Miss Dove’s rules were as fixed as the signs of the zodiac. And they were known. Miss Dove rehearsed them at the beginning of each school year, stating them as calmly and dispassionately as if she were describing the atmospheric effects of the Gulf Stream. The penalties for infractions of the rules were also known. If a student’s posture was incorrect, he had to go and sit for a while upon a stool without a backrest. If a page in his notebook was untidy, he had to copy it over. If he emitted an uncovered cough, he was expected to rise immediately and fling open a window, no matter how cold the weather, so that a blast of fresh air could protect his fellows from the contamination of his germs. And if he felt obliged to disturb the class routine by leaving the room for a drink of water (Miss Dove loftily ignored any other necessity), he did so to an accompaniment of dead silence. Miss Dove would look at him—that was all—following his departure and greeting his return with her perfectly expressionless gaze, and the whole class would sit idle and motionless until he was back in the fold again. It was easier—even if one had eaten salt fish for breakfast—to remain and suffer.

Of course, there were flagrant offenses that were dealt with in private. Sometimes profanity sullied the air of the geography room. Sometimes, though rarely, open rebellion was displayed. In those instances, the delinquent was detained, minus the comfort of his comrades, in awful seclusion with Miss Dove. What happened between them was never fully known. (Did she threaten him with legal prosecution? Did she terrorize him with her long map-pointer?) The culprit, himself, was unlikely to be communicative on the subject or, if he were, would tend to overdo the business with a tale that revolved to an incredible degree around his own heroism. Afterwards, as was duly noted, his classroom attitude was subdued and chastened.

Miss Dove had no rule relating to prevarication. A child’s word was taken at face value. If it happened to be false—well, that was the child’s problem. A lie, unattacked and undistorted by defense, remained a lie and was apt to be recognized as such by its author.

Occasionally a group of progressive mothers would contemplate organized revolt. “She’s been teaching too long,” they would cry. “Her pedagogy hasn’t changed since we were in Cedar Grove. She rules the children through fear!” They would turn to the boldest one among themselves. “You go,” they would say. “You go talk to her!”

The bold one would go, but somehow she never did much talking. For there in the geography room, she would begin to feel—though she wore her handsomest tweeds and perhaps a gardenia for courage—that she was about

ten years old and her petticoat was showing. Her throat would tickle. She would wonder desperately if she had a clean handkerchief in her bag. She would also feel thirsty. Without firing a shot in the cause of freedom she would retreat ingloriously from the field of battle.

And on that unassaulted field—in that room where no leeway was given to the personality, where a thing was black or white, right or wrong, polite or rude, simply because Miss Dove said it was, there was a curiously soothing quality. The children left it refreshed and restored, ready for fray or frolic. For within its walls they enjoyed what was allowed them nowhere else—a complete suspension of will.

Note: This passage is taken from a novel set in the 1950’s at the Cedar Grove Elementary School, where Miss Dove has taught geography for more than a generation.