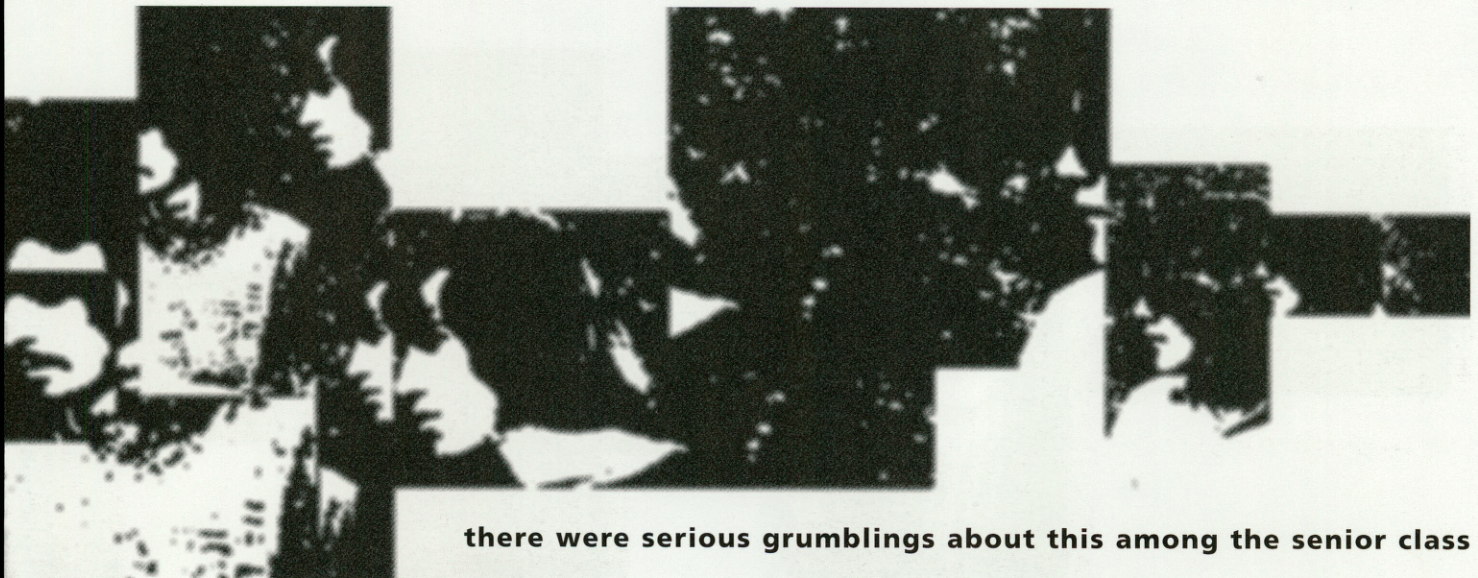
years sequestered together in this strange environment that was at once both nurturing and stifling. It wasn't as if the exiting graduates stopped to engage in hot and heavy make-out sessions with the waiting juniors—the high windows of the gymnasium did not steam up, there was no inappropriate touching, no clothes were removed, new families were not inadvertently started there in the center aisle. These were simply excited expressions of affection and farewell among emotional teenagers saying goodbye and about to go away, sometimes far away, to get on with their lives.

But still, it was dat ol' demon—PDA!

I never met any of the “older constituents” who were so

Stanton no doubt assumed, was closer to God. So, behind the untrustworthy back of Stanton Pardy and away from Elder Gash's piercing, watchful eyes and puckered, kissing lips, we began to plot and plan, hatching a little conspiracy that would have unexpected and violent results.

**I**f Elder Gash's arbitrary decision about the juniors lining the center aisle for the graduates wasn't enough to start a riot, there was the matter of the stage backdrop for the graduation ceremony being painted by the art teacher and a brilliantly talented student. It was an enor-



**there were serious grumblings about this among the senior class**

offended by this behavior. None of them was named for me. When I asked Elder Gash for specific reports from these people, he provided none and was offended that I would be so insolent as to make the request. He simply told me, with a leaden sound of finality, that as of our graduation, there would be no more lining of the center aisle by the junior class for the departing graduates.

But there were serious grumblings about this among the senior class, and neither I nor the other class officers were satisfied with this state of affairs. Neither were the junior class officers. The exception to our minor mutiny, of course, was senior class vice president Stanton Pardy, the tallest, single most self-righteous, pious, faculty smooching John Denver look-alike I've ever met. This guy always sided with Elder Gash. I suspect this was because Elder Gash was one of the few people there taller than Stanton and therefore,

amous mural that stretched the entire length of the stage and reached nearly to the gymnasium ceiling. It began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden on the left, featured the Crucifixion of Christ in the middle, and concluded on the right with the Second Coming. It was gorgeous.

But Adam's butt cheeks were showing.

Eve's derriere was covered up by her long hair, but Adam's was visible. They stood with their backs to the viewer, overlooking the Garden. Adam's butt cheeks were tastefully done, not at all offensive—certainly not to anyone in our class, anyway—and everyone who saw the mural loved it. But...it was still Adam's butt cheeks. And there were all those thin-skinned, easily offended “older constituents” to think about. I imagined dozens of elderly Adventists gazing innocently up at the mural,



clutching their chests, and dropping heavily to the floor. Dead.

Even before I received word, I knew what was coming.

Elder Gash declared that Adam's butt cheeks were out (hey, at least Adam's chest hair wasn't showing). Our art teacher was forced to hastily paint an oddly positioned bush to cover up the offending posterior. It was never quite clear from where this bush was growing. At first glance, I actually thought it was coming out of the bottom in question! It looked, quite simply, ridiculous, and seriously marred and distracted



from an otherwise beautiful mural. Our art teacher was mortified to have his work criticized and censored by a Neanderthal like Elder Gash.

I'd had it. I went to Elder Gash and told him exactly what I thought of his decision to obscure Adam's rear end. I told him I thought it was utterly pre-adolescent and far more dirty minded than the original artwork. What was he going to do—kick me out of school? I was furious and did my best to control myself, but I was shaking at the time, struggling to maintain my composure. Once I'd said my piece, I turned and walked away before he could even swipe that reptilian tongue over those puckered lips, let alone respond. I'd been listening to him for two years—he had nothing more to say that I cared to hear.

The Friday of graduation weekend, I began receiving messages from all directions: Elder Gash wanted to speak with me as soon as possible.

Each message became more and more urgent—Elder Gash was very eager to see me immediately. But if I could help it, he wouldn't. I avoided him as if he were virulently contagious. When I saw him coming, I either hurried in the other direction or hid (the way Seventh-day Adventists have done with me ever since I became a published horror novelist). Whatever he had to say, I didn't want to hear it.

Besides, I had other things to do—secret things—and they were occupying most of my time.

By graduation weekend, the conspiracy was in place. I had met secretly with the junior class president and we had put together a plan—the junior class would line that center aisle for the departing graduates whether Elder Gash and his weak-kneed “older constituents” liked it or not. Word spread clandestinely throughout the junior class in the way only students at a Seventh-day Adventist boarding academy, accustomed to secrecy and subterfuge, could spread it. (Secrecy and subterfuge are practically part of the curriculum.) Like a message transmitted throughout the underground resistance in World War II,



word got out among the juniors that they would line that aisle as soon as I stopped the procession of graduates coming off the stage.

But there was something else in the air, something other than the low hum of students making plans below the faculty's radar. There was a tension all around, the feeling of something building. There was more going on than our secret plans—I just didn't know what it was yet. I would find out on Sunday. We all would.

Saturday night was Class Night, and Chester and I were scheduled to perform. Up to that point, I had successfully avoided Elder Gash. I was in the middle of my routine with Chester when I noticed that someone was standing beside me. Frowning, I stopped talking, turned, and saw Elder Gash towering next to me.

It was not planned. I had no idea he was going to approach me on stage in the middle of my performance, so I'd had no chance to plan what to say. My mind was completely blank. But as if he thought it up himself in his mostly empty vinyl head, Chester immediately turned to Elder Gash and said, "What're you doing up here? You don't have to sweep the stage until after the show."

The audience went wild. The laughter and applause went on and on and on.

Elder Gash's tongue flicked out, his lips puckered, and his face lit up like a big red light on the bottom of a flying saucer. His pockmarks positively glowed. It took awhile for the audience's reaction to quiet down, then awhile for Elder Gash to compose himself enough to speak. Then, as if nothing had happened, speaking to Chester and most decidedly not to me, Elder Gash presented my ventriloquist dummy with an honorary diploma as a graduating mascot of Rio Lindo Academy.

That was why Elder Gash had wanted to see me—to prepare me for this interruption in my performance, an honor never before bestowed on anyone at Rio Lindo.

Okay, I'll admit it—I felt a little guilty. I did not feel guilty enough to speak to Elder Gash after the program—we never spoke again—but I still felt guilty. I still have that little diploma, and every time I look at it, I think of the audience's raucous reaction to Chester's remark that night, of Elder Gash's blood-red face, and I have to smile. But I also have to feel, even still, a little regretful of my behavior.

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# SPECTRUM



**T**he big day arrived. The commencement ceremony went smoothly. Each of us in turn stepped up to Elder Gash, shook his big hand, and took that wonderful diploma, that symbol of finality, that emblem of victory.

Then it was over—we'd all graduated, and it was time to march off the stage. As class president, I led the way to the front edge of the stage, to the steps leading down to the gymnasium floor. Halfway down the steps, I stopped with my lovely marching partner, Susan DeBolt.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Let's just stand here a minute," I replied.

"I don't know if this is a good idea."

"Don't worry, it'll be fine."

Boy, was I wrong.

A heavy silence fell over the gymnasium. I gazed out over the several hundred in attendance and wondered which among them were the "older constituents." The audience looked around at each other, at me, at the other graduates, then at each other again. Someone muttered something about marching. Someone else dropped a program on the floor.

The junior class sat in the front row. Suddenly, they stood and began to make their way to the center aisle as planned.

Then all hell broke loose. Chaos. Pandemonium.

Somehow, the faculty had gotten word of the conspiracy, and they were ready and waiting. The second the juniors began to move toward that aisle, the faculty raced forward and pounced on them, physically attacked them to prevent them from lining that aisle. Teachers literally picked students up and bodily withheld them from their mission. Then, a few really big juniors picked up some teachers and moved them out of the way.

The audience—made up primarily of families and friends of the graduates—had no idea what was happening, all they knew was that teachers were suddenly attacking students, and a lot of them did not sit still for it. Parents joined the fray and tried to pry the faculty members off the juniors. From where I stood—the best seat in the house for the entire eruption—I saw my own father leave his seat. He'd suffered a stroke some years before and walked with a cane, which he used to bop one of the teachers over the head. Fists were thrown—and so were chairs. There were potential lawsuits flying all over the place.

But miraculously, the loyal juniors would not be held

back. They somehow marched through the battlefield and lined that center aisle as planned.

Behind me, Stanton Parady began to stab me in the back repeatedly with a stiff finger, saying through clenched teeth, "You're behind this, aren't you? You've never been any good! You've fooled everyone else, but not me! You've always been rotten to the core!"

A part of me wanted to turn around and punch him, but I was too busy getting chills down my spine and tears in my eyes as I watched the juniors move down that aisle and stand to each side to wait for us. It was time.

The violence staggered to a stop. As red-faced teachers stood panting with their hair messed up, as parents with clenched fists and bared teeth looked around in confusion, as thrown chairs lay scattered on the floor, Susan and I moved ahead, and the graduating class of 1981 proceeded down that aisle between two lines of smiling, slightly mussed juniors—no! They were seniors now!—who gave us our final farewell by seeing us out into the world.

And yes, we stopped now and then for a little defiant PDA—"older constituents" be damned.

**I**n 2006, I attended my twenty-fifth high school reunion. By then, of course, we were adults and we could publicly display all the affection we wanted to—and we did. Elder Gash was not there—by then, he had died of cancer. Regretfully, I never got the chance to thank him for that wonderful little diploma that I still treasure and keep in a brown suitcase with the original Chester.

But my old friends were there, and it was grand to see them again. Even Stanton attended, and tried to behave as if he and I had always been friends.

We had been through something big together. Just spending two years—as many as four for some—in a Seventh-day Adventist boarding academy as a class was a powerful bonding experience. But we had been through something else, too. For one moment twenty-five years earlier, we had stood up to pettiness and unreason—a kind of tyranny—and had chosen instead to embrace a beloved and long-standing tradition, and something that might not seem like much now in our jaded adulthood, but that back then had meant the world: A final public display of affection among departing friends. ■

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**Ray Garton** is the author of more than fifty books, including the horror novel *The Loveliest Dead*. In 2006, he received the World Horror Convention Grand Master Award.