

Belina

by Steve Cook

As I mulled over the headteacher's question, I looked around my classroom, my gaze inevitably settling on one chair.

"John. He represents the biggest challenge. He's downright abusive in class, storms out of class nearly every day..." I sighed in frustration. "I want to talk to him, to help him. I know things aren't great at home, but he won't enter into any kind of conversation about it. And his parents won't come in either."

Florence tapped the table with one slender finger. "Hm. And you feel that having that discourse with him would help?"

"It'd be a start."

"I might have something for you, then. A friend of mine is looking to trial a new educational tool in classrooms. Sounds like she'd be just right for you."

"Uh, sure," I said, looking pointedly at the clock. Gone five already, and the cleaners would kick me out at six.

Florence nodded. "I was hoping you'd say that. I didn't want to just introduce her into your class without letting you know first."

"Her?"

Florence nodded. "A personality, someone for the children to empathise with, look up to, maybe interact with on the same level."

I leaned back in the tiny plastic child's chair and twirled my marking pen around my finger as I thought it through. *Something not yet sanctioned, definitely not yet tested... but she's new to the job, new to being a head. New to the risks...* "Ok, I guess we can give it a shot."

"Good. I'll get her sent up when you register the class tomorrow." I nodded, and Florence finally slid herself off the table, heading for the door. "Let me know how it goes."

I picked up the first book in the pile and flicked it open to the most recent piece of work. "No date, no title," I muttered, making little notes, then read the first sentence. 'The best thing that happned over the harf term hollyday was I went to disney and-'

"Morning, Mr Goff," Amanda said, breezing into the room. "Good evening last night?"

"Thrilling," I said, taking the last few marked books out of my bag and putting them into their boxes. "You?"

"Out with the other teaching assistants," she said, stowing her bag in the top drawer of my filing cabinet. "What've we got going on today?" She folded her arms, the bracelets on her wrists clacking together, and squinted at the timetable.

"All that and more," I said. "New child starting today. Well, sort of."

"Oh right? I'll get a drawer label sorted for them. What's their name?"

"Belina. They won't need a drawer though. She's not really a child." I stood up, abandoning the marking. "More an educational tool."

"Not sure you can call children that anymore," Amanda said with a grin. "I need a bit more than that."

I pulled out the little leaflet Florence had given me as I'd left the building the night before. "Ok, so Florence wants us to trial using this child. She integrates with the class, does the same stuff as them, but she's artificial. They can ask her questions, and she'll answer with the right info, all the time. Her work is exemplary, which guarantees I've got one good example for the class. And she's designed to make friends with even the most troubling children."

"...so she'll be sat by John, I'm assuming?"

I nodded, matching her grin. "Who better?"

"Right. Anything special to know about it? Can it get wet, that sort of thing?"

I shrugged. "As far as I know, we treat it like the others."

"Well, I'd better get the resources sorted." Amanda grabbed the little pile of worksheets I'd left for her. "Coffee?"

"Please," I called after her as she left the room. I looked around my domain, checking everything was in its place. Scissors away in their holder, book corner neat, nothing on the floor. A chair in every place, including the new one next to John.

"Good morning Mr Goff," a small voice said at the door, and I looked round to see Ariana, first in as always. She put her reading book in the tray by the door and went straight to her seat, followed a moment later by five other children. Within a few minutes the whole class was sat down, a low rumble of chatter slowly swelling as they all fought to share whatever thoughts they'd had at the same time.

"Right then, that's enough," I called, loud enough to be heard. "I can see... three people doing the right thing, which is sitting with a book out. Two housepoints to those three." There was a louder flurry of movement as everyone got their book out, and then a general quietening.

“Now, we’ve got a new-“ I said, then broke off as John entered the room. A tiny part of me had been wishing he wasn’t going to be in today, I realised, but here he was, blonde hair tousled, shirt untucked, chewing something, shoving past a couple of chairs to sit on his table. Not in the chair, but with his leg straight across the entire desk.

“Good morning, John,” I said, voice calm. “Let’s have you sat on that chair, please.”

He curled his lip and looked up at the ceiling. “Chair, please,” I repeated. He slid down onto the chair as noisily as possible, legs still up on the table. “And legs.”

“I’m sat on the chair. Jesus, what do you want?”

I sighed. So early, and yet he’d already started. “The language you use at home shouldn’t come to school, John. You know that. Now swing your legs down and I can finish telling everyone why you have an extra chair next to you.”

The distraction was enough that he actually did what I’d asked, and I nodded approvingly.

“Right then. We have a new child starting today. Her name is Belina, and she will be with us for a short while at least.” As if on cue, the classroom door opened as Amanda came back, juggling a travel mug of coffee and a pile of photocopying, and behind her came Belina.

She was about average height for a child of eight, average build too. Her eyes were blue, framed by blonde hair that looked just a touch like a wig, but there was really very little to tell that she wasn’t human. She looked around the classroom and smiled.

“Hello. I’m Belina.”

I pointed to the only empty chair, next to John. “That’s your seat right there, young lady. Now, I hope everyone will show Belina how we act here at Mount Bale. I’ll be looking for some really nice people to play with her at break time.”

Hands shot up, playmates were organised and Belina sat down. I watched John as I launched into the first lesson, wondering how long it would take before he tried something.

John made it to breaktime.

I watched them from the window, Belina's book in my hand. Her work was flawless, of course, three paragraphs on 'Things the Romans did for us'. I read it, wistfully yearning for a class of Belinas, half-watching as John skulked around the edges of the playground. It was so difficult for him to find playmates, I thought, when he didn't really know how to play.

Belina had been snapped up by most of the girls, but even as I watched he approached them.

Closer. Too close.

One of them knocked into him, and John reacted, shoving at the closest girl – Belina. She rocked backwards on her heels, somehow keeping her balance, and said something to him.

John flashed into action, swinging his fist, and I was down the stairs and running.

By the time I got outside, though, it was all over. John was on the ground holding his arm, and Belina was playing with the girls again.

"She hit me! The new girl, she hit me!" John shouted, as soon as he saw me.

"And did you hit her?"

"No!"

Immediately, the girls swarmed me, a dozen high-pitched voices giving me different versions.

"Enough," I said sternly, and they quieted. "John, I saw you hit Belina–"

"No, I never!"

"–after one of the girls bumped into you by accident–"

“She hit me on purpose!”

I stared into his scowl for a moment, then carried on. “But I didn’t see what happened next.

Anyone care to tell me? Ariana?”

The young girl nodded. “That’s what happened, Mr Goff. Belina told him she didn’t like him doing that, and that it had been an accident. John punched her on the arm and she punched him back.”

“Nearly broke my arm!” John’s red face was a mask of anger as he screamed his defiance.

“Belina. John. Here please, now.”

Belina walked over and looked at me, a slight frown on her face.

“Did you punch him?”

“Yes, Mr Goff. He punched me. It was fair.”

“That’s not how we do things here, Belina. If someone hurts you, tell an adult.”

“Yes, Mr Goff. I’m sorry, John.”

I turned expectantly to John. “You made it a bigger problem, but I think you came out of it worse. Apologise, please.”

He mumbled something, and as soon as I nodded he turned and ran around the corner, away from everyone.

All the rest of the day, John kept his chair as far away from Belina as possible, and when the end of the day came he was the first to get up and go.

“Homework,” I shouted as the children filed out. “Don’t forget it.”

Florence was waiting for me in the corridor, and I shoed the last of the children away to the playground, beckoning her in. "So, how was Belina?"

I shrugged. "She's perfect. Perfect work, perfect behaviour, except for one incident at breaktime." I gave Florence the quick version. "Seems odd. Doesn't she have a 'don't hurt people' rule or something?"

"Actually, no. She's designed to defend herself. But it's odd, and a little disturbing. How did John react?"

"Didn't go near her the entire rest of the day. Even moved his chair right to the end of the table."

"And his behaviour?"

"It was..." I paused and thought back. "Now that you ask... better. He had a good afternoon, even got some work done."

Florence nodded. "He's maybe not had anyone talk back to him and then actually stick to their word. It's a new experience for him. She's got John's respect." Florence walked to the door, lingering a moment before leaving. "Keep an eye on it, ok?"

The week wound on. This close to the end of a term there were assessments every day; Belina aced them all, of course, and after the children had gone on Friday I waved the stack of marked papers at Amanda.

"There's almost no point marking these. She's got a computer in her head; there won't be anything wrong."

Amanda shook her head as she pulled her bag out of the drawer. "Yeah, well. It's a bit odd having her in here, but I can't help but feel a bit weird about it. Whatever group she works with does well though."

"True enough."

"There's some odd things. Y'know, the children spot anything 'off' straight away."

I looked up, dropping the papers into my out-tray. "How so?"

"She doesn't eat with the others. For now, she's got them convinced it's because she eats a big breakfast and dinner, but that won't last forever. And have you seen who picks her up?"

"Tall man, dreadlocks?"

She nodded, digging for something in her bag. "That's the one. She calls him 'Doctor', though.

Not Dad, or Father." She tutted, and kept rifling through her things. "Strange."

"She's not real," I said, "so it's only to be expected."

"Not that. One of my bracelets broke this morning, and I put it in here. Now it's gone."

I looked up. Amanda's bag, smooth brown leather, wasn't big enough to lose something the size of a bracelet. "You sure it's in there?"

She nodded, then frowned. "Do you think one of the kids could have..."

Our eyes met, and I scowled. "Wouldn't be the first time." Crossing to John's tray, I pulled it out and dumped its contents onto the desk. Letters from weeks ago, half-finished work, a piece of chewing gum, a tiny football figurine, a fake pound coin...

"No bracelet," I said, sighing. "Not this time."

Amanda shrugged. "It'll turn up. I hope none of them have been nicking. Maybe ask around on Monday?"

“Yeah. Probably for the best.” I sat back down at the pile of marking and waved as Amanda left the room. In the silence, I gazed at the contents of John’s tray, still strewn over a table, and felt vaguely guilty at my assumption. Just because he’d stolen before didn’t mean he’d done it this time. I scrawled a hasty post-it note to myself – Bracelet? – and slapped it down onto the desk, before pulling the next Maths book towards myself.

The bracelet didn’t turn up the following Monday, but by then there were more important things at the front of my mind. John wandered in as usual, heading for his seat, then stopped short. Belina was already sat there, prim and proper, staring at him. I watched as John slunk around the edge of the classroom, dragged his chair with the maximum amount of noise and slid into it, as far from her as possible.

She gave him a big smile. “Good morning, John.”

He stared at her as if she’d grown a second head, then mumbled something, and I kept half an eye on him throughout the first lesson, though he barely moved.

Amanda tapped my arm as we went into group work. “Belina’s taken John under her wing,” she said, nodding in their direction. I looked over, and sure enough Belina was doing her patient best to involve John. He put his arms up and buried his head between them, and she backed off just enough to give him space.

“Any other child would keep pressing,” I murmured back to my assistant. “Perhaps she’s on to something after all.”

It was the end of Tuesday before I realised that John had done something previously thought impossible: actually stayed in class, problem-free, for two whole days. Sure, his work was

almost non-existent, but there was evidence of some learning there, and when he agreed to come in and do his homework during breaktime on Wednesday, it was all I could do not to stare.

By Thursday, however, a little Lego man was missing from my desk.

“I wouldn’t have noticed it,” I said to Amanda, “except that Georgia asked me where it was. She gave it to me for Christmas.”

“That confirms it, then. We’ve got a thief in the classroom.”

I nodded. “Guess so. Time to have a little talk with the rest of the class.”

More than a few heads turned in John’s direction when I started talking, and it took everything in me to keep scanning everyone’s face.

“I’ve noticed a few things going walkabout in here, and I want you to know that it’s going to stop,” I said. “If someone knows where the missing things are, or comes across them, I want to know.”

On Friday, it was a child’s pencil case, and I knew that whoever was doing it wanted a reaction.

“Trays out,” I said, as soon as children came in. “Everyone. Get your tray out, then sit at your place.”

There was controlled chaos as everyone took the orange document trays out from under their tables, sorting through them on the tables. I was halfway round the room, trying to see into each pile of clutter before they had time to rearrange it, when Belina touched my arm.

“Mr Goff,” she said, her voice cutting through the hubbub. “The missing items are in John’s tray.”

I strode over to John, who was sat at his empty desk. "Tray out, John," I said, realising even as I said it that I was being too confrontational, falling into old habits. He looked at me, sucked at his teeth and pulled his tray out.

There, on the top, were the bracelet and the toy, almost hidden under the cartoon-character pencil case.

He looked down at them, then at me, and I could see real confusion on his face. "But, I didn't-" he said, then looked around as nearby children gasped dramatically. "It wasn't me!" He got up, throwing the chair backwards onto the ground, and backed away from me. "I didn't do it!" Lurching forward, he kicked the table and ran from the room. Amanda looked at me. "I'll get him," she said, and followed John out the door.

I watched them go, barely hearing the uproar around me as the children began to share the news.

"Mr Goff," that little voice came again, just loud enough to be heard but still quiet enough to be confidential. "I need to talk to you at break time."

"I think... I think I'll be talking to John at break," I replied, and finally focused on her properly.

"What is it you need to say?"

"It needs to be break time. I'll stay behind, Mr Goff." She spoke with such certainty and then sat down at her place, completely sure that I would agree. I stared at her for a few seconds, then shook my head.

"Right, you lot," I shouted above the discord. "Settle down; handwriting books out, dates neatly written. Now!"

Amanda didn't bring John back into the classroom until the other children had filed out to play, all except for Belina, calmly sat waiting at her place. As John came in, he saw her and turned to bolt again. Amanda was quicker, blocking his way.

"John, no. You agreed to come in and talk to Mr Goff." John strained to get past her for a moment, but she stood in front of the door and I kept my distance. "Do you think he's going to talk to you if you're rude to him?"

"...no," John said. "But I'm not sitting next to her. Stupid bitch getting me in trouble when it's not even my fault!"

"John!" Amanda said, but I put my hand up to stop her.

"You know how I feel about language, John, but right now I want to talk to you. Properly, like grown-ups. You realise this is serious, right?"

He stopped trying to leave and slouched into the nearest chair instead, still half a room away from me. "I din't steal nothin'."

"How did the things that are missing end up in your tray then, John?"

He started to talk, then broke off as Belina stood up. She slid the chair away under the table and walked up until she was stood halfway between us.

"I stole the things, and put them in John's tray," she said.

There was a pause that seemed to stretch into infinity.

"...you stole them, Belina?" I choked out. "Why?"

She shrugged, an incredibly accurate movement. "I don't know." *You do know*, I thought, but kept silent as she turned to John. "I'm sorry, John. I didn't have a tray to hide them in, and I didn't mean to get you in trouble. I hope we can still be friends."

John, Amanda and I stared as she went quietly over to the drawers, took out a piece of paper and sat down at her place again. She began to write. I crooked a finger at John and, to my surprise, he got up and came over to me.

“John, thank you for coming in here to talk to me,” I said quietly. “I’m going to overlook the language and the table kicking earlier – this once only – if you try to have a good rest of the day. Think you can do that?”

He nodded, looking slightly dazed. “Yes, Mr Goff.”

“Off you go, then,” I said. “Amanda will take you downstairs.”

The sounds from the playground were muted, like the beat from an overheard song, as I crossed the room to see what Belina was writing. She was already on to the second copy, beautiful cursive letters flowing across the page. The first was a letter of apology to John; the second, to Amanda.

“Belina, why did you do it?” I asked, as she moved on to the third copy.

“I told you, Mr Goff, I don’t know.”

“That’s an answer I’d expect from any other child in here. Not you. Why?”

She looked up at me, a calculating gaze that I might see coming from another adult’s face, one eyebrow raised. “I’m a child analogue, Mr Goff. If you expect anything other than the answer a child might give, I will only disappoint you.”

“That’s a very adult answer for someone who only answers as a child,” I countered.

“I don’t understand that,” Belina said, and her eyes had widened back to innocence. “I’ve finished writing letters of apology, Mr Goff. How much free time will I need to lose?”

I frowned at her, trying to see past her humanlike face into the programmed responses behind it, but there was nothing to see. "Give these to the people they're addressed to, and I want to see you at lunchtime as well. There are some jobs you can do in here."

"Yes, Mr Goff," she said, and walked out of the classroom.

The door swung shut, leaving me with only silence and questions.

Belina was gone the next morning, undoubtedly because of the conversation I had with Florence that night, and when the children asked I just told them that she had moved to another school.

Days grew into a week, then two, and I began to feel as though something was missing from the room. The others noticed it too; the class was quieter, more subdued, and one lunchtime Amanda pointed out what it was.

"I was looking at John's behaviour book," she said. "Look at this; in the last week, it's completely minor things. Didn't say thank you first time; leaning on his chair; called one of the boys fat, and look here, I've put a note: 'apologised straight away.'" She shook her head. "It's like he's a different child."

"Too early to say that, maybe," I mused, "but it's a positive step. Maybe--"

The classroom door opened and John's head poked in. "Mr Goff?"

"John; what're you doing in here?"

"Can I ask you something, Mr Goff?"

I nodded, beckoning him across. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Amanda's eyes widen, as if to say *told you so*, and then she busied herself with something just within earshot.

John sat down on one of the chairs and I leaned forward to listen.

“Mr Goff...” He looked down, and it was a long moment before he could look up and meet my gaze. “Was Belina real?”

A dozen glib responses ran through my head, but something in his earnest expression stopped me. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Was she real? Yes. Was she a real little girl?” I toyed with the idea of lying, then shook my head. “No.”

“I didn’t think so.” He looked off into nothingness for a moment, eyes unfocused, then nodded and got up. “Thanks, Mr Goff.”

As John walked towards the door, dishevelled as the day I’d first met him, I realised that I was seeing him as a boy for the first time. The behaviours that masked him, the persona, had started to wear through and John was shining through.

“What gave it away?” I called after him.

He frowned, one hand on the doorhandle. “She stuck up for me, Mr Goff. No real child would do that for me.” And before I could reply, he was gone.