

The New York Times Bestseller

Carl Hiaasen

SCAT



ONE

The day before Mrs. Starch vanished, her third-period biology students trudged silently, as always, into the classroom. Their expressions reflected the usual mix of dread and melancholy, for Mrs. Starch was the most feared teacher at the Truman School.

When the bell rang, she unfolded stiffly, like a crane, and rose to her full height of nearly six feet. In one hand she twirled a sharpened Ticonderoga No. 2 pencil, a sure sign of trouble to come.

Nick glanced across the aisle at Marta Gonzalez. Her brown eyes were locked on Mrs. Starch, and her thin elbows were planted like fence posts, pinning her biology book open to Chapter 8. Nick had left his own textbook in his locker, and his palms were sweating.

"Good morning, people," said Mrs. Starch, in a tone so mild that it was chilling. "Who's prepared to tell me about the Calvin cycle?"

Only one hand rose. It belonged to Graham, who always claimed to know the answers but never did. Mrs. Starch hadn't called on him since the first week of class.

"The Calvin cycle," she repeated. "Anybody?"

Marta looked as if she might throw up again. The last time that had happened, Mrs. Starch had barely waited until the floor was mopped before instructing Marta to write a paper listing five major muscles used in the act of regurgitation.

Nick and the other students had been blown away. What kind of teacher would punish a kid for puking?

"By now," Mrs. Starch was saying, "the photosynthetic process should be familiar to all of you."

Marta gulped hard, twice. She'd been having nightmares about Mrs. Starch, who wore her dyed blond hair piled to one side of her head, like a beach dune. Mrs. Starch's school wardrobe never varied: a polyester pants suit in one of four faded pastel colors, and drab brown flats. She painted heavy violet makeup on her eyelids, yet she made no effort to conceal an odd crimson mark on her chin. The mark was the shape of an anvil and the subject of wild speculation, but nobody had gotten up the nerve to ask Mrs. Starch about it.

Marta's eyes flicked miserably toward Nick, then back to the teacher. Nick was fond of Marta, although he wasn't sure if he liked her enough to sacrifice himself to Mrs. Starch, who had begun to pace. She was scanning the class, selecting a victim.

A droplet of perspiration glided like a spider down Nick's neck. If he worked up the courage to raise his hand, Mrs. Starch would pounce swiftly. Right away she'd see that he had forgotten his biology book, a crime that would be

forgiven only if Nick was able to explain and then diagram the Calvin cycle, which was unlikely. Nick was still struggling to figure out the Krebs cycle from Chapter 7.

"Plants, as we all know, are vital to human existence," said Mrs. Starch, on patrol. "And without the Calvin cycle, plants could not exist. Could not exist . . ."

Graham was waving his arm and squirming like a puppy. The rest of the class prayed that Mrs. Starch would call on him, but she acted as if he were invisible. Abruptly she spun to a halt at the front of Marta's row.

Marta sat rigidly in the second desk, behind a brainy girl named Libby who knew all about the Calvin cycle—all about *everything*—but seldom made a peep.

"The chart on page 169," Mrs. Starch went on, "makes it all plain as day. It's an excellent illustration, and one that you are likely to encounter on a test. Quite likely . . ."

Marta lowered her head, a tactical mistake. The movement, slight as it was, caught Mrs. Starch's attention.

Nick sucked in a breath. His heart raced and his head buzzed, because he knew that it was now or never. Marta seemed to shrink under Mrs. Starch's icy gaze. Nick could see tears forming at the corners of Marta's eyes, and he hated himself for hesitating.

"Come on, people, snap out of your coma," Mrs. Starch chided, tapping the pencil on Libby's desk. "The Calvin cycle?"

The only reply was a ripping noise—Marta's trembling elbows, tearing holes in the pages of her book.

"Woo-hoo! It's time for another trip to Florida—screwy, gorgeous Florida, with its swamps and scammers and strange creatures (two- and four-legged). Our guide, of course, is Carl Hiaasen."
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