

The Book of Annotations

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To nanowrimo or not to nanowrimo?

To the CPA Authors' Club 2015-16

Chapter 1

In-class Writing

The substitute teacher was busy typing on his laptop. He didn't see the kids poking each other in the arm when they were supposed to be writing their essays. Or if he did, he didn't react. Most of them were talking, too, but that didn't seem to distract anyone except the quiet kids. And the quiet kids would be fine, probably.

There were essays being passed back and forth, with many hands writing on them in many colors of pen. In the same way, only more slowly, Noel's book had been passed down from one sibling to another, with each one adding something to the writing in the margins.

For this essay, they were supposed to include quotes from the text, so Noel was flipping through and looking for something good to quote. He wanted to say that the sister in the story was braver than her older brother, but not in a way that diminished the brother's bravery. He needed to find the place where the brother was enduring. It had to do with him being hurt, Noel remembered, or scared, or both, and not crying out.

The turning pages fanned gently against his face.

He smelled something like the odor of fallen leaves, that blows up and down the neighborhood streets this time of year.

Noel's eyes fell naturally on the highlighter, faded though it was, that colored many lines from when his big brother Matt had read the book. Characteristics first mentioned, repetitions with variation that lent their push to a pattern, poetic devices and imagery pointed out in the discussion or prompted by the teacher--his dutiful brother had recorded them all. Or rather, he had marked them where they already lay buried in the printed type-rows. Here and there individual words sparked the page, attesting to their novelty or strange aptness. They fluttered by like yellow leaves, flowers in the hedges, little birds up in the branches: "supine," "crenellations," "prolixity."

Carlton, the boy next to Noel, kept trying to see where he was looking and was offering helpful suggestions, such as "You already looked there!" or, "I'm pretty sure it's on this side of the page, near the top." He frequently brushed his finger against Noel's short pompadour tuft to help lighten the mood, and Noel smiled and shoved his shoulder playfully.

Rory, the boy next to Carlton, knew exactly where the quote about the brother twisting his ankle was, but he was not aware that that was what Noel was hunting, because the way Noel described it already carried with it more of the associations he'd imparted to it for the purposes of his essay, obscuring the clear memory Rory had of reading the passage. In fact, when Noel spotted it and showed it to him, Rory saw that it could admit of the meaning his friend wanted to give it, the brother's bravery and endurance, but that it just as easily could support the interpretation he had formed of it, an example of the way what seems like harmless fun can turn dangerous by sudden accident. Turning in his own book to the same page--it was on the side Carlton had expected, and right near the top--Rory read around it and spotted the portion of the quote he would use to tie back to something a few pages earlier, when the brother, the sister, and their friend set out on their nighttime ramble.

That passage was not highlighted in Noel's book, but in the margin his sister had written, ominously, *foreshadowing*. Sure enough, when they had read it for homework and talked about

it in class, the teacher had pointed out that very example and asked them to explain how it worked. Noel flipped back to another place his sister had written the same thing, near the very beginning, and by dint of comparison he was able to figure out that what they meant by it was a kind of leading on the part of the author. She--his teacher, his sister, the writer--was priming him to expect that something was about to happen, and to recognize something about it when it did.

He had shared the example from the beginning, about the girl learning to tie her shoes another way, and pointed out that the whole book had been about her learning to see things in a new perspective, and the teacher, Ms Milliworthy, had nodded pensively as she only did when something especially on-target had been said. She wrote the relevant page numbers on the board in squeaky haste and everyone who was paying attention wrote *foreshadowing* in their margins, too.

Ms Milliworthy, of course, was not there today. She had told them she would be away for Thursday and Friday of that week, but somehow they were still surprised when they came to class and didn't see her. Her splendid penmanship still adorned the board; as usual, their activity for the day and their homework were listed, along with her tutoring times. But there was no matronly form seated at the high desk, no soft click of sensible shoes resting on the brace between the legs of the sturdy stool pulled up to it, no orderly stack of papers to hand back on its pale wood top. There was no teacher there at all until the substitute showed up moments before the bell rang.

Many of the class had already made their way around the tables to sit by their friends in little cliques, and some had even taken out their books and their essays, but most were talking about something else. He had told them again what they already knew, handed off the attendance sheet to the closest capable-looking student, and retired behind the desk to do something on a laptop. Either he had forgotten to tell them his name, or he thought that by withholding it they might not talk to him as much, though a handful of students with older siblings knew who he was, Noel among them. When anyone needed to go to the bathroom, they would ask around until one of these students told them his name, or they would simply say, "Excuse me, Mr..." and he would look up long enough to acquiesce to their request.

Incidentally, there was a girl who was crying even before the bell rang, and she asked to go to the bathroom as soon as the substitute appeared. He was taken aback by the timing of the demand, and started to say, "Didn't you just have time to..." before noticing her glare and the tears seeping out from underneath. "What's wrong?"

"Today is my last day at the school," she said. Her friends were listening in as unobtrusively as they could, trying to convey their loyalty yet not so much that it set her off crying again.

"Are you moving?" the substitute asked stubbornly.

"Not exactly. I'm just changing schools," she said. "It's a long story. So I can go?"

The substitute nodded, and she swiftly moved through the stragglers still coming in the door as the bell was ringing and out into the hall. The heavy makeup around her dark eyes seemed to leave streaks across the carpet.

"Remember to mark her present," the substitute said to the girl who was taking attendance. "What's her name?"

"Amaya," she said, and pointed it out on the list.

"Has she been like this all day?"

She shrugged. "That's how she is."

The girl next to her was looking down at her closed book. They started talking once she handed back the attendance sheet: more problems the substitute knew nothing about. Next to them Rory couldn't help overhearing. They were discussing some kids in another class.

Across from them, another group, two boys and two girls, were flirting while also managing to get some productive work done on their essays. Everyone pretended not to notice. Rory saw how the two girls next to him looked darkly at the group across from them. One boy had a dashing haircut, with the hair on the sides shaved close and the short hair on top long-looking by comparison, and he flipped his hair around to make the girls laugh. The boy on the other side of the pair of girls was handsomer, with a square jaw and straight back, but his broad shoulders did not seem to let him play around as much as he would like. Still, he looked on approvingly at his friend successfully preening.

The substitute appreciated the clear marks made on the attendance form, and put it with his other paperwork. He looked over his laptop screen from time to time, registering Amaya's return--her eyes just as red, but her cheeks dry--and the coming and going of a few more kids, one at a time, to the bathroom. One soft-spoken boy who looked vaguely familiar asked if he remembered his brother, whom he'd taught the year before.

"He got really big!" he kept saying. "He's been working out a lot. Do you remember him?"

The substitute demurred. Either he remembered but hesitated to show a kind of favoritism by entering further into conversation, or he had simply forgot and didn't have the heart to say so.

Soon enough the boy good-naturedly got back to his paper, peppering the children nearest him with recounts of big brother Andrew's prowess.

The substitute focused again on his laptop. So far none of the students had squeezed between the podium and the wall close enough to sneak a look at his screen. Whether by chance or design, the substitute had ensconced himself where no one would see what he was working on. His fingers tapped along quietly in a steady stream of privy information. Students this age had begun to get the concept of personal space, but regular bathing and daily applications of underarm deodorant were apparently still out of their ken. Self-conscious to the point of paralysis, they could also be astonishingly blind to the perceptions and preoccupations of the people around them. If anyone did wonder what the substitute was writing, they didn't ask.

The nighttime ramble began at the bottom of a page, and went on for several more, almost to the end of the chapter. Rory had forgotten how much happened in the course of that night, but now that he was writing his essay on it, and now that they'd finished the book as a whole, suddenly there was a great deal more jumping out at him. Had there always been that metaphor about the circus strongman act at the part where the brother gives the friend a boost to reach the window? Did the street ring out with the sound of their mom's boots the sister was wearing "like hammers hitting horseshoes," when the crucial horseshoe game with the bully wasn't for another hundred pages? And the light they saw through the trees was a glimmering from the moment that they stepped outside, reflected in miniature in the lightning bugs, "a yellow glow on the yellow-green blades of grass."

Rory never annotated in his books, since he wanted to keep them unmarked; in case he ever read the book again, or lent it to a friend, he didn't want his previous thoughts to impinge

on what he got out of it the next time. Instead of writing in the margins, he put his thoughts in journal entries in a spiral notebook. His tiny, angular handwriting took up hardly any room, and he never wrote more than one or two major insights or questions he had from a reading, so that even now, almost a quarter of the way through the school year, his spiral was still mostly full of empty pages.

After a while, Noel got the prickly feeling on the back of his neck and looked up to see the substitute looking toward the door, where a kid was making faces in the window at him, at Noel. The eyes on the other side of the door looked to where Noel had been looking. The substitute was looking at Noel. The look was quizzical, not wrathful, but the kid on the other side of the door must have bolted, because there was no one there when Noel and the substitute looked back again.

Carlton nudged him. "Was that your little brother?" When Noel looked back, the substitute was engrossed in his laptop as if nothing had happened. He turned to Carlton and made the same face that Sam, his youngest sibling who went to the same school, had just been making through the window in the door. Carlton flicked him under the chin and blocked his riposte.

"Fellows," the substitute said laconically. They stopped at once. He had a very easy job.

The two girls stopped whispering for a moment, but segued their conversation seamlessly onto the transparent coatings of their binders. Where before dark tones went between their lowered heads like echoes in subterranean labyrinth, now silent highlighters took up the thread.

She let her mom take her phone for it

I hate her so much

Her mom?

No Jackie!

This made her giggle, though her friend meant it as a legitimate question. She blushed, then laughed with her mouth wide open, but stifling the sound. *Sorry*, her friend's look said to the substitute. They erased their last messages from their binders and pretended to work on their essays for a minute in chagrin. Jackie's mom would have read the text by now. And that meant...

That group of girls and boys had quieted down, too, when they heard the substitute's voice. The class had so much that pulled it in a hundred different directions--concerns about grades, or rather, about parents' expectations, and sports, and friends, foes, and strangers, what a boy had written on her hand, what a girl had meant by not talking to her, and what was for lunch--but one thing held them together with a steady pull. They all remembered Ms Milliworthy's promise. At least so far, it held them like a star. In the interstellar silence, a few neurons relevant to the reading of books and writing of essays even blinked and sparked back and forth.

It was a promise with two ends. That was how Ms Milliworthy put it: a stick with two ends. Even the crying Amaya remembered that much, partly because the phrase seemed so pointless and redundant. She no longer held onto the actual content of what the teacher had said next; nor did it matter much to her just now, she wouldn't be there for it. Anyway, who cared, it was all stupid: what teacher you had one year, or from one week to the next, made no difference. Still, Amaya was hurt to think Ms Milliworthy was missing her last day.

Rory was looking back at something he had written in his journal. *If after knowing about the foreshadowing you notice the foreshadowed, or you only notice the foreshadowing after you notice the thing it was foreshadowing. That is, which direction is the shadow going, and what's casting it? and by extension, where is the sun?*

It was as if there could be many pages that only appeared in the book once you had read a certain part, and they suddenly appeared there in the beginning. Like when he'd looked back, and there was that sound ringing and that light glowing. Or again, it was as if you were not bound by time and space, but could read different parts of the story, things happening to different characters, simultaneously, or know the background and see the action happening in the foreground all at once, like a stage stacked on top of another stage, or a score of music, with the treble clef and the bass. Or the way God sees.

This always confused him, and he tried again to talk to Noel about it. "Pst," he said, which was how it was spelled in the book. Noel knew he had something story-related, then. Rory talked through his idea about the ringing, the glowing, and wrapped up with something Ms Milliworthy had pointed out: the way you call authors who write like this omniscient, while of course they weren't.

"But this book is told from Ruth's perspective," Noel said slowly.

"First person," Carlton put in. "Though she's talking about everything in hindsight."

"And that makes sense," Rory replied impatiently, still fixing his gaze on Noel. "It's not prophecy, it's a story. But still, it's a made-up story, told by a made-up character. So I'm talking about the author telling the story--and about us reading it. So what looks like foreshadowing to us, isn't that just the author planting a seed, something she may or may not come back to later?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

"She must have revised, like we're always supposed to edit papers, so maybe--"

"Oh shoot, I need to get one more person to edit my paper--Ms Milliworthy said--"

A shadow fell over the three boys. "Could you keep it down? I have a lot of work to catch up on here, since this is my prep. I know you have heard this before. I'd appreciate it."

Noel apologized. Rory was already writing something on the back of his paper.

"What are you working on?" Carlton asked the substitute.

"Nothing. Just hope it's not a note for your teacher," came the reply. *Ooohs* from the boy with the haircut, who was hastily shushed. The substitute was about to say more, but he resumed typing instead.

"What does he teach?" Carlton asked as soon as they were out into the comfortable chaos of the middle school hallway.

"Humanities seminar," said Noel. "I'm pretty sure."

"It was so quiet after he roasted me I couldn't concentrate!"

"Later, Rory!" Noel called to his friend. He was already threading the scrum of bodies, but Rory turned and waved over his shoulder before he was gone from sight.

Finally school was over for the day. Noel and Carlton had their workout for football to go to, and Thursdays were also when the writing club met after school in the library, which was where Rory was heading.

A few students were straggling out of the classroom still, which the substitute didn't mind.

He would wait until the halls cleared a bit before heading back to the teachers' lounge. It wouldn't take long.

Presently, though, he became aware of a familiar smudged attention settling on his face. He kept his expression bland, though little by little his concentration on what he wrote was being transmuted into rage.

Amaya's husky voice: "Would you give Ms Milliworthy this?"

As he looked up, the substitute closed his laptop and took the folded paper she was handing him over the place where the top of the screen had been. "A note for your teacher?"

"A goodbye letter. It's my last day at this school."

The substitute assured her that he would make sure it got to her teacher, and Amaya, reassured, finally departed. He made a detour through the front office to drop the paper in Ms Milliworthy's mailbox. At the last minute he hesitated, curious. But then he slid the paper into the cubby unread.

Across the front hallway in the library, the writing club was convening. It was student-led, but because there had to be some adult supervision, the part-time librarian had been contracted to stay late on Thursdays to keep an eye on them. She was the daughter of one of the teachers, apparently, and also did some substituting from time to time. The sort of person that kids would register, even politely, and then immediately dismiss from their minds. So she heard some surprising things.

The girl who ran the club, and who had founded it just the year before with a couple of her friends, bustled around greeting everybody when she came in with her enormous backpack. Like Rory, most of the kids in the club were shy. Even Yvonne, the founder, was at heart a deeply self-conscious high-school girl, to the point that her very awkwardness lent her almost invincible charisma. But unlike Rory, she and the rest of the club were all girls.

"I'm OK with that," he'd assured her early on, once Yvonne had nerved herself up to broach the subject with him after everyone else but the two of them and her friend Brenda had left. By the third or fourth week, everyone was used to Rory showing up.

Rory was interested in the workshops that Yvonne led them in each week. She usually either found something online, or sometimes she would make it up with her friends at lunch that day. Write a story from the perspective of a mirror. Write a story taking place entirely in terms of a board game, either real or of your own invention. Write a poem with words chosen at random from a dictionary. Then create a world whose creation myth that poem represents.

This last one seemed metaphysically unsatisfying for him later, when he had come back around to faith in some larger purpose, but at the time, of course, random chance seemed like a powerful force. What arrangement of pimples he would wake up to, one morning to the next, was always a serious matter.

The girls, for their part, appreciated having this non-judgmental yet nevertheless uninitiated audience for talk about their own serious and random matters. While Yvonne held forth on the topic of the day--a convoluted characterization exercise building off of the map they'd drawn of their story's settings the week before--a few of the girls interrupted her. Instead of writing, they had been texting furiously for some time, with anguished whispers.

"So, we gotta go. Dominique lost her keys."

"She had them at school this morning, and she says she has to find them before her dad gets here to pick her up or else!"

Brenda tried to exchange a look with Yvonne, but she was already captivated by compassion. "Where was she last when she knows she had them?" Yvonne asked urgently.

"That's what we need to go help her think through."

"She's freaking out. So we need to help her calm down."

Yvonne sighed. "I'm getting stressed out just thinking about it! I'll catch you guys up tomorrow on everything. Go ahead."

Meanwhile Brenda had formulated her protagonist's full bust, sketching it from life from her best friend across the table. She had it just disguised enough, in words like "round cheeks," "frayed poncho around her powerful shoulders," "brown eyes hidden by heavy bangs," that the theft might not be too noticeable if they read them out loud today.

Rory had triangulated somehow based on the outline of mountains at the edge of his world map, the phase of the moon, and the density of the rainforest biome, that his main character's rugged face should be set off to best effect by giving him a messenger bag slung over one arm, and in it, a heavy set of dictionaries, one of which concealed a secret compartment. At his waist, a keyring which could double as brass knuckles in combat scenes jingled.

As they wrote, the girls brought up more minor but perennial stressors on their minds.

"Dude, our first period class is so boring. Plus the room is way too cold."

"If it wasn't, I would probably fall asleep. Instead, we just freeze."

"Does your teacher notice the girls who try to wear sweatpants underneath their skirts?"

"Yep."

"Uh-huh."

"I can understand them being ugly, but I wish the uniform skirts at least had pockets!"

Skirt complaints, class chagrin, and the unlocalized angst breathed in their wake--all this found its way into Rory's writing.

The substitute passed through the mailroom again, his work bag tucked under his elbow. Papers to grade, and the laptop to keep pecking at over a plate of pasta and a glass of wine, both from a box. On his way out through the front hall, where the lowering sun flashed forth in outrageous glory over the silhouette of the strip mall across the way, he glanced over at the library and caught the eye of the part-time librarian. Or maybe she was just staring off into space, admiring the play of the colors across the far wall.

Past midnight, he would have the dream again: the kiss of promise; protective gestures, self-rendering, and the blossoming of limbs; claims on him he would wish for and dread in the mouth of her who spoke them, and still more and still stranger, darker, more vibrant colors for his palette.

Chapter 2

Morning Practice

In the cool morning after the rain, a little mist clung to the ground outside of town where some last acres of farmland were left in between housing developments. Off in the distance, it was still cloudy, but the sun was rising over the mountains.

The book in the backpack at Noel's feet shook as the car bumped over the ruts in the road. A new one they were starting, now that they'd handed in the essays on Friday. Reading it was the only homework he'd taken home over the weekend, and the only thing he still had to do before school was look it over one more time. He and his sister Harriet were up early for morning practice. She played soccer with the high school girls at a park near the school, and he was on the middle school football team. She would drop him off at the school field before going to the park. It meant he would be a little early, but it was a logistical feat for all of them to get where they needed to go, and they were used to things like that.

The brother and sister did not speak much. Their breath was full of morning tastes, sleep and breakfast pastry and, in Harriet's case, coffee that she wasn't supposed to drink. There was fog on the windows, just enough to remind Noel of writing in it when he was small. That in turn reminded him of the doodles he had done on his math homework when they were checking it in class the other day, and how he planned to continue them today. And then Sam's face against the glass making faces at him, and the mood the substitute had been in that day. And, more vaguely, Rory's question, and Carlton's...

There was an artist his sister particularly liked these days whose music was always playing when she drove. They often heard it coming out of her room at home, too, in the evenings when she did homework. What they did not know was how often she kept a running account of her ideas about the songs when she was also doing the Calculus she was assigned, or how much she annotated in the margins of her book about thoughts more applicable to the music than to the story or the philosophy that she was intermittently reading. When the margin wasn't enough, she went on in her journal:

the fanfare records the meeting of nobility and democracy, horns and guitars.

lost notes find their place in the amplitude of running up and down scales, lonely in the reverb.

crescendo of multiplicity rather than any one instrument increasing in volume. if it is a wall of sound, it is built up in layers like a bird's nest, built around you, and then you finally lie down in it.

the next track, you stand up and sing out and soar.--even, rather, in the silence before it, the idea of flying.

is that why there are so many songs about birds, or is the other way around--I think of birds because of the song names and lyrics. song first, or words? music, or Idea?

All this was like the response to the dynamics the songwriter had marked on the unseen sheet music, if it were possible to respond to them as easily as people posted comments under the videos that played the music. With some such thought in mind, Harriet had started a blog to post her writing about the music and the singer-songwriter she loved so much. She called her blog Shynamics, which was just clever enough while still being ironic. It was also true. Once every few days when she had time she typed up the notes she had made from as many places as she remembered to look, or she changed or wrote more about something in a previous post, or she just posted links to songs recorded live and other media or writing that she liked.

In class, Harriet had no trouble speaking up, but she was never as outgoing socially as any of her three brothers. The friends she hung out with were used to talking almost uninterrupted by a comment from her. For all that, she was just about universally admired. When they read *Pride and Prejudice* last year, her sophomore year, and everyone was having fun assigning one another this character or that, her class all agreed that she would be Jane. Her question in response, "Why would Austen name this character after herself?" was one which no one seemed to have much time to answer, engaged as they were in figuring out who one another would be. Her teacher then, and also this year, had been and was Mr Thomas. He was the one who had been subbing for Ms Milliworthy that couple of days she was out last week. And he had noticed Ms Curran's questions, as he thought of Harriet by her last name during class discussion, and eventually would try to bring the class back around to them.

Whenever a teacher did this, the class took note: here was something important, maybe even something the teacher actually didn't know, maybe something they were only pretending to wonder about for the good of the student who asked it, or from some other whim. Whatever they had said, Harriet couldn't keep it separate now from something she had been thinking about, the song where the name of the volcano and the singer intertwined.

She dropped her brother off and watched him go in through the opening in the fence onto the field. The lights were just warming up, the assistant coach was there shooting the breeze with some kids, and the head coach was pulling in as she left. She waved. There was a little more traffic going this way, towards the highway, towards the city. She soon turned off into a neighborhood, though, where the streetlights were some on, some off, and pulled up to the park where they practiced. There were only about half of them there, though it was five minutes until they were supposed to start. A stranger, not one of the usual dog-walkers, sat on a bench beside the jungle gym over by the little man-made reservoir. Too far away for her to see more than that there was no dog, and whoever it was wore a hoodie and shorts. A jogger, then. The other girls were passing soccer balls sleepily by the near edge of the field where the light from the streetlights barely reached. The field, itself an irrigation control in the really big rains, was low-lying, and the sun was not yet overspreading it.

Harriet dropped her water bottle at the base of the hill, responding to the coach's greeting with a wave. The ball moved quicker than usual over the wet grass--more dew, almost frost, this morning. Her feet were soon damp and cold.

What did I do-, the song purled, -ooo to deserve this? The synth effects from the live show haunted Harriet's read of the song now, and they came to mind whenever she felt in such a way as to bring the words to mind.

Harriet dreamed of being able to see him in concert; he was coming to Phoenix later that November. She saved from her job all summer and had just enough for a ticket, just before

there were none left. Not a perfect seat, but a dream come true, nonetheless. *Will Call, beautiful name for a band*. Of course, until then, she would watch videos from the shows in other cities, memorizing every word, everything he forgot in the lyrics or varied in the arrangement. *Adorably imperfect, dauntlessly experimental*.

Noel slapped the ground with his fingertips, hips already turning to position his high-top cleats for the push-off that would launch him back down the length of the field in the last leg of the wind sprint. He accelerated all the way through and tagged Carlton's hand, finally braking before his collision with the mat cushion against the fence. Red and Blue, the colors of their school.

Or Scarlet and Azure, as the coach insisted on calling them. Likewise, always Wind Sprints, never Suicides. He spoke of Brotherhood and Camaraderie, Self-sacrifice and unstinting Devotion to the Team, Sweating the Details and Owning the Errors, and the boys lapped it up. Currently the coach was barking encouragement at intervals over the thud of footfalls and clapping and cheering of the kids waiting their turn. He could hardly have more breath than the runners.

Noel got himself set for another shuttle, just in case he had lost count or coach decided they weren't pushing themselves and gave them another, but mercifully he called them into a huddle.

"Take a knee, fellows."

Noel beamed at the back thumps, the words of encouragement, and paid close attention to the blocking drill they would run next. As needed, kids would get water in between transitions throughout the drill, but Noel almost never did. He'd sweat buckets, but always seemed to be refreshed by rejoicing in the elan of his movement and his teammates' alone.

Carlton was his perennial partner for the drills, and they jogged and played catch together over the summer in their neighborhoods. They'd attended another charter school together for elementary, and while Noel was automatically enrolled at East Cliffs Prep because he had older siblings there, Carlton had been on the waiting list for a year and a half before a spot opened up. In the meantime Noel had made other friends, smart kids like Rory and other kids his family knew from church, good kids, but he was over the moon about Carlton finally getting to join them.

With the zeal of a true believer, he set about inducting his friend into the lore of the school. Some things Carlton already knew from elementary, some he had to be reminded of, but much else was new. And he, in turn, had a surprising amount to unlearn even from his short time being dunked in the regular public school, Grady Middle.

"You get homework every night," Noel had admonished, "and frequent pop quizzes on it, too, so you better keep up."

"Kids actually read the books here?" Carlton was bemused.

"Not all of them, but that's the idea, yeah."

Their first day, he had shown him around, all the practical locations like bathrooms and the fastest way to the cafeteria, and where their table was in there, and then Noel made a point of stopping before the mural that fronted the main entrance. It featured a great feast scene, something out of a Norse warrior's dying vision, or an adaptation of a Brueghel village holiday, only all around the tables, instead of Vikings and peasants, were famous figures from history

and literature. Dido and Beatrice high-fived between a bright window and a fireplace; Abe Lincoln toasted Frederick Douglass over the head of Jefferson, locked in chess-battle with Walt Whitman; Heathcliff bit into a drumstick, while Mr Darcy passed Jane the casserole. Noel pointed each one out and rattled off their exploits, glad to finally impart the science in which he had been instructed himself so many years before, when the school was new, and big brother Matt was in the first ninth-grade class, a day hazy in his memory when the paint still smelled fresh.

A few weeks later he had quizzed Carlton on the mural and got this response: "They should include some football players next time if they want to appeal to the kids downtown."

East Cliffs Prep was an unusual school, but maybe it would not be so for long. Rumors were going around that year more than ever that big efforts were in the works to expand the East Cliffs brand. The board and their donors wanted to bring more schools like it to campuses all around the Canyon. Displacing the existing public schools was all to the good, as far as Noel was concerned, from what Carlton had said. But still his friend had a point: not every kid would get to hear about the mural, the curriculum, the whole amazing school culture from their best friend, who'd heard it in turn from an older brother almost mythic enough to clink glasses with the rest of them around the long table.

So a seed was planted. Football practices watered it, the smiles of his friends and teachers beamed warm upon it, and most of all, the earth it fell on took. Noel's was a good heart.

He naturally had hands. He had never taken up boxing, but he would have been adept very shortly. For now he used his gifts not only for catching passes, but for blocking and eluding blocks. Footwork was a strength of his, too. Carlton was a little stronger in his upper body, but they weren't wearing pads or hitting anybody right now, and Noel had the advantage of agility.

The sun was well up by the time practice was ending, and as captain he had to make sure all the equipment made it back into the shed. He kept an eye on the younger players, his little brother Sam among them, as the coach in turn supervised them all leaving the field and crossing the parking lot. The cars were already beginning to line up, parents dropping off their kids on their way to work, and the football team always contributed significantly to the back-up. They cut through the traffic in a ribbon of red practice shirts, safety in numbers, while the coach held up the cars. By the side door Noel and his teammates smartly pulled off their cleats, horsing around again now that they were out of sight of the coach, and padded through to the locker room.

Even the irreverence of walking around the school in sock feet could not quite overcome Noel's sense of responsibility. He often ran into his sister around the sharp hallway corners back by the gym, and he ought to preserve his dignity around her. Particularly since, coming back from soccer practice in carpools, all her teammates and friends were around, too.

He didn't see her today. There was only the janitor setting up the tables in the cafeteria. He greeted the kids as they passed, wishing them luck in what was left of the season. Just as he had every day beginning with the teacher work days before the first day of school, when they had training camp at the end of the summer, he gave them high fives.

They did not have much time to change before school started. So, with poise and restrained impatience, Noel brought up the rear of the train of boys, found a little square yard of space in the locker room to change into his uniform, splashed his face and neck with water at

the sink, and judiciously applied an off-brand deodorant spray his brother used to use. Carlton was waiting for him outside the door.

“Time to look for Rory?”

Noel nodded and they fell into step. “Yeah. Then I’ve got to read.”

Harriet, overhearing her brother’s voice, missed it the first time, but then the polite cough repeated caught her attention. “Excuse me, I’m sorry to ask this.” It was the janitor, holding out a hand; Harriet shook it. The other held a stacking chair like it weighed no more than a leaf. “My name is Eric.”

“I’m Harriet Curran.”

“Nice to meet you, Harriet. I don’t know you, but I’ve seen you around and I know you’re responsible, though. Your mom volunteers at the lunch time, right?”

“Yeah, sometimes,” Harriet said readily. She had a way of squaring herself to whomever she addressed that made her seem mature and capable, even when her mind was elsewhere. She unconsciously learned it from her mother, who indeed was capable, and among whose volunteer activities organizing and serving the school lunches was one. “How can I help?”

The janitor lowered the chair to the floor and it abruptly settled with its wonted weight. He flipped another chair up lightly and down, and Harriet saw that his art consisted in having found the balancing point, where the least effort would go to the maximum effect. “Sorry to take your time from studying, but I found this book this morning. Someone must have left it there the other day, by the lunch window. It doesn’t look like the kind of book the kids here would read. I thought it must be one of the mothers’ who help. You could ask your mom about it?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll go get it, then.”

Harriet waited while the janitor jogged over to a backpack on a side table by the wall. A number of other students were already studying around the cafeteria, and sure enough she saw her brother and his friends not far away. He was reading, but looked up from time to time to exchange a word with the others. She caught his eye and waved.

“There you go.” The book that the janitor held out to her had been read and written in up to a certain page several chapters in. It seemed to be some kind of self-help book of the kind marketed to would-be entrepreneurs. On the cover, a model home and a grinning couple. *The Good Life*, it read.

“I saw that and I said, I don’t want to put it in the lost and found, since it must belong to one of the parents, you know?”

“Sure! I’ll ask my mom and see if she can help find out who it belongs to.”

Already the bell was ringing to move along to class. Harriet wrote a quick note, stuck it in the book, and brought both to the front desk, where she dropped the book off in the little mailbox on the side marked Parent Teacher Organization. Her mom would check it on her way to the cafeteria at lunch, and someone’s business or someone’s good life would be saved.

Once the cafeteria cleared, Eric set up the rest of the tables and straightened up after the students. He made a quick round of the halls, sliding things out of the middle of the floor with his foot for now, which he would either pick up later or leave for the night crew. It would depend on how his book was going.

He had started working at the school just the past spring as a way to get his daughter through the waiting list. Once he got the hang of the way the place ran, Eric began reading again in his spare time. There had been very little of it while he was raising a family, and working at the public school he had been part of a team, so the free time there had always been there had always been spent talking and joking with the guys, but he found himself with leisure time now and alone. He had tried a few game apps on his phone. They were addicting, so he told himself he did not want to be a bad influence on the students. The only thing to do here seemed to be to read.

He snuck a glance into one of the science labs at the front of the school. His daughter was there, Nica. She stubbornly paid attention to the lesson while he ambled by the window, pretending to dust its frame. She never liked to look at her father at school, and was mortified if he ever said hello. Even if there was no one around, she worried it would embolden him. Such a change had come over her in so short a time. As all her teachers said last year, it was a difficult adjustment, coming from a public school and jumping into East Cliffs.

Many days she wanted to give up, and was almost inconsolable. She had a peer tutor now, though, the Curran girl, and had been doing a little better.

Eric propped open the back door and sat in the shade of the wall enclosing the air-conditioning machinery. It was loud here, but he did not mind since he knew no one would distract him. A large trapezoid of sunlight angled across the pavement.

Right now, he was reading the vampire series that had been so popular a few years ago. Nica had read them all in a month. Eric read slowly, but with the care of a man who wanted to understand what his daughter was going through.

Harriet caught up with her mom towards the end of lunchtime. Mrs Curran shrugged.

“So none of the volunteers said it belonged to them?”

“No takers. You said the custodian found it here today?”

“This morning, I guess it was lying there by the lunch window.”

“In that case, it could have been from the end of school on Friday. You know that the Chivalry Club meets in there Friday afternoons, that Sam’s in. I guess it could be Mr Fraye’s, but it could be one of the parents had come in looking for a child and left the book there. Or it could be someone from the church that rents out the theater on Sundays, though they don’t usually use the cafeteria.”

“Were there any sports going on here this weekend?”

“I could ask Mrs Rivas.” Mrs Curran and the athletic director were old friends. “So how was practice today?”

“It was fine. Some of the new girls are still struggling, but we’re all coming together.”

“Keep it up, hon.” Mrs Curran gave Harriet a swift hug, and they parted. “I’ll keep asking around about that book.”

The only one of the mothers who had given it a second look was Edna. She was the big reader among the PTO, and had even started taking an online class about fantasy literature that she’d heard about somewhere. The others had all seemed vaguely uncomfortable at the idea of needing to read something like that, which Mrs Curran could understand. Edna’s response, though, was to dismiss it as mundane.

Once again, Ms Milliworthy was missing. It was one thing for her to tell them she would be gone on Thursday and Friday, but she hadn't said anything about being gone on Monday, too, had she?

The boys heard about it at lunch from their friends, who had her class in the morning.

"Who's the sub?" Carlton asked the crucial question. "Is it that old guy again? He was all right."

Instead of the sub who had been watching the class last week, they said, the new teacher today was a young woman.

Rory spoke up. "Is she that one who watches the library?"

"Oh yeah," said one of the others, "she did mention that she works there."

"I didn't know we had a librarian!" Noel blurted out. He was astonished to find there was something about the school he did not know about.

"Yeah," said Rory. "I think she's new. Hardly ever speaks. What was she like as a teacher?"

"All she said was that we should have brought our new books and that we could read them in class."

"And annotate," Noel remarked. There were murmurs of assent: that went without saying. Even when Ms Milliworthy was present, she often gave them entire class periods to read or re-read silently and annotate, sometimes with ten minutes or so at the end to write responses to questions they had. She called silent reading, "That than which nothing is a more valuable use of time for instruction."

"Did the librarian say what's going on with Ms Milliworthy?" Rory persisted.

"No. She said she was fine, just that something had come up, and she'd try to be back soon."

Talk turned general across the table. Noel turned to Carlton. "So I think we should go this afternoon," he said in an undertone. "We'll have plenty of time to get the reading done for tonight. We can probably do the rest of our homework right now and during LL."

LL was what they called the half hour after lunch. It stood for liber liberis, a joke the Latin teachers had come up with. LL could be used as a recess by students who we caught up in their classes, or for study hall. Many teachers offered tutoring then.

"Go where?" Carlton had eaten his lunch and was gathering leftovers from everyone in reach. "Sorry," he dropped his voice to a whisper, "I sort of know what you're talking about, but I forgot."

"It's OK," Noel didn't miss a beat. "I'll talk to Harriet about it, you let your mom know you'll be home a little later. We're going to hang out at Sully's--we're just going to make a little detour on the way."

After their staff meeting that afternoon, the Headmaster approached Mr Thomas. "Hey, Lane."

As usual, he had arrived a few minutes into the meeting, sat well away from the circle of teachers by a wall, and typed assiduously at his laptop throughout. It was nothing the Headmaster saw any reason to confront him over at this juncture, however. She had more pressing business. Without more ado, she laid it out. "What's going on with Dolly?"

Mr Thomas looked up impassively. He had been reading the last of a stack of his juniors' essays. He had meant to hand them back the previous week, but then Ms Milliworthy had roped him into watching her classes and his other project had been born, which absorbed him all weekend. He always tried to save a good one for last, and Ms Curran's work was not disappointing. When thoughts of Odysseus and the swineherd had dispersed fully into the wings of his mind and the stage was clear, Mr Thomas asked the Headmaster, "Sorry, once more?"

"Dolly Milliworthy. Have you heard from her? Originally she was planning to be back today."

"And now?"

"Another couple of days, at least."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Mr Thomas said expansively. "It's been years since she took a day off; I would think she's earned a couple extra by now."

"I just wanted to make sure everything was all right."

"Well, as far as I know, it is." The Headmaster, in turn, looked pensive. Finally, Mr Thomas relented. "I can give her a call tonight, try checking in on her."

"Thank you, Lane."

"I can't promise she'll answer."

"That's all right." The Headmaster was already striding back to the separate office behind the front desk, where hundreds of emails awaited. Mr Thomas idly wondered if by portioning out a few good ones here and there the Headmaster managed to go on, too. "You can leave her a message, at any rate, let her know we're thinking of her."

Meanwhile, at the Diner Mite Inn, Noel and Carlton had seated themselves on the high stools at the counter. The plate of breakfast scramble that came within reach of Carlton had been decimated, and a honking slice of pie was going the way of all desserts. Noel sipped temperately at his chocolate shake. Condensation was beading around the thick glass mug that flared out at the top like a flower. He was talking over it to the waitress.

"You guys go to that school on the corner?" she had asked, noticing their uniforms. For her part the waitress wore all black under her apron, with heavy-soled black shoes.

This was all the opening Noel was waiting for. "Yes, we're students at East Cliffs Prep, ma'am, and we'd like to tell you a little bit about it, if that's all right."

"Go ahead. I've been curious about that place for years now. Is it a Catholic school or something?"

"More like a Mormon school," Carlton quipped. "They send us out two by two to knock on people's doors."

"It's not religiously affiliated," Noel said carefully. "But many of the families there are Catholic, or go to some other church. East Cliffs Prep is a charter school, free for anyone to attend, serving all the students that it can accommodate on the hearty intellectual food of great books and a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, and we believe in the core values of Wisdom, Courage, and Friendship."

"Seriously, though, Noel and I do happen to be Mormons," Carlton persisted. "This sort of thing is in our blood."

"That's very interesting," the waitress said. She was wrapping some silverware in napkins. This late-afternoon lull was not a bad time for her to take a little break and humor these

kids. Even the dinner rush had not been too busy lately. "And you're looking for more students?"

"Actually, there aren't many spots that open up each year. If you have young children, you could place them on the waiting list."

"Oh, my kids are grown. I was just curious."

"And since there's no more room at the school," Noel went on, "we thought we'd like to bring the school to the places where there's room. The real goal of Wisdom, Courage, and Friendship goes beyond the classes and curriculum. Even beyond college, we want to be a community of lifelong learners."

"Anywhere can be a classroom," said Carlton, "and anyone can be both teacher and student."

"So Carlton and I decided we would start this afternoon."

The waitress thumped a handful of silverware down beside a pile of paper napkins and regarded the boys with an appraising look. "Well, respect, you guys! You go for it!"

The glow through the windows was matched by a warmth in Noel's breast. In his heart, a sprout was basking in the splendor of invisible light.

"So we wanted to recommend a few books for you to read, maybe with your co-workers, maybe with neighbors."

"Oh, I don't have time to read." The waitress laughed. "I'm sure the rest of them are in the same boat."

"You don't have to read them all at once," Carlton explained. "It's not like there's homework or a quiz on it. You get to choose when and how much to read."

"And then when you're ready, we can have a discussion about it."

"When I haven't read a whole book in years," the waitress went on, chuckling, "now I'm going to be part of a book club?"

"What better way to start?" Carlton said. "We can all help each other stick with it."

"What better time than the present?"

The waitress looked suddenly glum. There were snickers from back in the kitchen. "Well, I'll think about it. Now you guys want anything else?"

"Just think about it," Noel said. He wrote down the waitress' name and the phone number of the diner in the back of his book. While she was ringing up the check, he made some notes about how the discussion had gone. *Encouraging, wants to be. Worried about reading. Time.*

"That was delicious!" Carlton said when they got outside. "I think that went well."

"Yeah," Noel assented. "Not bad."

They turned their steps toward the coffee shop in the strip mall down the block. The expanse of the parking lot was broken up on the other side of the diner by a fanciful office complex, built to counterfeit a village square. All the tenants had gone, the windows were boarded up and the sidewalks were vacant, but the little development still attested to someone's attempt to shape barren materials into something beautiful. To make out of placelessness a place. There was even a drainage canal built in for the monsoons with a pedestrian bridge over it. Noel liked to hop up on the coping around the old-fashioned lampposts, barking, "Parkour!" so that his shouts echoed off the dilapidated wall. He leapt onto the bridge and walked across the broad balustrade at its edge, a casual acrobat. Carlton slid down the declivity below. "You take

the high road, I'll take the low!" he sang in as deep an opera vibrato as he could imitate, and his voice and the cawing and hooting sounds he made all fluttered around and around in the drainage pipe, magnified and foreign when they emerged under Noel's ears at the far end.

Harriet looked up from her homework to see her brother and his friend capering around in the little office block. Whizont Alley, as she thought of it. She just hoped they never went by there when it was any darker out than this. She had heard stories of girls being accosted along the road there by dingey men in pickup trucks. She doubted it, but it was possible that they had been looking for someone in particular who sometimes walked up and down there, maybe in twos or threes, smoking cigarettes. Either way, a bad place for boys to play, but they loved it.

Now they were waiting at the corner for the light to change. Harriet saw board spinners on that corner during the daytime. They were living advertisements for more legitimate businesses that hunkered too far away across the parking lot for the signs in their windows to be seen from the road. Some of them were bored looking, waving a sign halfheartedly on a stick while they swayed under the tiny square of shade, but some were magicians. She wondered if they took turns whirling pizzas in the kitchen of the Italian restaurant there and then practicing on the sidewalk with heavy wooden boards instead of tacky dough, like athletes training on a Greek urn, only with an apron and a few more clothes on.

Harriet stifled a laugh, thinking of the art teacher who showed them slides of the classical models when they were doing their pottery project. She had hid her face in her hands, while other girls squawked openly at the muscular outlines with their wee parts showing. The boys had snickered and waved rulers at each other, the goons. That was back when they were in eighth grade! What was Mrs Fulks-Warriner thinking!

She gathered up her things as Noel and Carlton came up to the entrance. Sully's was quiet this late in the afternoon. Harriet wanted to get going without a long conversation with the baristas, which she knew Carlton was capable of, and without disturbing the handful of regulars who were reading the paper on the couches or having Bible study in twos and threes around the edges of the big room.

On the drive home, Harriet ignored the boys' veiled remarks about their secret project. She went over parts of the latest album that she would like best to sing with the church choir. If such a thing were possible, she mused, she might even give up coffee, return to the fold.

Chapter 3

Banned Books

At one point or another, several of the books that were popular at the time would impinge on the consciousness of the teachers who monitored the halls before and after school, or at lunch. It might go something like this: My, what a colorful book! or, Why would that student bother to put a brown paper bag cover overtop of the book she's reading? or, Why aren't they as assiduous about reading what is assigned?

The school prided itself on reading only classic works in the curriculum, but it was inevitable that some of the kids, at least, would read what was not.

There were a variety of responses to the crisis. For one thing, some of the younger teachers were usually reading the same books themselves. If it was a guilty pleasure, it only grew when they saw their students' noses in the same book they had by their bedside, or heard them talking about the characters they were apt to discuss with their friends on weekends, too. Some even wrote fanfics; they secretly wondered if the students read those, hopefully.

esperanto_ace posted on 07/24: Anyone else wonder what happened to Marcello after the Bonzai II episode? Well, check out my new fic! (spoilers)

The ideologically stricter teachers had no patience for a student reading books with covers that said, NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE, or with pages delineated by panels, and even pages that you turned backwards. They might be curious about what made the kids want to read such books, but if anything they added to the allure by telling them to put them away. This is how they proved they were really good teachers.

If the students did not want to read what was assigned, that was regrettable, but the love of reading would bring them around to appreciating the quality of the books sooner or later, they trusted. By not just offering but requiring the students to read what was great, and modeling the appreciation and enthusiasm they hoped to instill, it was only a matter of time before the students left behind *Book Three of the Rigged Game Series* and read their Tolstoy with gusto. If these teachers knew what a fanfic was, it was only because they had their students write imitations and sequels to the great books for extra credit when time allowed. But they wouldn't recognize the word fanfic unless their students, late-reformed, taught it to them.

Somewhere in between, and torn, alas, were the teachers with kids of their own. If their kids were reading the popular books, they did not want to discourage them, but they knew they set a poor example by letting them bring them to school. In some cases, they read them first or with their kids to see whether they might be classics in their own right after all--and some of them were actually pretty good, they had to admit. Still, the best they could do was steer them towards the ones with literary merit and ask them to read their books for school first.

One thing almost all of the faculty could agree on was the perfidy of cell phone usage. Students hanging out in little clumps like ribosomes around a nucleus, lone truants shielding the tell-tale illumination with their body, hunched over a phone held at the hip inches from a pocket, or with their heads halfway into the locker where they held the hidden talisman--the push-back against the ban on phones in school was unrelenting. The persecution of stubborn miscreants by the righteous teachers was no less impatient. It made each day an epic struggle.

In the event that a phone could be wrested from the malefactor's grasp, it would be turned in at the front desk. For its ransom, a parent would have to step into the fray, ensuring that they were apprised of the severity of the rules, and leveraging any and all support they might lend to enforce reasonable limits on the time their scions spent interfacing with screens. The agony of dispossession, even for a few hours, was nearly, but never quite, outweighed by the shame of entreating mom or dad to come to the rescue. A further turn of the screw was that kids hitherto unaware of the privileges they enjoyed were made at least fleetingly cognizant of the true relationship in which they stood to that parent, that it was one of absolute dependence.

When her phone was taken away after one such incident, Jackie and her friends had been separated through the weekend from contact via phone, and had been forced to convene in person in order to talk. She didn't talk to the teacher who had caught her and enforced the rule to the letter, confiscating her phone and setting the stage for the weeklong deprivation, for weeks afterwards. She and her friends kept up a steady stream of abuse in lowered tones and through snapchat to keep the flames of their indignation alight.

Aside from these few annoyances, the staff had to admit that the school was remarkably free of behavioral conflicts. There were teachers there who had taught in public schools, or young teachers who still remembered vividly what it was like to attend them themselves, and no wonder then that East Cliffs was such a happy place.

The most crabbed and disciplinarian of task-masters, who might speechify a minute or two at students who came late to class, could not deny that they ran late on occasion when there was a line for the single staff bathroom. The kids who resisted starting their work by dilatory tactics, asking a talkative young teacher tangential or personal questions, were not forgotten when that same teacher sat down later to do some planning and spent ten minutes ogling social media feeds first. Those pesky, manipulative, technology-obsessed squirts, they would say to themselves, and I am just like them.

Jackie's friends were having considerable success with the long-term sub for Ms Milliworthy with this last tactic. When they learned that she was studying for the MCAT, they began meowing with extra ems in front, just loud enough for her to hear. They would ask her a question here and there, and pretty soon, she was explaining her whole life's aspirations to them. How she would intern with the Red Cross. How she would specialize in pediatrics, with special attention to the role of psychiatric trauma. How she would set up clinics in the inner city, once East Cliffs expanded there, to serve the whole child.

Ms Milliworthy had been guilty of this, too, but in a different way. She found that at times her own scholarly interests and writing overlapped with the curriculum for her students in ways that were not too problematic for all involved, when she could actually borrow lecture notes whole-cloth from her work outside of school, or adapt it with minimal fuss. She was always happiest when there was no great divide between her worlds outside of school and within it. She was very happy when her words could be heard by human ears, and if the captive audience did not entirely hate what they heard, bully for them.

Zounds Nouns
By Dolly Milliworthy

I have some thoughts I'd like to share, before moving on to the meat of the review. I hope this will be interesting for you, as it was for me to think about, but if it's not, you can just tune me out and look over the paradigms there on the handout:

Noun: person, place, thing, or idea. Noun means name. Proper Names capitalized in English, and by editors, at least, in Old English, too. Tend to be stressed on first syllable, ignoring any prefix (ge-, a-, be-, for-). Tend to give grammatical information with inflected endings.

Frequently the first grammatical category people are taught, when the time comes to analyze their own native language and think consciously about all the rules they unconsciously inhabit. Probably a mistake, since what counts is the sentence structure of subject and verb, their agreement, coherence. But there is something fascinating about categorizing words, nouns especially and maybe quintessentially.

One of the more interesting things I ever learned in middle school (in class, that is, as part of the ostensible curriculum) was in English class, and it was the meaning of the harmless-looking old fashioned exclamation Zounds, and a handful of other oaths that used to accompany it once upon a time. God's Wounds! Odds bodkins! God's little body. I've forgotten the rest. I think this was how we were introduced to Shakespeare, with Romeo and Juliet. Which is fantastic! I love Shakespeare bec to this day!

Romeo Romeo...Names a kind of incantatory power. A rose by any other name smell as sweet? A blostma? A power of memory, the giving of a name, or the attempt to erase it. To make a name for oneself. I am become a name. Adam's task, and I am that I am. Saying a noun over and over until it is just sounds (like sunu in my paradigm), or Zounds.

[Augustine's account of learning language in his Confessions, one of my favorite boca, begins with nouns. He describes recognizing things and associating them with the words spoken by the adults around him. Wittgenstein plays with this in his Philosophical Investigations with a thought experiment of a language consisting solely of nouns. Plato's forms propose the Good, The True, The Beautiful. Maybe these are actually substantive adjectives, family resemblances; and German idealism is concerned with the thing in itself...]

Thinking from a teacher's perspective, now, which is to say that of a person who likes learning and hopes to find other people who like it, too, and can be persuaded to pay him for sharing that fondness--well, the audience for this course is very different from savage 7th or 8th graders. I've heard Tolkien opened Beowulf by chanting the first fifty or so lines in OE. The way this course opens with the more manageable music of Caedmon's Hymn.

Nu sculon herian heofan-rices weard
Metodes meahta and his mod-geþanc

...

The nouns there in the first line, the first we learn, are the compound heaven-realm and ward, thinly disguised. Renaming, apposition, the towering Subject.

Thanks for listening to all of that! Nouns are quite amazing things. Where do they fit in? How do they work? How can we work with them, aside from simply memorizing whole reams of poetry, or paradigms?

Flipping back through (clicking) Drout's Quick and Easy and my notes on their lectures, I appreciated again the method he uses and we've used for presenting and learning Old English: beginning with an overview of grammar, adding vocabulary little by little, and gradually focusing on various components of the Anglo-Saxon in the service of translation and comprehension.

The first components suggested for closer study are not, as one might expect, nouns, the most common words used for everyday things, people, places, or verbs, the account of their actions. Instead, we start with the personal pronouns which so often take the place of the subject of the sentence. We get an overview of common verbs. Then we move into the demonstratives and relative clauses. Then adjectives. They provide a kind of preview of noun endings, and a training ground for recognizing these inflexions.

Sound pedagogical reasons: Since nouns fall into so many classes, not as helpful to memorize right at the start. Since you will have to look them up the first few times at least anyway to figure out what they mean, you'll also get a review in doing so of their declension, which is glossed with the relevant line. I find this incredibly helpful, but potentially a dangerous recourse if abused. For myself, I also generally find the context of the sentence helpful--especially those little demonstratives, if present (though frequently missing from poetry), adjectives, and common verb endings that I have started to recognize.

That being said, the most common nouns are also fairly recognizable and starting to become more familiar.

Three kinds of Nouns: Strong, Weak, and Minor....Look this over together, catch any errors.

Appreciation for the fun of working on this, and for the time it must have taken Preceptor Goering and Prof Drout to prepare the wonderful lectures! And as I'm only auditing, know that I don't say this for any brownie points, but sincerely!

She had lost her nerve sharing some of the cornier bits with her class, and deleted them from the copy she brought with her. But a few of the references she left in, and with great relish she adumbrated just enough context for the students to get a glimpse of the point she wanted to make.

* * * * *

Parents could be a powerful ally, or a baleful foe. The margin between the two extremes was thin. This was where Mr Thomas began when he finally left a message for Ms Milliworthy, after trying her home phone several times. She still didn't have a cell phone.

"And as a parent, I get that," he slowly wound his way towards his point. "I still worry about how my kids are doing." Mr Thomas's kids were all grown and living in places with more water. His wife had left, too, soon after the last of the kids was out of the house.

"We're all hoping you're all right. We hope you'll be back soon."

In tandem with their adventures across the street, Noel and Carlton were active in their search for a teacher. They needed somebody within the school who would mentor them, Noel reasoned, just as much as they needed to share what they were learning with others elsewhere.

Carlton and most of his other friends thought she was strict, but of all of his teachers, Noel would have asked Ms Milliworthy first. The problem was, who knew when she would return?

"I wonder if she's really sick," Carlton shuddered. "With her nose dripping everywhere, like happens sometimes, and she would keep pulling out that same wad of tissue paper from her purse and stuffing it back in each time she goes by the podium."

Mr Fraye was Carlton's first choice, but he already did so much with Chivalry Club and History Bowl.

"We can't ask him to take on this, too," Carlton remarked. "Besides, he was going to give me a high five today, right after I heard him coughing down the hall. I faked him out, but even though he laughed, I felt kind of bad about it."

Without telling his sister why he was asking, Noel brought it up with her on the way home that afternoon.

"We want to talk to someone who knows a lot about teaching," Carlton summarized, "but who won't get us sick."

"Why do you keep going on about that?" Noel cut in.

"These teachers are all walking around coughing everywhere, getting all the kids sick," he explained. Noel was fairly sure he had it backwards, but he let it drop.

"What about Mrs Hendersen?" Harriet suggested. "She's never sick, and she takes the extra time to do seminars with some of the teachers on the weekend."

But Carlton balked at the thought of approaching someone even more senior in the Humanities department than Mr Thomas, the substitute who had rebuked them so sharply.

"Yeah, she can be a little intense," Harriet reflected. "Most of what I hear her talking about with other teachers, and students, too, is either stuff about epic battles and tragedy, or about training animals. Or sometimes both. And yet she always seems so happy, she's laughing and having a great time."

Harriet told them a story she had heard about Mrs Hendersen's love of horses. Apparently, when she was a little girl, her mom had taken her to a horse show at the county fair. The size of the animals had left her unfazed, even when a wayward pony was galloping around, spooked by something and out of the grasp of its handler, and almost trampled her. Her mom had picked her up and tried to stay calm to make sure the girl was all right. "She wanted to check that I was actually all right, not just in shock or something. And I said, 'I like these horse people. How do they get them to do that?'" Her mom was amazed that the girl had been more

interested in the people and how they trained the animals than the brute fact that one had almost destroyed her, trained and yet wild, or at least not completely under control. "And I thought it was the greatest thing. I wasn't afraid at all. Maybe it was because I realized it was about the people."

Rory's stories often took as much from the video games he played as from the books he read. The indie games he followed, and the online communities that formed around them, were as real and vital creative and social endeavors as anything he got at school. And of the books he read, what was outside the curriculum guided him far more than what was within it.

For the fall intra-club writing contest, he was working on a play, maybe it would be a screenplay, about one of his favorite games. In the opening scene, a child lay on the ground all alone, spotlit. The Child raised its head, looking to either side, and then turning to look up, but all is darkness. The first thing Rory had was this image of the Child all alone in the dark, and yet brightly lit in a narrow circle. The trick was to make it so that the light was only for the audience to see the Child, but it wasn't really there, at most a pale moonlight within the world of the play.

A puppet would appear next, a little yellow flower, right at the edge of the circle. The actor-puppeteer could be dressed all in black, that wouldn't be too obtrusive, next to the brightness of color in the Flower. It would bob there, smiling, clearly sentient, even before the Child came near enough for it to speak. This, too, was clear enough in Rory's conception, though it was really only connective tissue for the critical event that was approaching. He tried writing a few lines of the Flower's monologue--

*Take the leaf I offer, little one
Fallen from the world above,
And with my instruction
Open up your heart with love.
Watch the patterns
Of my movements,
So you don't miss
A single one.*

The Child, faithful to the game, would never speak fluently, but only decide in certain moments with brief statements--

It hurts--

And then the Flower would be lit suddenly with a red light, and a mask would drop over its smiling face, changing it into something terrifying.

*That's because, you fool,
Your life was lost the moment you landed!
Now, on behalf of monster-kind--
Obey our rules, and die!*

But just then, the Protector would intervene.

*I heard your cry,
I came to find you.*

A larger costume for this actor, with a huge styrofoam mask, like a headdress part elephant, past beehive perm, and regal robes like wizards' pajamas. As much as possible, her movements would be slow, majestic, and gradually the light would take on warmer tints as she

introduced the Child to the more peaceful denizens of this strange realm, civic spiders and meek ghosts, until they came to her House.

In the really old video games, only the simplest outlines of stories were present. The rescue of a princess, the saving of the world. What counted was the play that took place within that simple framework. In turn, Rory wanted to suggest the simplest outlines of the setting and characters, and by the dialogue and the relationships they played out, to tell a more complex story.

In the encounters with each of the different creatures, the Child underwent a sort of extended allegory of learning. The first, the Flower, represented the harsh appeal to authority thinly veiled by bright colors and sweetness. Next, with the Protector and her House, surrounded by so many harmless and somewhat pathetic creatures, there was the nostalgia for another time when that sweetness might have been real, if only in the nursery or the yard covered in fallen leaves, learning the most basic things, words, favorite foods, not to touch hot things, but now the memory of learning them was gone, they were known so deep down they were difficult to think about.

In leaving the House, the Child was making the first really big decision of the play. Rory wrestled with how to portray this. Ultimately, he supposed, violence wasn't necessary; determination to go one's own way, even if it was for one's own good that they were attempting to prevent it, was all. The Child could push the Protector aside, hurt her feelings, and move desperately through the doorway through which there could be no return.

The rest of it, the serio-comic Skeletons, glowing Plants and dripping walls, the heroic Hunter, the nerdy Inventor, and finally the Monster King, he sketched out in brief scenes, each with their particular voice and accompaniment in lights, gestures, entrances and exits. The Child stayed on stage the entire time, but had fewer lines than most of the monsters. When the time came for the performance, he might have to put in an intermission so the actor could use the bathroom.

Would it be a comedy or tragedy in the end? In the game, the player got to choose. In the play, the audience would be given the choice as well. The last speech from the Monster King would consider the tragic side of things, but the final education of the Child that came out of the whole journey would argue for the essential comedy, in the sense of a happy ending.

After his first excursion to the diner, Noel made further sallies into the heathen environs of the school. Far from being deterred, his zeal was fired by the grave need of instruction all around. Accompanied by his trusty friend Carlton, and with his unwitting mentor Mrs Hendersen's words--as reported by his sister--ringing in his ears, Noel set out that evening for the fast food place across the street.

Lying in the other direction from the diner and the cafe, Glenda's Pit Stop was not visible through the front windows of the school. There were other ways in which it was still more present, however, than the businesses that faced the school directly. If they were the better angels East Cliffs collectively turned towards, the Pit Stop was the devil perched on their slumped left shoulder. During the course of the day, it was not uncommon to see teachers hurrying through the halls with a Glenda's sandwich wrapper or soda cup in hand, brushing crumbs from the corners of their mouths. The Headmaster's desk was the site of modern still

lives with hamburger and side of fries, ever changing, ever the same, and the whole front office had the smell of fried onion rings hanging in the air late into the afternoon.

After school and then again after team practices and workouts, posses of East Cliff students could be seen moseying across the street and malingering in the Pit Stop parking lot. Today when they stepped inside, Noel recognized a couple of the high school football players in line ahead of them. Soon it was the football players' turn to order. Noel heard the practiced familiarity of the one, who slung phrases about "Macho Meal, easy on the mayo," as if he worked there, and the stammering of the other, who ordered a la carte from the enormous menu.

To call out his classmates for eating the fast food purveyed at Glenda's would be pointless, when their teachers were not above succumbing. The football players, what's more, had been exercising enough that they might even benefit from this grade of fuel. For the teachers, the compensation was more on a psychological, not a physical, level. As the kids fed their growing bodies, the teachers soothed body and soul alike and armed themselves to go on wrestling through the needs of their growing students to the school's high aims. Unhealthy food in service of the pursuit of the good life: Noel did not see any contradiction in this.

Noel also had no illusions about what would happen when Carlton got to the front of the line. In fact, he was counting on it.

"Let me get, uh," Carlton put his head to one side. "Are you guys still serving the Volcano Burger, or was that a summertime-only promo? With the stromboli sauce and mozzarella cheese?"

"Can I help who's ever's next," the second cashier stated, effectively inquiring if Noel and Carlton would be ordering together or separately. She made an aside to her counterpart who was struggling to keep afloat on Carlton's torrent of menu-related investigations, "No, we aren't doing the Volcanic right now." She turned back to Noel, "Welcome to Glenda's, and what can I get for you?"

Noel made a thoughtful face. He had to wait only a moment before the first cashier, a young man with a game attempt at a mullet, had turned again to the second with a lost look.

"We do a--what was it?" the first cashier asked the second/Carlton.

"A dry rub on the chicken wings, with the honey mustard sauce served separate," he rattled off.

"You can do that," Noel's cashier said, "you have to mark it a special order, but then you ring it up like the Wing King Meal special, which is just a normal meal. Unless you want a curly fries?" she asked Carlton.

Now Noel took his opportunity to throw the first cashier a lifeline of his own. "How's your day going," he peered at his nametag, "Jay?"

Jay blinked from his coworker, who was now deep into the fine print of Carlton's order, to his customer, and then, as if by a physical effort, forced his gaze through the crossfire of verbiage to meet Noel's open face.

"It's been a long one," he said with a sigh. Jay scratched the back of his neck. "I had been working the night shift, but then my girlfriend had to go take care of her cousin's kids, so our one co-worker covered for her last night, so now I'm covering for him."

"So you've been working almost twenty-four hours straight?" Noel asked.

"No, I had the morning off," Jay said. "Or wait, what time is it now? What day is it? I guess I haven't slept in at least a day and a half, so what, forty hours? But I wish I had been working that whole time, that would be like a full time job. I'm lucky if they give me fourteen hours a week at this point. I keep showing up--"

"Hey, are you just going to talk all day, or can I order some food here?" said a woman who had just come in and taken a look at the menu.

"Yeah, I got you," the second cashier said. She was in the process of taking Carlton's cash. Finally Noel stepped around his friend and leaned on the counter on Jay's side.

"You kept showing up?" he prompted.

"Yeah," Jay said, "Thanks, Glenda," he said to his co-worker, who made no response. He went on, "and they would send me home for little trivial reasons. I didn't have the right black shoes. I was a few minutes late. And my hours on the schedule got fewer and fewer."

"And your sad puppy stories," said Glenda, once the woman had moved away towards the soda machines, "are not doing anything to help with that."

Noel slapped the countertop. "Hold on!" he said. "Glenda--as in Glenda's Glenda?"

The cashier made a how-de-do gesture with her hand.

"And Jay, you have the opportunity to learn from the master--mistress--herself, and you're letting a few details stick in your craw?"

Jay twisted up the side of his mouth. "Details that mean, will I be able to pay my share of the rent this month, sure."

"I came here today to talk to you about learning," Noel said. "From what I can see, though, I have hardly anything to teach you. Jay, you stuck with that conversation earlier even though you had no idea what my friend was saying. You were willing to ask Glenda for help, even though you might not get along with her. And you weren't afraid to talk to me like a human being, not just give up and take that lady's order when she tried to be rude."

"Plus, this food is the bomb," said Carlton, whose tray was gradually being populated with wrappers marked SPECIAL ORDER.

"Plus," Noel insisted, "you're doing this while not having had any sleep. I don't really see any difference between your conversational abilities and that of a student at my school, or even at college, for that matter. The only difference is, instead of talking about shoes and schedules, you could be talking about Wisdom and Courage. Instead of staying up all night working the night shift, you could be talking to your friends about the nature of the universe, and our place in it."

"And Glenda," he said, turning to her, "I'm sure you have way more knowledge of human emotions and behaviors than any but the most ingenious of the authors we read at East Cliffs. You could tell stories that would make Dickens take notes!"

"So why wait?" he concluded. "Why sweat it if you have to work instead of going to school? You have a school right here. In between and across the orders you take serving your customers, you can be serving your own soul the best kind of soul food: philosophical conversation!"

Glenda and Jay's faces, and what of their torsos could be seen above the counter and behind the registers, passed through various stages of confusion in the course of this discourse, wavering between being taken aback by the kid's effrontery and feeling flattered by his outpouring of idealism. If they spoke, would it set him off again?

Glenda hazarded a reply. "I'll put it on my sign out front. But I think we'll keep doing our business the way we've always done it. Can't charge for conversation, as far as I know."

She gestured to the TV. "Those talk shows, I guess they make money on advertising sponsors, but it's free for the viewer."

Carlton had sat down and started eating at the nearest table. "Hey Noel," he called, "could you get me some extra containers of ranch, I'm already running low."

"I'll get it," said Glenda, and bent to rummage around in some boxes under the counter. "Here you go." She tossed them to Carlton.

Jay said, "Where did you get all that?"

"It's funny you should ask," Noel said, unsure which was more entertaining: the TV, where a talk show audience was applauding the security personnel as they wrestled the guests apart from one another, or Carlton beside it, attempting to dip his entire Cheesesteak Burger in the tiny container of ranch. As if to preserve him, another picture came into his mind.

The barber shop. In the huge windows that took up the entire wall, the glint of sunshine off of cars passing by sliced now and then through the half-closed blinds and flashed across the ceiling. The smell of wet hair and freshly shaved skin, with the myriad products that could smooth and slick and soften, tickled Noel's nose. His grandpa was there, as he usually liked to be in the morning, reading the paper and talking through it all with his friend the barber. So Noel had got into the habit, too, of stopping by the barber shop whenever he felt like talking, or just listening to his grandpa's and the barber's voices, and not only when his dad or Matt brought him in for a haircut.

The barber's wife had sold the shop after her husband passed away. Noel's grandpa died a few years later. In the nursing home, he had been much quieter. It was a place, he said, where he did not feel much like talking.

In Noel's memory, though, they were still together.

"It was one morning in the barber shop," he continued. He had brushed aside the cashier's sympathy. Not because he didn't appreciate it, but because he felt somehow that his grandpa would not have wanted people feeling sorry for him. Noel had heard his dad say something to that effect after the funeral, and it stuck with him.

"Or it wasn't so much any one morning, as it was all those times I used to stop by to talk to the old men, to listen to them talking." Jay and Noel had sat down by Carlton, who had already finished most of his food. He prodded a few fries out of the corners of the carton. The restaurant was getting busy, but Jay had taken his break. He rolled a cigarette while he listened.

"That was where I must have gotten the idea, originally, that talking together was the best thing for people to do, to be happy. Even before going to East Cliffs and getting all these ideas about what it's most worth talking about.

"I don't think I realized that," he said. "Until you asked. I had a kind of *deja vu*, because their TV at the barber shop was a little bit older, but it was set up high on the wall, not mounted like yours, but on a shelf where the people waiting to have their hair cut or the barber could watch it. Seeing your TV up there suddenly reminded me of that. My grandpa and his friend would always have the TV on, even though the glare in the morning made it almost impossible to see anything. It was something about the background noise that they liked. Not anything in particular that they said on it. I think my grandpa said he only ever really paid attention to the

sports. And so when there was a game being played back East, he'd actually be watching it in the morning. Otherwise just reading the paper, talking about the news and the old times. The lost art of conversation, as he called it."

Jay nodded. He seemed to be asleep, but the cigarette rolled back and forth between his fingers. When Noel trailed off, he nodded again, with decision, and slapped his thighs.

"Well, fellows," Jay said. "I'm gonna smoke, and then I gotta get back to work for a few more hours here. It was nice meeting you. Stop by anytime you feel like talking." He grinned. "I may be here, literally anytime."

"We will certainly be back," Carlton said, blowing out a meaty breath of satisfaction.

"Thanks, Jay," said Noel. When he had gone, he turned to his friend. "Ready to go?"

"I think I can stand. Where to next?"

"We should have time for one more place tonight," Noel said. "Let's go see if there's anything going on at the old barbershop. If it's not open, we can call it a day."

Once they were outside, Noel looked around for Jay, but he must have been by the back door. He shook his head again. "I can't believe I had forgot about my grandpa and the barber, and he reminded me of it without even meaning to. I really think he's just as good a teacher as Ms Milliworthy. It's too bad he's addicted to smoking."

"Yeah," said Carlton. "I feel fortunate my only addiction is delicious food. If I ever do anything worse than eating too much, on a regular basis, you'll step up and get me back on track, right Noel?"

"What, telling you if you're eating too much on a regular basis, or only if you start to do something else--which I don't think you would?"

"Yes," said Carlton.

"OK, as your friend, I will tell you on a regular basis when you're eating too much."

"No, you don't--" Carlton said. "If I have to be addicted to something, I'm OK with it being food. If it starts to spread, though, and I'm in danger of not being a good clean Mormon young man in any way, I trust you to let me know. All I'll ever need for an intervention is a basket of Glenda's wings, I promise. And a Volcano Burger if they have it."

The barber shop was too far from the school to walk, so Noel had been leading them back towards Sully's to see if Harriet would give them a ride. They crossed the street and were cutting through the school parking lot, which was almost empty now, when they saw a couple of figures come out the front entrance just ahead of them. It was Mr Warriner and Mr Fraye.

Carlton raised an arm in greeting, but Noel shoved a hand over his mouth just in time. He ducked back into the mouth of the school, pulling his friend with him, just as Mr Warriner looked like he was about to turn around. "Don't you see where they're going?" Noel whispered.

"Weren't they just headed for their cars?" Carlton said. Noel had crept back to the angle of the wall and carefully peered around it.

"Come on!" he said. "Or we might lose them. They're walking fast."

"No more sudden movements," Carlton whined. "I'm so full."

The boys hustled along to the alley at the far end of the parking lot down which the teachers had turned and were taking long strides.

"I knew they weren't going to their cars," Noel said. "Mr Warriner's truck is always back by the music room, and Mr Fraye's wife usually drops him off in the morning. I'm not sure how

he gets home, actually." He turned to his friend, who was keeping up, though he did not look pleased about it. "You know where they're going, right?"

"How am I supposed to know? All I know is we were supposed to get a nice comfy ride to the barber shop, or whatever it is now!"

Noel shushed him. They waited a minute at the turn in the alley the teachers had taken ahead of them.

"Get your breath," Noel said. "This is the long straightaway behind the condos. Then there's more cover once we go past the gas station, and we can slow down again. Then it's just across the street. But we'll have to keep close to see where they're seated."

"OK," Carlton said. He rubbed a stitch in his side. "Which is where?"

"Don Amigo's, or possibly Blue Garden." Noel did something sneaky with his eyebrows. "Whichever bar the teachers decide to go to tonight."

Instead of the Chinese restaurant, where the Currans had run into them one evening after school, the teachers went in at the arch of Don Amigo's. Maybe it was because they did not want any more random encounters with the families from school. Or maybe they just wanted to drink on the patio, rather than indoors.

As it happened, Noel and Carlton, sauntering along the sidewalk across the parking lot, spied them seated at one of the picnic tables off to one side. A low wall coated in the same adobe- simulacrum separated the patio from a small grass lawn and the alleyway behind. Rounding the block swiftly, the boys took advantage of this landscaping. They crept up to the side of the restaurant from the back lot and sat by the base of the wall, pricking up their ears. Hearing nothing but the cars on the road and the hum of happy hour at the cantina, they scooted closer to the teachers' nook, staying low.

"...Messianic attitude," came the gruff voice of Mr Fraye. "I'll trust to my own preparedness, when the shit hits the fan."

"And it's more general than that," came Mr Warriner's sententious reply. "Not just, I have the answer, but we have the answer, and this is how *you* fit into it--or you're part of the problem. It's a martyr mentality across the board. All this is, is the latest auto-da-fé."

The kids hiding in the grass under the wall, hoping to hear something about the plans for this year's Green Knight's Feast for Chivalry Club, or insights into the art of conversation for their adventures in outreach, furrowed their brow at each other. This banter was going over their heads. The swearing, at least, was colorful.

Mr Fraye let out a laugh like a growl. "Expecting the Inquisition? That might be giving them too much credit! Do you know what Hendersen said to me after the meeting? She has been catching herself vividly imagining throat-punching anyone who talks about our Brand, our Mission. She catches herself because she looks around and isn't sure at first if she actually did it. Can you imagine her, or any of us, doing that to anyone who annoys you in the real world? What would they do? Besides, saying, Oh my God, you just punched me in the throat! Assuming they could still speak."

"Consequences, pfff!" Mr Warriner's voice hardened, but he was joking, unless the laughter on the edge of it was actually manic: "Desiring freedom, I act as if I do possess it. Keep your neck out of my arm's reach, I say. More than I want to have a job, I want to be *free*. So you fuckers can just keep clear."

This was enough for Noel. He pulled at his friend's sleeve and sidled back the way they came. Carlton was turning purple with stifling his astonished laughter.

"What proof do you have of causality?" Mr Fraye was saying, imitating his friend's parlance. "Anyway," he went on airily, "when it comes, it's going to come in chaos, not order. That's what the conspiracy theorists haven't understood..."

If they had stayed a moment longer, Noel and Carlton would have heard Mr Warriner asking in a more normal voice, "How's the bunker coming along, then?"

Instead, they hurried back to Sully's to meet Harriet, who was waiting for them.

The apartment complex where Rory and his family lived was not far from the school. While it was still light out, he took walks down the paths meandering between the buildings and the rare trees scattered around, to give himself a break from writing or studying. Or playing videogames, or lurking around online forums about them--let's be honest, anything that required looking at a screen or a page lit with artificial light, he could use a break from every so often. Whenever his dad was around, he would check in on Rory every few hours, telling him to go outside. Eventually Rory began to do it on his own.

When it got dark, the sidewalks were lit by lamps placed here and there in the grass and by floodlights mounted on the buildings. In a way, the rest for his eyes was even more effective, because he could feel them actively shunning the glare, picking out instead its reflections on the grass wet from the sprinklers, or the shadows it cast under the walls, or in the darkness of the sky around the moon.

With the weather finally cooling off, Rory would not be able to use the pool much longer, so he changed into his swimming trunks and set out. The light was fading, but the lights were not yet lit. The apartment complex pool was just to one side of the middle of a courtyard surrounded by high hedges and a metal fence. They eschewed symmetry, the builders, and preferred to combine form and function wherever possible. Green hedges, but a metal fence to back them up.

Rory hardly ever saw anyone else there, but the pool gate was usually left unlatched. Some unspoken, common consent among the residents seemed to prefer abiding interlopers rather than having to fiddle with the lock every time. So it was tonight: the gate almost shut but not secured, the pool unoccupied, the water still.

A bird was singing in one of the trees nearby. Rory slipped off his sandals and shrugged out of his shirt. The water was cool, but he swam around a little and soon felt more comfortable.

Floating on his back, the water pressing up onto his ears and then unsealing them, Rory heard the birdsong as a rhythmic confirmation of life interspersed with water sounds. He knew that every year, children died when they fell into pools and didn't know how to swim. It was advertised on the radio and the local television news. Here, too, with the open gate, a kid could wander in and drown. Hearing the animal sounds above and the hum of cars on the road not far off, then the static of water, then nothing. But if it happened while he was here, Rory thought, he could fish them out in a twinkling. Before they lost contact with the world of sounds, before they knew what had happened, he would lift them back up on the shallow steps and against their full airborne weight heave them onto the pool deck. He would be laughing and smiling, so they might think it was only a game. He would let them get their breath back, and then, if they had

seen the joke and were willing, he would lead them back into the water, this time to begin to teach them to swim.

Chapter 4

Hallway Monitoring

The kiss of self-defense. In a moment, it could change everything, the substitute-librarian thought waywardly. She was watching the first kids arrive and open their lockers, as it was normally Ms Milliworthy's job to do every morning. The students were not to be unsupervised, but neither were there structured activities for them, unless they chose to go to tutoring. Some of the high schoolers had started a yoga club one morning a week, but the teacher who had wanted to do tai chi had gone to an inner-city school with more need. So they lingered by their lockers or made laps around the building in coveys of three or four. Groups of boys and girls followed their captains closely, passing by one another as quickly as possible with downcast eyes, or head nods, or strutting up inviting confrontation.

What she was supposed to do, the substitute did not know. Other than being there, a kind of moving scarecrow to deter any horsing around or overt bullying, there did not seem to be much to the morning monitoring duty. At times, the bullying might be just under the surface--a furtive glance around, a shove that might not be only playful--but there was no way to tell what mean things the kids might be saying conspiratorily unless they reacted in some overt way. To show such a reaction, of course, would only encourage the bully, while going to the teacher on the spot might escalate things disastrously after the fact. So the substitute passed by the little knots of chatter as close as she dared, overhearing what she could not ignore.

All of it was innocent enough, if not so high-minded as the school might want to suppose of its denizens. The kids had toys to show off, rubik's cubes and yo-yos, or stickers of cute animals, new phones and mangas that they had to be told to put away at once, which only led to more importance being attached to them, or the strong sharp scent of athletic body spray or saccharine perfume washing out of pockets of little boys and girls who were marketed to all too effectively. Only with their school uniforms, clothes could not be as much of a conspicuous consumption, but the popular culture breathed down their necks even so, in the form of wristbands and necklaces, berets and hair gel. Plenty of ways to stand out or fit in, enforced unconsciously and barely kept at bay by a hall monitor standing desultory by.

If the unthinkable were to happen, a fight breaking out, a bad word floating viciously into innocent ears, a pervasive asserting of power or feeling of ostracism, or these days as likely as anything, a gun brought to school, the substitute wondered how she would respond. Would she leap into action? Would she cast around for support? The preposterous answer came to mind at once: throw the hot tea she was drinking at them, or her phone, which she took out frequently to check the time until the bell rang, or the book she was trying to read when no one else was near enough to chastise her for not watching closely enough. Or, if the book meant anything at all, shouldn't she turn the other cheek? Shouldn't she even, like the conclusion of the Grand Inquisitor, give the bully, the aggressor, the would-be notorious school-shooter tragedian du jour, in direct contradiction of their offered violence, the kiss of peace? The kiss of self-defense.

It was Friday, and the natives were restless. The older kids, especially, glided like ghosts, exhausted as the teachers were by the end of a long week, while the little ones and the medium-sized eddied around with more than usual spastic glee. Noel opened his locker,

noticing the substitute for Ms Milliworthy standing near the crossroads of the hallways. He got his book out and sat leaning against his backpack, the fabric between his back and the wall scratchy and comfortable, and dug around in his pocket for a pencil. He found that reading over the homework a second time, he remembered it much better in case there was a pop quiz, but more than that, he noticed some things that neither of his siblings had seen, or at least, that they hadn't annotated already. If he liked what they had, he still marked it for himself: Ms Milliworthy liked to see that he was annotating, too, and not just taking his siblings' word for it.

As he skimmed along, a passage that he wanted to look closer at slowed him down. *With the wind knocking at the shutters, Noel read, like a latecomer to the wedding feast, the innkeeper made his way along the corridors, turning down all the lanterns for the night.* What was going on in that sentence? What was the wedding feast the narrator was talking about? And was it the innkeeper or the wind, for that matter? He made a dark ? in the margin and read on, half-mouthing the words to concentrate. More students were starting to arrive, and he had to scoot over to let one get to his locker and try not to lose track of the story over the hubbub of kids accosting their friends or unzipping their jackets and book bags.

In the dimness, his gaze was drawn to the ribbon of moonlight under the traveller's door. He heard a low voice, he couldn't help overhearing as he padded through the narrow vestibule: it sounded like singing. The innkeeper hurriedly ascended the stair to his own chambers. Let it not be said that he eavesdropped on any of his guests, much less that he lurked outside the door of a young lady riding alone. The traveller might sing all night to the moon if she pleased. Or was it, the wild thought crossed the innkeeper's mind, that the moon was singing to her?

The stair creaked

Noel lingered over the paragraph without writing anything for a moment. He thought about how they had listened to the Moonlight Sonata in music last year, and tried to remember what the teacher had said about the name. It was there, just at the edge of his thought, like a page held just too far away to read the words. Or a low voice behind the door. Quirking a smile to himself, he wrote in the margin, **Mr Warriner's story about Moonlight Sonata**. The substitute's back was turned, so, in a lightness of spirit, Noel started idly untying the shoe of a boy standing talking nearby.

Chivalry Club was that afternoon, and a number of the younger kids were practicing their fealty oath.

"I never meant to slay the knight, I only meant to peace-make, however."

The oath changed slightly from year to year. Mr Fraye's joke was that it was his sole concession to democracy that he allowed the upperclassmen to rewrite a few of the lines each year. In its current form, it owed something to Harriet's fondness for a particular section of one of the more complex songs in the repertoire. It had another name, or names, but she thought of it as "A privileged peddler."

Sam Curran was ready with his oath memorized, but he was struggling with his weekly quest. He knew at the start of the meeting, the call would go out for a recounting of noble quests achieved in the past week, and he wanted to be able to share something good, something well and truly noble, as befitting his pedigree. He was walking at a clip just below a run, but he stopped short when he found his brother.

"Hey, Noel," he panted. Noel looked up from his book. "Heard of any good quests lately?"

In some ways, Noel's outreach mission was a quest for Chivalry Club, though he was too old to participate in the meetings and too young to rewrite the Oath. He felt a little guilty for leaving Sam out of it, but he knew he was still too young to be of much help.

'Let's see,' he said, leaning his head against the locker and looking up some more. 'You haven't finished working on your bow yet, have you?'

"Not yet!" Sam squeaked, shushing him. "It's for Green Knight's Day, anyway."

"OK, OK, just trying to help," Noel's brow wrinkled. "Actually, I'm trying to finish my reading, so..."

"Come on, Noel, please! I'm sorry, but...that thing...has to be a surprise!"

"Hey, Rory!" Noel called. His locker neighbor was getting up to go, so he let him know, "Hey, by the way, your shoe's untied." He grinned as the kid sighed and dropped his books again to tie his shoe. "A knight is cognizant of his surroundings and of possible dangers at all times," he recited blithely.

Rory nodded to Sam and slumped down next to his friend in a suitably nonchalant way. They told him briefly of the dilemma--Rory already knew about the bow Sam was working on for Green Knight's, but pretended to be oblivious when Noel alluded to big secret projects being no good. He also happened to know that Noel and Carlton were up to something that they hadn't let him in on, but he kept that to himself for now, too. He thought for a moment.

"There's something I heard about at writing club," he said then. "You might have time to do something about it before this afternoon. One of the ninth-grade girls, Dominique, lost her key last week."

"Oh, that's good!" Sam brightened up.

"Yeah, not for her," Rory went on. "I saw her this morning and asked her about it. Apparently someone turned them in, so she got them back--except she was still so upset when I brought it up. I got the feeling something was still missing."

"Maybe whoever found it took off one of her favorite keychains," Noel suggested. "Their idea of a finder's fee?"

"So what do you think, Sam?" Rory said.

Sam was already making a beeline for a group of kids to ask them if they'd seen anyone flashing a new keychain around. Among the little sixth graders, lanyards and keychains were a favorite accoutrement. Wearing them at the neck or hip, jingling them out from under a shirt or whipping them out of a pocket when no teacher was looking--these relatively safe ways of flaunting the dress code appealed to their sense of style and camaraderie. Besides, they were like little kites, scavengers, and like little magpies, or dragons, hoarders of shiny things.

Soon the bell was ringing for first period, but sure enough, they hinted that they might have some information for him. Sam made a rendezvous with one of them to talk a trade. At ten o'clock sharp he was strolling over to the water fountain by the gym. He hit the button three times in a certain pattern, and the door to the boys' bathroom opened the breadth of a page in the dictionary. After a moment, the door swung open and a hand beckoned him in.

"Hey, Brayton," Sam said when the door was shut again.

The boy who stood in the narrow vestibule where the door did its swinging was about to say hi, but then he caught himself. A cross look settled over his bland features. "Call me the Doorkeeper here," he hissed.

"Oh, right," Sam said hastily. He tried again, "Hail, Doorkeeper."

Brayton gave him a thumbs up. "Hail, Guest. What brings you to the Thrice-Pushe'd Fount?"

"I come a'questing. A set of keys, lost and then found, returned without all its pieces in it: verily, this is my quest: to return the missing pieces, to make what has been separated once more whole." He pronounced the nested colons beautifully.

"Give me a pledge, Guest. What you seek is very valuable."

"More valuable than you know," came a third voice. It echoed strangely. It came from one of the stalls, quiet and yet reverberating. Whoever it belonged to was constricting his throat and breaking it on purpose. That, or he was actually using the bathroom, not just hiding in there, Sam thought.

He turned to address the uniform shoes he could see underneath the partition. They were unremarkable; the shoes working their concealment in plain sight wouldn't give away the speaker's identity any more than the disguised voice, but Sam had a decent idea who it was in there.

"Look, they aren't yours, Ian." The shoes stiffened. In the mirror, Sam caught a glimpse of the Doorkeeper's crestfallen visage.

"You shall address him as He Who Sits and Thinks," the Doorkeeper objected lamely.

"So I promise no one will tell on you if you just give them back...O He Who Sits and Thinks."

A normal voice echoed quietly in the bathroom: "It's a key to the school, Sam."

There was a breathless silence. Sam blinked uncertainly; the others were struggling with oaths to secrecy, but soon they had to give in.

"I noticed it right away," Brayton said proudly. "Since Ms Portnoy's always forgetting her keys she sends me next door to borrow them from Warriner. So when some of our Underlings were like, Hey we found these keys, and we were looking through them, I was like, Wait a minute, that one's the same format as the school keys. We tried it later when no one was around, and it worked."

"On what door? Which teacher's key is it?"

"All of them, dude," Ian said, peering up from underneath the stall partition. "It opens every door we try it on. It's a key to the whole school."

How had Ms Milliworthy got herself into such a pickle?

A counterpart to Chivalry Club, ran [the offending blog post](#), was the morning group for Christian fellowship. A few of the teachers would meet to watch a few minutes of a video recording of an old pastor of theirs who had passed away. The talk seemed to be a discipleship class, with other members around the table, but the camera was fixed on the old man. The others would talk from time to time, but when the old man spoke, you could also see their hands moving pens over the papers in front of them, treasuring his words. And what did he say?

It was interspersed with jokes and badinage from the living souls who gathered there to watch the video, and short stories that had to be told. One comes in a few minutes late with a bagel sandwich, apologizing that he's eating in front of everyone, but his wife has had too much time on her hands since the kids moved out and keeps packing him too much food, food enough each day to last for three days, so that their fridge is overflowing with his leftovers. Another, the science teacher, tells how a student kept drawing on tables and so he gave him community

service to help with the murals the art club has been doing in the middle school classrooms. I'll trump yours with this story, says another one, and they excel one another in wincing laughter at the political pun introducing it so already you know the sort of thing you're in store for, but it turns out you're not quite right. This student keeps asking him to help out with something, not as extra credit, just because he admires the teacher and wants to help. He doesn't need help, of course, but not wanting to quash that enthusiasm, either, he took the student up on a couple of little projects, washing out beakers after the lab and sweeping up the hallways, which always seem to get cluttered with more odds and ends than the janitor knows how to keep up with, and as they were walking down the hall the kid said to him, "How come you haven't grown up?" He didn't know what he meant at first, but it seemed that his dad had a beard, and since he didn't, he was wondering if he wasn't grown up. He didn't seem to understand that not everyone had a beard, and was awaiting the day he would have his. And then he asked, "Are you sad?" He said something noncommittal, no, I'm all right, something like that, but the student said, "You're really sad. I can tell." He didn't elaborate, but he said when he took him back to his English teacher he praised how perceptive the kid was and how emotionally intelligent, whatever his disabilities might be in other regards. He asked her about it and she said, yep, that's him all right. Attuned to other people's feelings in a special way. The video was on complete forgiveness, the emphasis that this must be learned with humility and discipline to such a perfection that it is only possible with God. The pastor began telling a story of his dear mother-in-law's remarriage to a nice Christian man, them both being up in years, and how the pastor would learn about forgiveness by watching her, for whenever the husband would get cranky and say offensive things, she you could have sworn was deaf to them all. The teachers joked that here was the secret to a happy marriage: ignoring your spouse! And about the license plate "My wife says I don't listen--at least I think that's what she says," and then the obligatory trump joke passed back and forth. The guys think they're so funny, the wife said, and got things back on track. She took prayer requests and spoke the prayer to close the meeting when everyone else was abashed, looking down at shoes and folded hands to avoid meeting her eyes; prayers for peace and reconciliation after the election results, knowing the kids might be upset, to say nothing of their coworkers who had other views about abortion or the relative merits of being a crook versus a bigot, prayers for safe families, safe travel, and thanksgiving. And all of them voted for him--they asked me but I put the question off, saying that's what the kids have been asking and I don't know how to respond. I think they must have guessed my answer, but I couldn't help saying how surprised I was by the result, where they expressed relief, comfort, a kind of beatitude. The wife's reason was that he was pro-life, whereas the Democrats would kill babies up to the last minute; his, that he was the lesser of two evils, brash and crude as opposed to manipulative. I had the same reason for my vote the other way, so I could at least agree to that characterization, but my Socratism failed me. I listened to the advice of the old white man with bald old skin and wretched red flesh on his thin neck, huge glasses blurring his eyes in their shadowed sockets. Such a godly man, she said. They thanked me for coming as I thanked them for inviting me.

That afternoon, after checking in with Mr Fraye at Chivalry Club, Sam, Brayton, and Ian set out to test the limits of the Key of Power. They told the club sponsor that they had some work to do on allocations of Underling Plunder. Which was quite true. Keeping the Squires busy

with suitable quests was too important to leave up to chance and the exigencies of mere humdrum reality. Long since, an order of pure vice had been organized, as playfully nefarious in its innocence as the Chivalry Club was in its virtue. Its express purpose was to provide plenty of creative outlets for the inherently necessary activity of knocking things down, taking them apart to see how they worked, so that the Squires could put them back together again and set them right. In many cases, the same kids would spend part of their time in the Chivalry Club brainstorming ideas for villainy in one corner of the school, and part of their time succoring the needy in another.

Ian was this year's head bad guy, He Who Sits and Thinks. So far he had pulled off an impressive string of prank phone calls to teachers' rooms using the school's internal telephone. By the same method, he frequently had success getting some of his Chief Underlings out of class so they could carry out their Deeds of Darkness, for each of which he made a record and wrote them out a receipt. Tori had cracked thirty locker combos, and switched the locks onto different lockers, or put them back on upside down. Kendall had taken dozens of books from wherever their owners had left them--under their desks, for example, and often even right off their desks while they were paying attention to the teachers--and shuffled them into other kids' backpacks and binders that he found laying around. Brayton's job, as Doorkeeper and Ward of the Thrice-Pushe'd Fount, netted him a steady income of candy bribes and pledges for access to the head honcho. For the efforts of each of them, and there were always between eight and ten Underlings, though they rotated in and out so everyone could have a go, an appropriate tally of Plunder had to be distributed from the general funds accumulated at the end of each week in the form of pledges.

The Underlings earned pledges fair and square, by collecting receipts for their nastiness from their Evil Overlord; however, they could also acquire them by dint of a little enterprising dastardly. If a Squire was hard put in his quest, and the Underlings got the better of him by craft or by force, they could yield a pledge of their honor, and would have to pay up to get it back. The payment might be in the form of helping the Underlings with their homework, or doing chores for them at home. Payment for those who could afford it even might be in toys and games, or outright cash, though this was frowned upon. Some of the students preferred to pay for protection up front and be spared the whole thing. Though they were scoffed at as "Modernes," "MedioCrats," and "Unreadies," they could jump back in the game at any time, if the tedium of never finding their things missing became too much for them.

Actual bullying, of course, or theft or violence, would not be tolerated by the administration, so part of He Who Sits and Thinks' job was to make sure that his Underlings, in turn, made it clear that they were only playing around. The best way to do this, the traditions dictated, was to make their villainy so overtly villainous, that it could not be mistaken for plain mean-spiritedness. Coupled with this, the ready aid of the Squires and, if need be, the intervention of the illustrious Knights of the Order, would soon restore whatever had been lost.

Each week's allocation was overseen by one of the squires, just to make sure everything was accounted for. Any outstanding quests would be bumped up to a priority for the more handy squires, and anything too egregious would be put on the docket for the Knights to deal with, before somebody got upset and involved the administration. Any arguments were usually settled in house, with Mr Fraye or one of the other faculty Council members as the court of final appeal. So it was not too suspicious for young Sam to fraternize with the Doorkeeper and HWSAT.

Something about their mien today, a slight spring in their step, put Mr Fraye on his guard, but he did not allow his face to betray anything other than his habitual countenance of somewhat sleepy prudence.

"I see that ye go about yore business with gusto, boys," he said dryly. Mr Fraye placed a finger to his nose. "Ostensibly the most tiresome of tasks, yet with gamesome earnest, even the bookkeeping can be a treasure-ship of delights, eh?"

The boys swallowed as one.

"Don't have too much delectation, now,"

Ian forced a laugh, suitably maniacal, and abruptly cut it off for that really creepy effect looked for in an Evil One. "We shan't. See you noobs later," he said to the rest of the Club members milling around the Latin and Medieval History room at their various employments.

He Who Sits and Thinks swept of the room, trailed by his Doorkeeper and the trusty Squire. He held the Big Black Book, august tome of record, from which stray papers and IOUs poked out and fluttered as he led the way quickly out of sight around a corner. They made as if they were headed for the library, but then they detoured down a side hallway to circle back to the lockers. Here they deposited the Book. First, though, with a necromantic flourish, Ian took out from it, from a shallow secret compartment cut into the bottom corner of pages 1930-1950 recto, the Key of Power.

"Well, gentlemen," he said with a wink. "Shall we go?"

They drew lots for the order in which they got to pick which doors to go through. Brayton had already tried calling dibs as soon as the locker slammed shut. As Ian pointed out, the calling of dibs, whilst appropriate for spoils taken in raids, was not really pertinent to items of a more magical persuasion, viz, the Key. As it happened, though, whether the fates would have it so, or Ian had done some legerdemain on them at the last minute, Brayton drew the first choice. Ian's came up second, Sam's third. They had already agreed that three was the right number of doors for using the Key. Any more than that and they would be pushing their luck. Anything less would have been a waste of their good fortune. It would be leading the gift horse to water only to skip a stone, and spitting in the eye of that most potent of Wyrd, Finders Keepers.

With some sheepish throat clearing, Brayton declared his choice. Skulking around to avoid observation by any squires errant, the three wound up before the door to the Life Science room. They checked through the window to make sure it was empty: the lights were off, and yet small shapes could be seen moving about in the light from the hallway. Opening the heavy door with the key, they quickly stepped inside. Ian let down the blinds over the window. With a swish, the room was plunged into pitch darkness. Sam felt his way over the lamp on the teacher's desk and flicked it on. By the warm light that filtered through its flower-patterned shade, he saw that Brayton, as if drawn by senses of touch and smell and muscle memory that could burrow through the dark, had already lumbered over to pet the animals in their cages.

He was crouched down beside the newborn chicks. Even as Sam watched, Brayton lifted a tiny puff of bright feathers in his hand and pivoted around to show them, his wide face grinning as if it were a watermelon about to split in two. The chick in his hand peep, peeped, and its fellows in their little cardboard box full of sawdust peep, peeped as they awoke. A sound of deep contentment came from somewhere in the large boy's bowels.

"Oh, dude!" said Sam, wrinkling his nose. Brayton chuckled.

Instead of joining him at the chicks, as Ian intrepidly had chosen to do, Sam went over to a cage on the table by door. He lifted the latch and tentatively patted around the interior--his own shadow was making it hard to see--until he felt something warm and soft. Under the rabbit's haunches, he felt its quick heartbeat. With a thumb, he pet its face and stroked its ears, which perked up and swiveled, though Henry stayed frozen. Sam felt his nose twitch,

"The poor guy's scared," he whispered. Ian met his glance, nodded once, and said something in a low voice to Brayton, who was now sprawled out on the floor with three or four of the chicks fenced in by his hands on his upper chest, where they were staggering about and tickling his neck and chin.

"Nooo," he cooed. Ian repeated his instructions. When Brayton continued shaking his head, he added an ultimatum.

"Just one more minute?" Brayton pleaded.

"How about I just take one of these little peeps and feed it to Mr Leopold's boa constrictor?" Ian suggested. "Better make it, two, don't you think, Sam? One would hardly even be a snack."

"OK, OK," The Doorkeeper scooped up the chicks and deposited them back in their box. He got to his feet and glared at his master, who had taken a step towards the great glass case that held the serpent when she came for her visits from the Drama teacher's house. "Meanies."

"Let's get going, Underling," Ian said. "Squire. I've got a room in mind."

Ian's choice turned out to be just around the corner. They scouted out through the little window in the door as best they could, and then, seeing the coast was clear, they tumbled out and locked the science room behind them. Sam had remembered to switch off the light, and Ian had made Brayton pull the blinds back up. The large boy jumped to it, eager to reassure He Who Sits and Thinks that he was a loyal Underling. He had been tempted by the cute fluffies, but he would make up for it, only please don't tell anyone!

Ian led them just down the hall to the music room, used the Key, and bowed them inside. Here they again drew the blinds, and using their phones as flashlights, they crossed the obstacle course of music stands, chairs, and instrument cases to arrive at the closet doors.

"I hope," Ian began, but the Key fit and turned yet again, and he pulled open the doors with a low cackle.

"Awesome!" he said to himself. "Mr Warriner doesn't let anyone but the most senior percussionists touch these puppies. Well, he doesn't have to know, does he?"

"Mr Warriner can--" and Brayton said something rude that Sam didn't quite follow. Why would anybody do *that*? he wondered. "He got me in trouble for putting temporary tattoos on the back of kids' necks," the Doorkeeper went on. "I tried to explain that they were for our plague-carrying zombie horde, but he--" he trailed off in exasperation and tried out a few more oaths, but they were drowned out by the short, sharp slapping of bongos.

Ian had switched on the closet light, and by its livid shine and the deep shadows underneath whatever surface intercepted it--the metal shelving, hanging white collared shirts and black pants and spare ties for concert nights, and the intent brows of He Who Sits and Thinks-- he brooded now over the huge drum. He had set aside the bongo and the snare, the triangle and the marimba, the gong and the bass with its foot pedal. All of these he had practice with. The timpani and the kettle drum, however, were forbidden. Mr Warriner and the seniors guarded them jealously.

"You guys ready to run for it?" Ian said, hefting the mallets. Sam and Brayton backed up towards the door uncertainly.

"Are you really gonna--"

"Ian, I'm not so sure--"

"Wait," he hissed. "I'm not sure Warriner is still here today. I didn't see him in Fraye's room, and they usually hang out during Chivalry if he stays. I'm going to need you to record this, Brayton, so I can make sure he does hear it."

The Doorkeeper glumly took out his phone and fiddled with it for a minute.

"Ready?" said the Drummer. Brayton gave a thumbs up with all the excitement of a pacifist Caesar at the Coliseum.

As when, in late summer in the desert, in the monsoon season, the clouds first gather into a threatening beige smear across the Eastern sky, blotting out the mountains, and the wind springs up and the first drops splat fat across the pavement, then the thunder rumbles, and the storm breaks, lashing the panting earth with torrents of black water in a deluge; or when your neighbors a few houses away are wheeling out their trash and recycling from the garage to the gutter at the end of their driveway, and first the garage door grinds open, then the buckets full of packaging and wasted consumer goods trundle down to scrape and thump into place, and then the garbage truck comes roaring down the block spouting exhaust, bashing the buckets between its robot pincers and smashing them upside down over its gaping maw, then crushing the trash so that a froth of liquid is forced out, dripping behind the truck in a smelly trail--even so, Ian played the mighty drums. Their round bases rattled and their metal rings, binding the skins tight, glinted as if they revelled in the abandon with which they thundered out their sound. Sam covered his ears, but he felt in his whole body the waves of vibrating power. He felt an urge to laugh uncontrollably, and his laughter was swept up in the waves' crashing.

Still pounding away with one hand, Ian frantically gestured cut with the other. As soon as Brayton had stopped recording and put his phone away, Ian rested the mallets in their holsters regretfully. He snapped the light off and slammed the closet door. With mounting panic, the three bolted out the door and into the adjoining art room. They hid in a corner behind a bookcase while they listened to the confused students in the hall, drawn by the noise.

A voice that sounded like Mr Fraye said, "Maybe the seniors are stressing about college again and felt like blowing off steam. They'll have made their getaway in their car by now. Oh, well. Nothing we can do about it, plebs."

When the voices had receded again, Ian led his mates out through the side door at the end of the hall. It was the same one Mr Fraye had dismissed as the likely escape route, only he had been situated at the wrong point in spacetime. They ran across the parking lot, capering with exhilaration, and swung themselves up and over the low wall that bordered on an alley. A cat, startled, took off over the other wall and hid in the backyards of the houses there.

"Man, the Key of Power!" Ian gave it a kiss--"mwah!"--and held it aloft. "What a hoot! You really want to give it back?"

"I must," Sam said.

"Too bad," rejoined Ian. He brightened up at once: "I can't wait to see Warriner's face when he hears that!"

They listened to the recording on Brayton's phone. First, being the tallest, Brayton peeked over the wall to make sure no one was anywhere near in the East Cliffs parking lot.

Some of the volleyball girls were lolling around the door to the gym, getting some cool air, but otherwise it was deserted. After listening to it "One more time," and then, "Just one more," Ian punched the air triumphantly.

"That's the good stuff," he said. "OK, Sir-to-be Sam. Whither next?"

The Squire, the Doorkeeper, and the Keybearer went down the alleyway back to the far side of the gym. As nonchalantly as if they had just been out by the community garden for a parley, they came back into the building by the cafeteria doors. These were open still to allow the Chivalry kids who were working on their archery to come and go, watched over by a parent volunteer. Today the janitor was here, too, chatting with that parent while he took out bags of trash.

Greeting a few friends, Sam allowed the others to go ahead to the rendezvous. He drank greedily at the water fountain in a back hallway, and thought. Now that they had pet the animals and banged--bung? bung?--the drums, what would he have them do? Shouldn't he take them to the Calculus room, just to be in that sanctum of the intellect, his oldest brother's favorite class? Or ditto for the teachers' office: shouldn't he take the opportunity just to set foot in there, where no students were ever suffered to tread? Just for a minute, and then take the key back to its owner. That would be the right thing to do, wouldn't it?

But he had already told the others to meet him at the door across from the French room, and from way down the hall he saw them waiting. The door was marked BOILER ROOM. When Ian handed him the key, Sam's curiosity overpowered him. He couldn't turn back now without wondering incessantly about what he had passed up. Were the rumors true? And wasn't it good to wonder? And, now that they had the chance, wasn't it better yet to find out?

"You guys might not know it," he said, turning the key over in his hand, "but there was an old Physics teacher who used to take his classes up on the roof to do the egg crash-landing experiment they do at the beginning of the year. You know how now they just drop it from that ladder way up in the gym? Well, they used to take a ladder outside and go all the way up onto the roof. My brother told me."

A few kids walked by far down the hall, and Sam closed his fingers over the key and held it behind his back until they were out of sight.

"So?" said Ian, cocking his head. "We don't need the key to get up there, then, just a ladder. We could take one of the ones they keep in the theater to work on the lights. Why'd you bring us way down here if you wanted to go onto the roof?"

"Well," Sam went on, "I heard this rumor from some kids in my brother's grade, that they heard the old Physics teacher saying there was even more to the school than the roof that the students didn't know about, and where they couldn't go."

Finally he made up his mind. He felt bad to have kept them in suspense, and they were very exposed here at the end of the little-used hallway. Sam put the key in the handle, turned it, and pulled. But the door didn't open. Was it stuck?

"There's a deadbolt, too," said Brayton. "Just like on the door to the bathroom. Very handy, only not if you're on the outside trying to get it."

"Oh," said Sam. "That would be why, then."

He fit the key in the upper lock, and now the door swung open. They went in. Sam found the light-switch, which lit up a naked bulb directly overhead. The ceiling seemed oddly low,

though it may have been because the room was cramped, crowded with machinery and old desks and supplies, and very dusty.

"Think there's spiders in here?" muttered Brayton.

"Oh, yeah," said Ian, "scorpions, too. Certainly."

"Those kids' theory, my brothers' friends'," said Sam, keeping track of his possessive apostrophes, "Was that he must have been talking about a basement. It should be right around--aha!"

A rusty railing erupted from the floor in the far corner of the room, and as the boys clambered over the debris, they saw that a flight of stairs descended there. The stairs cut back on themselves at a landing not far below, beyond which they disappeared in the darkness under the school.

"What's down there?" Brayton shivered, though the air was just as warm here as elsewhere in the school, and musty. It reminded Sam of his attic crawlspace. His house didn't have a basement, nor did any of the houses he could remember visiting in the Canyon.

"My dad's place up in the mountains has a cellar," said Ian uncertainly. "You can get to it from outside the house, through a diagonal kind of hatch up under the cabin. He's got all kinds of old camping gear in there, hunting and fishing stuff."

Sam was surprised. He had never heard Ian speak about his parents, and he'd never heard him sound like he was anything less than a complete smartypants about anything.

"Time to find out," Sam said, and crept down the stairs. Another lightswitch on the landing illuminated a short half-flight, which ended in a long hallway. The walls here were lined with old papers stacked up in binders, folders, and loose piles; wall clocks whose faces were broken; lab equipment that looked like it might have been used to discover magnetism; paint cans, tubes of glue, and floor tiles. The way the shelves bulged out from the walls made the hallway narrower, and made it seem longer than it actually was. The Key of Power was not necessary this time, for the door at the end of the subterranean passage was unlocked.

"That's weird," Sam said. Since going underground, none of them had spoken. He turned the knob the rest of the way and pushed, and the flimsy door opened with a creak.

Sam immediately had the sense that the room before them was much more spacious. Though he could only see a few feet in by the light cast from behind them on the landing, the feel of the air and the hollow quality of the boys' tentative footfalls suggested an area vast and vacant. If his sense of direction was true, he judged that they were now somewhere between the gym and the theater. Sam reckoned he could hear the sound of volleyballs bouncing and shoes squeaking, but it might have been his imagination.

Ian and Brayton already had their phones out, and the glow from their screens played over the walls on either side of the doorway.

"Can't find a lightswitch," Brayton muttered. "But there's stuff stacked up in here that looks way newer than all of that out there."

"What kind of stuff?" Sam turned around and rejoined the others by the wall. He felt uncomfortable turning his back to that mysterious expanse, and resisted the urge to look over his shoulder.

Ian kept working his way further off to the left. Brayton indicated the nested tubs stacked three and four high. Elsewhere, piles of bags the shape and size of the dog food bags Sam's mom kept in the garage loomed in the darkness, but instead of one or two they were heaps of

ten, twenty. "They all say things like, 'Supplies', 'Prepared,' 'Rations,'" Sam said. There were tubs of dehydrated fruits and vegetables, sacks of flour and corn, even buckets of freeze-dried meat.

"I've seen some of these brands at the store," Ian's voice wavered over to them from across the room. "They're all marketing to people who think the Apocalypse is coming. Dad says a bunch of his neighbors around the cabin are big into it. I've met some of them, and I think they're a little kooky."

"Anyway, I found a bunch of switches over here. Should I try turning them on and see what happens, or do you guys think we should just get out of here?"

"You make it sound like you think they'll launch a rocket or something," Sam tried to recover the light tone they seemed to have left upstairs.

"Better not risk it," Brayton said. "Some of the teachers here--I wouldn't put it past them."

Ian made his way back towards them. "I'm thinking we don't want to be down here when whoever this all belongs to comes back. Turning on the lights could even trigger a dedicated generator, and then whoever it is would know we were here."

Sam and Brayton fell into step behind him. "And believe me," Ian went on after a moment. "Nobody who stockpiles that much for a rainy day doesn't have just as many guns and ammo somewhere in easy reach." They quickened their pace.

Once they were back upstairs by the boiler room door again, the boys brushed themselves down. Brayton put his ear to the door, then carefully undid the deadbolt and eased the door open silently. He breathed out a sigh of relief.

"Nobody there."

Thank you, Sam thought. He said, "It doesn't look like there's been a nuclear bomb or zombies or plague, does it? Cause we can go back down to the bunker."

Ian smirked. "No thanks!" He headed off down the empty hallway. "I'll see you guys."

"Shoot," Brayton said. "You see what time it is? My parents are going to be calling me any second, asking what's taking me. I hate it when they leave those voicemails."

Sam heard Ian call back to him, "Don't forget--" and he made a gesture of locking a door, then locking it again. Right, the deadbolt. "And that's how today's adventure is going to have to be, too. But I'll take it as my pledge. All the stuff we just *did not do*. So you're scott free with the Kay-Oh-Pee! Take it back to its owner, little Squire. Make up whatever story you want for her!"

Back to his usual bold persona, Sam thought. But he'd keep that to himself, too.

Songs of Innocence and Experience

The look in the mirror as they walk past the window with the dark classroom behind it, while I stand in front of the door waiting for the halls to clear. They aren't aware at first that they're looking at themselves, only a movement out of the corner of their eye. Then they look--the look changes from mild surprise, to curiosity, to recognition. And then to curiosity--that's me. That's how I look? And all this in the blink of an eye, so that many of them miss it. If they're looking down, or talking to somebody, or making room for somebody pushing past the other way, they walk by without a second glance. But if they take that glance, it passes almost instantaneously through the series of the looks so far enumerated and comes to the capo curiosity and just as presto--al fine. My room is right across from the music room. The last look they give it, already moving past towards the lunchroom, is one of ineffable consciousness--a look of approval, appraisal, long familiarity and longsuffering, and longing, and expectation. This face is mine, only I know it, and seeing myself look I can feel no self-consciousness--but in case anyone else might be looking, who might judge me for it, I will drop my eyes. And they look down at once, pretending not to have seen, and just by chance adjusting the way their hair falls. Just as if they had caught the eye of a stranger.

Eye contact. The repetition is uncanny. As clear as they are walking past, their souls are hanging laundry from the window-lines on a sunny day. Light filters down from a skylight just there where the hallways meet, and some natural light from the big windows in the gym comes through the doors across the way, too, that must have made me add that.

Presently a couple voices take up the song next door, putting in extra practice through lunchtime, and the piano picks up a bar or two a few minutes later, depending on whether the music teacher is free or has to teach or tutor somewhere else then. The straggler kids are still heading to their lockers, grabbing something they forgot or keeping informal trysts, or sauntering into the gym to shoot hoops--lunchtime is free, they can sing or play basketball or eat if they want to, but they aren't to wander the halls unaccounted for. Freedom and responsibility--a long time later, this should probably be all they hold onto from here.

Incredibly, too, some of the old students do come back and visit. Annual events try to harness and gather them, but during the breaks from college, or when they have a day off work or a vacation, they also come in ones and twos to say hi to the teachers that are still here--the ones they want to say hi to, they tend to be the ones who stick around, though many more, like me, also come and go.

Mind control, body control--straightening the way your hair lies, flaring your nostrils. If we were to go on changing, not deteriorating and dying, but always changing to be growing bigger, stronger, wiser.

So Mr Thomas typed during his prep period.

The concert was that weekend. Harriet wrote about the unreleased songs: "is it the right word...quiet room/ paradise." She dwelled on the bird imagery again, and sought the way to connect these songs he played live to the other themes that dominated the released works, themes of place and power, the characters he brought to life, neighbors and zombies.

Blake and Newton, Mr Thomas mused. In the wayward poet's etchings the great scientist was portrayed hunched forward, crouching over a compass in the wilderness. Blake's Newton was young and strong; either his nudity or his golden locks caused consternation among the class when he showed them the image during their discussion of the scientists and Romantics when they were reading Frankenstein. He seemed so oblivious to the strange surroundings, the boulder he was sitting on, his own Egyptian, rock-hewn iconography, focused only on the angle he held, the points and lines he drew, or the calculations he could glean from them. Blake's own interest in duality was hard to pin down. He gave his heroic scientist the symbol of division and analysis, the compass, and banished him to squat among the rocks. But his single-minded devotion to his work was engaging. It had its own purity. And Blake's poems, falling into the two perspectives, were they opposed poles, or by their unity what sorts of applications might they be put towards?

In the students passing the window, Blake's questionable duality appeared in more or less relief. Some were clearly children--in that moment--and some had all the marks of experience. Some clutched books and pencil bags and calculators to their chests, some swung their arms big and free, some concealed their minds as best they could with silence, and some spoke lightly, hilariously, desperately, blandly. Mr Thomas was working on poems about them.

For Noel, the hidden thoughts were of the most innocent shape. A gentle heat of competition and benign ambitions licked the lumpen materials of his good intentions and hardly tempered them. He thought of the football game that afternoon, for which they'd be released early from class. The school they were playing, Filament Charter, had no field of its own, so they would be sharing that of another school, a public school a few blocks away. It was as much this public school as the opposing team that Noel had set his courage to considering. Whoever they actually were--semi-literate kids of adults at the bar, the smoke shop, the wings shop, riding the bus and light rail up and down--Noel had only the best of hopes for meeting them after the game.

Carlton always ate a whole loaf of bread for lunch on game-days, and now he had the bread-hiccups. "You know," he tried to explain, punctuated by the thing he was explaining, "when you eat bread too fast without drinking water--with me it tends to happen with bread, but maybe it could be anything--and you get the hiccups." Big ones, in his case, that convulsed his whole upper third. "You can almost control them, but not quite; you almost know when they're coming out, but then--hup!" They nodded, they knew what he was trying to say: how time skips, and they erupt a bit before or after you were expecting.

As they were playing, Noel kept hearing the hiccups down at the end of the line, where Carlton was playing tight end. After one particularly sudden tackle, he lay there a moment. Noel was about to come over to check if he was all right, when he popped up and exclaimed, "They're gone!"

Over his friend's head, Noel caught a glimpse of a girl sitting all by herself towards the top of the bleachers, surrounded in billowing paper. She was trying to smooth it against her lap to cut it with some scissors, but the wind kept making it fly up, and her hair blew with it. She looked up and saw him. Something between irritation and content suffused her features. Then she made a gesture that plainly meant, Oh well, and smiled. Noel hurried back to the huddle.

It a close game for awhile, but then the other side started to tire. Noel caught a pass over his man, dropped and spun to shed the near tackle they landed in, and ran easily straight down the sideline. Though the safety had the angle, he couldn't match Noel's pace. It was a valiant fight from the Filament boys, but the final score hardly showed it.

In the aftermath, Noel congratulated his team and looked around for someone who could be a public school kid. There was one in particular he was looking for, but she seemed to have gone. His mom would only wait for so long; it was a school night. He scanned the bleachers, but everyone had the heavy look of parents who had settled in to keep warm and were slowly stirring themselves like animals in springtime. Stray kids wouldn't be up there.

As the teams shook hands, Noel saw a bunch of dim figures past the end zone, playing their own game of football in the grass around the edge of the field where the lights just reached. With Carlton complaining that it was too late, that their moms would be worried about them, even that he had homework to do, Noel marched down to greet these other football players. His friend trailed after.

Some there were young, Sam's age and younger. And in the middle of the scrum Sam himself suddenly appeared. He darted sideways but couldn't evade the reach of the massed defenders. At the moment he was tagged down, Noel called out, "Who's captains? Sam, what's the score?"

"No one, really. I just started playing. Are you guys keeping score?"

The rest of the kids milled around, unsure if they were about to play another down or if the newcomers were expecting to keep talking until they got a reply.

Carlton scoffed, "Let's just get on opposite teams, keep things fair, and so you and Sam better not be on the same team."

The rest of the kids watched this exchange with that same tension between exasperation, bemusement that they were still chatting rather than just jumping in, and relief that they seemed to be finishing up. "So you're on our team?" The nearest kid, who had just hemmed Sam in for the tackle, held out a hand for a high five. "Your brother?"

"And my friend. We go to East Cliffs."

"Oh." The kid squinted at Noel's jersey. "Your brother's pretty fast. You too? Want to guard their receivers?"

He assented and just in time identified an unmarked kid across the line of scrimmage that wavered sketchy and undefined between the two sides. Noel had a brief impression of collisions closer to the center, where he thought he caught a glimpse of Carlton waving his arms, and then the receiver broke outside and leapt. Before Noel knew it, the ball whipped by his outstretched arms and the receiver had snagged it neatly out in front. He just barely clipped his heel, or he would have been gone for a touchdown, but stumbled so Noel's safety was able to touch him down.

"Whew!" Carlton hooted. "Got lucky, Noel!"

"Tired from the game, Carl?" Sam shrilled. "I saw how you got beat so don't try to put all the attention on Noel!"

"Well, I mean no one told me we weren't counting, and then they all just come right in on the blitz, I mean--"

The rest of the kids laughed. Noel was a little surprised, but seeing his friend flummoxed reassured him that all was right with the world. He thanked the safety, who said, "OK, now you know you got to watch him!"

On the next play a rusher trucked Carlton, but Sam was expecting it and flea-flicked back to the waiting quarterback, who ran hard to get around the overcommitted line. The receiver turned out to be a staunch blocker, too. Noel swam for all of a handful of shirt before he was knocked off balance, but again the rest of the team was able to recover--one of the nearby corners shed his block and brought down the QB.

"This is unreal," Noel panted when, a few plays later, there was a lull after a touchdown. Carlton had managed to fumble right after catching a short pass, but in the confusion that ensued, one of his teammates had scooped up the ball and zipped through the defense, smelling blood and suddenly back on their guard, and the scrambling offense alike, who were as suddenly relieved. He went untouched the few remaining yards for the score.

"Wait up," Noel said aloud as Carlton gaped and gestured.

"I basically assisted in that TD, right?" was all his friend had managed.

"Could you all bring it in," Noel used his captain's voice this time. The other kids gathered around. "I have to ask, how old are you guys?"

The answers came in ones and twos, ranging from ten to twelve.

"So most of you are in sixth grade here, but there are a few fifth graders." They nodded. "So Carlton and I are the oldest kids here, we're in eighth grade, and you guys, far from being older like I thought, are actually younger than us. I thought you weren't that much bigger or stronger looking, but now I see that, for your age, you're all giants!"

"Not really," Sam said morosely.

"Not you, Sam," Noel sucked his teeth, "No offense. I mean, compared to the kids at East Cliffs, these public school kids are huge! You guys," he said, turning back to them, "would crush us at football, or probably any other sport."

"Noel's right, he's the best player we have, and he can't even close to keep up with you," Carlton said helpfully.

"So I was planning to give you guys my talk about how great our school is, but honestly," Noel went on, "I don't think it would mean much coming from me right now. I think I'd rather hear about what things are like at your school." Tears had sprung to his eyes, surprising him, but he wiped his nose with his sleeve roughly and held them back.

"What do you mean?"

"We're not any bigger than most of the kids there."

"I know," Noel said, "I know that isn't something that matters that much. I know football doesn't have much to do with what your school is actually like, either, but it's just indicating to me that things there must be different."

"I could have told you that, Noel," Carlton said. "If it's anything like my old school, you guys are probably never talking about wisdom and friendship and stuff in the books you read."

"There's no Chivalry Club," Sam ventured.

The kids were speaking up more actively now, some asking Sam, "What's that?" and others assuring Carlton and Noel that they didn't read books. "They try to make us," one boy said, "They have us listen to the CD sometimes, or do work on the computers with these little tiny books, but I just pretend to read and just guess at the answers."

"Or write 'IDK,'" said another.

There was a sharp whistle from back by the stands.

"Oh, shoot, they spotted us," Carlton said, recognizing his mom's signal.

"Well, we should get going," Noel saw his mother peering their way and then start waving at them. "But what you guys are saying to me is, the way you would school us in football, we would school you in, um, school. You don't have to be just a bunch of giants who write IDK, though! If you want a rematch with us--I'm talking metaphorically now--you should come to the Sully's on Wainwright after school tomorrow. I promise it will be for you like this was for us tonight: a revelation."

There were some shrugs and appraising looks as the kids processed this. Carlton added as they were jogging back to their moms, "And there'll be free food--fries, chicken nuggets, cookies--so tell your friends!"

"We've been looking all over for you!" said Noel's mom sharply. "You didn't get enough football during the game?"

"We thought you might have been in the locker room fooling around with towels or whatever it is you boys do," Carlton's mom remarked in a bored tone.

"Gross," Carlton said. "We don't even take showers."

"No kidding."

"What's for dinner?"

"Actually," Noel said, remembering Carlton's offer, "We're having a little event after school tomorrow for Chivalry Club, kind of an outreach thing, so could we pick up some extra food to go?"

Around that same time the next day, Noel and Carlton said goodbye to the last few of their guests. The interior of Sully's was a disaster. The tables they had dragged together for everyone to sit around had helped to contain the damage, but here and there stray disposable cups rolled along the floor in their wayward curlicues. Cookie crumbs had been kicked into corners. All through the afternoon, while Noel did his best to facilitate the conversation, Carlton had been assiduously pouring drinks, spilling hardly at all; carrying plates of food, always munching on something as he filled them; and putting in words whenever the silence indicated that the rest might be lost for them.

Noel tried again to explain while they cleaned up, "It's not that every silence is good. There can be a point where the silence gets a kind of momentum to it and suffocates things people might have wanted to say. It can make people uncomfortable, like it seems to make you."

"Thank you," Carlton said on his dignity. His dignity was undercut only a little by the stains on his best uniform shirt.

"But there is also a certain amount of silence, and a kind of silence, that you absolutely need in a discussion. It's silent, Carlton, because people are thinking. It's the whole point of why we're here."

"I don't think I get it," his friend said. "It's so boring. You have to give people something to think about first. I always just think of what I could say to break the silence. Or about food; if after a minute still no one replies, I can't have a conversation with myself, so I start thinking about what I wish I was eating instead."

"You probably could have a conversation with yourself," Noel said with a wry smile. "In fact, that's basically what thinking is, only most people don't do it aloud."

"Those tables in the upperclassmen Literature rooms and the library always remind me of banquet tables anyway. Like the ones in that painting in the front of the school."

"You're right, Carlton. You follow your gut, that's what you're supposed to do," Noel hesitated, then plunged ahead. "You remember that girl I told you about, the one I saw at the game yesterday?"

"Oh my gosh, this again? Yes," said Carlton, "I remember, and I'll say again what I said before, she's just some public school girl. You could go out with any girl at East Cliffs you want, Noel." He puffed himself up slightly. "My lady said so."

"So Nica's your lady now?"

"Yep, I asked her to the Green Knight's thing already and everything."

They dragged the tables apart with a loud thrumming of the feet on the hard floor. "I just kept imagining her showing up today," Noel said with a sigh. "I knew it wasn't very likely, but I just kept hoping one of those kids yesterday was her little brother, and she would come. I have to talk to her. I have all these imaginary conversations with her in my mind."

"So nice of you to congratulate me and show some interest," Carlton said. He tried to be sarcastic, but Noel saw he was hurt.

"Right, I mean, good for you, Carl! Nica seems really great!"

"You want to know how I asked her?"

Noel nodded. He immediately began imagining his dream girl, and what asking her out would feel like.

"So," Carlton said, brightening up, "I talked to Rory first, since he knows her from writing club and she's his friend or whatever. He warned me that she was still kind of upset about the whole thing with her dad's keys. But I was like, but we found them for her! That's true, he said, but you want to be careful how you bring it up. Dominique's very sensitive about any kind of criticism. You want to know what I would do? He said, if you look at the broadsides posted around the theater, there are some signed Deal. That's her nom de plume, get it: D L, her initials?"

"That's cool," Noel said. He kept himself from laughing or saying something about how long it must have taken Rory to explain what a broadside was, or a nom de plume. Look at you, he thought, I've never seen you so excited about learning!

"Right? Read them, Rory told me, and when she's around, I'll start saying something kind of harsh about them. Not even that harsh, just, oh there's a typo in this line, or whatever. And then you say something about how good they are. He even told me some things about what I could say, after I read them with him; way more is in a poem than I would have got out of it, that's for sure. And as we were there reading them, Nica actually was walking by. I guess she's helping Rory with his play or something. I just blurted out, You're amazing! Rory facepalmed, but I said, I know this isn't how we planned it, Rory, but you're right, these poems are incredible. And Nica, I said, as Rory sort of scampered away to try to give us some privacy, do you want to go to Green Knight's Night with me? Nica was cracking up. And she said, Sure!"

Noel gave his friend a high five. He tried to picture the girl from the game reading poems with him in a corner of the theater. He imagined asking her to go out with him, as if he were

asking on behalf of someone else, a friend, a poet who had written poems about her, who was also himself.

They were about done cleaning up, so they gathered their things and went out, thanking the baristas again for letting them have their meeting there.

“How did it go?” one of them called out as Noel stood in the doorway.

“It was... amazing,” he said, thinking of a girl who hadn’t been there, but who had pervaded the whole experience for him anyway.

“You guys are the best!” Carlton called out. The door jingled shut.

In fact the meeting had been what the boys would refer to between themselves as a CF to remember. A complete fiasco, they pretended they meant. The youngest kids lacked all patience with talking, and kept getting up and running around. The kids closest to their own age did not trust them, and kept looking around and catching one another’s eyes, then looking down at the table and smirking. Noel suspected they had their phones in their laps and were texting, but he couldn’t see from where he was sitting, still, thinking, trying to be a role model. But what good was modeling a role no one recognized? And what good was only thinking, when she wasn’t there.

One good thing did come out of it, at least. Noel heard some of the kids saying as they were leaving that the Homecoming game was that night, making plans to play beside it. He thought he might know where she was.

As they strolled through Parkourland, Noel was quieter than usual. Carlton tried a spin move off of one of the wheelchair ramps and landed with a tumble.

“I nearly busted my butt!” he yelled out from a heap on the yellow grass, grown higher than he was sitting down and husky as dead leaves. When his clowning wasn’t able to rouse his friend from his abstraction, Carlton tried leveling with him.

“What’s up? Is there something I can do?”

Noel blinked. “Huh? Oh, yeah, I was just thinking.”

“Go on. You’re in a weird mood!”

“It’s that girl. I have this feeling that she’s out there, waiting for me. We should go by the school again.”

“Tonight?”

“Right now! I think she’s going to be there.”

“Noel,” Carlton said. “Don’t get ahead of yourself! That’s a little bit stalkerish.”

Noel peered at the scoreboard over the East Cliffs field. “Only about ten minutes left in Harriet’s game. It looks like they’re tied, though, that’s not good,” he said to himself. “They could go into overtime and it’ll be like another hour by the time they’re done.”

He felt the night stretch out before him like a meadow, or like a beach down to the ocean, dark and glimmering with fireflies and white-tipped waves off to the starry horizon. It was actually just a parking lot, with the lights in the cheap apartments at the far end, but Noel quivered with elation just the same. It was the night.

“Look, just help me out tonight! Do you want to just go to school and play sports and eat meals, the same thing every day, or do you want to try to do something more, something

bigger?" Noel glanced over at his friend, who weighed his hands in an imitation of a grocer's scale. "OK, don't answer that. I see you're learning the uses of silence, here."

Noel shrugged hugely, feeling like Hercules holding the sky at Mt Atlas, or just relieved of its weight and on his way to the Hesperides. He couldn't decide which. As they approached the fence around the field, they could hear the cheers and groans from the crowd. He tried another tack. "If you don't want anything more than that, don't worry about it. You're still my best friend. And as you so tactfully pointed out to me back at Sully's, friends take an interest in one another's lives and... interests!"

Carlton squirmed. "OK, Noel. That wasn't really...But fine. I still don't think it's a good idea. But what do you want me to do?"

Harriet dropped off her brother and his friend at Carlton's house. Their moms had both agreed to let him stay over, though Mrs Curran sounded a little taken aback by Noel's not having asked any sooner. Carlton's mom was still at work at the clinic, but she said it was all right. Carlton was used to letting himself in and taking care of his own dinner nights when she had to work, and she trusted the Curran kids unconditionally.

They waited until Harriet had driven back down the main road and turned onto it, and then Noel and Carlton, without even going in the house, went around to the shed where the bikes were chained. Carlton's dogs had come barrelling out of the doggie door flap, but he wrestled them down and scratched their bellies to quiet them down. Meanwhile, Noel wheeled his friend's bike out and locked the chain and the shed door behind. He tossed him the key and gave a thumbs up.

"Be careful!" Carlton hissed. "And I know you won't listen, but if you do see her, don't come on too strong!"

"I'll keep you posted on all the romantic things that do or do not happen, my friend!" Noel whispered. In a moment, he was through the gate and pedaling over the narrow front yard to the sidewalk, flashing in and out of the light of the widely spaced streetlights.

His dream girl's high school was very close to where Carlton lived. It was the one his friend would have gone to if he had stayed in the public schools. Noel rode his bike the opposite direction from the main road. He crossed the park in the center of the neighborhood, where a few guys were still playing basketball under the lights and grilling on the charcoal grills. The smell of charred burgers or steaks or whatever they were made Noel wish he had stopped for dinner, but he soon found his hunger sublimated again into dreams of the girl he was going to see. Would she really be there? A question he needed to know the answer to much more than he needed food and drink for the moment.

With some trepidation, Noel jaywalked the bike across one of the main roads ahead of a traffic light changing. He hopped back on and disappeared into the next neighborhood over. At the far end of this one, the high school, with its fields and parking lots, took up about a quarter of the square mile development, circumscribed by still other big roads. He could see the lights already, much larger than East Cliffs'. He felt a twinge of regret at not telling his sister. She had been sad after their loss in the last few minutes of the soccer game. Carlton had tried to make some conversation in the car, but Noel only told her how well he thought she'd played and patted her on the shoulder once as she drove them.

But Noel pulled up to the field and all thoughts were driven like sand over the rooftops in a dust storm. As he had guessed, it was the Homecoming game. What else could she have been doing with those enormous sheets of colored paper? He saw the banners along the fence at the top of the home stands, and many posters bobbed above the fans cheering their sons or boyfriends *ad hominem*, along with the whole team incidentally.

Noel realized he had forgotten about locking up the bike now that he'd got here, so he lingered by the fence. It looked like they had been charging admission, anyhow, and he'd brought no money. From out here, though he couldn't see much of the field, he could see what he had come for, the faces of the crowd. Sure enough, up near the front this time, but still on the side where she'd been sitting the day before, he saw his girl. He fancied that the section of the banner nearest her had been made by her, and it took on an artistic quality beyond all the rest up there, than which it was hardly any different. The letters L L E, he guessed, had come from her hands, cut out of paper that had rested on her lap, and blown in the wind with her hair. The portentous letters were taped now to the fence along with various stars and moons, ringed planets and flying saucers. They had an outer space theme this year, or their mascot was the Astronauts, perhaps.

Noel looked again at the girl herself, the artificer of such beauty. He could see her hands peeking out of the ruffed sleeves of her jacket, shapers of the paper, holders of the scissors and pencils that she used to outline her letters and decorations, and now and then a bit of wrist and forearm when she reached forward or up and waved her hands. He saw her lips part when she participated in the cheers or booed an unfriendly whistle by the referees. She glanced in his direction when she looked up at the scoreboard at that end and his heart beat fast. But if she saw him, she didn't show any sign of it. He would have to get closer, or would have to wait.

As he lingered lovelorn by the gate, wheeling the bike back and forth pensively, Noel heard somebody calling his name. Only they were pronouncing it wrong, as two syllables, No-elle, like the girl name. He looked around and spotted one of the kids from their football game after the football game yesterday. He recognized him, and forgave him for misremembering. "It's Noel," he said. "What's your name again?"

"Gordon!" the boy said, and nodded his head in the direction of their field beside the field. "I heard your talk or whatever was pretty lit! You want to come play with us?"

"No thanks," Noel said. "Not tonight. But could you do me a favor? Tell them I said hi!"

Gordon grinned and gave him a quick fist bump. "You know, if you want to watch the game without going through the gate," he said, at once conspiratorial and offhand, "You can see it pretty good from the other side of the bleachers. See that big gate there, where they drive the ambulance if they have to, and the teams run through there at halftime to go back to the locker rooms."

"Thanks! See you," said Noel, and without seeming to rush, he went to see about it like a wanderer in the desert goes to see about an oasis.

Sure enough, a long gate section of the fence sagged open on the far side under the bleachers. Noel left Carlton's bike in the shadows and slipped through the opening. He was directly behind the home team's benches now. The varsity players were truly giants. Big brother Matt would maybe have made the JV squad. Noel wondered which of them had never read a book, which had never played an instrument or never recited a poem, never seen a play. Was it possible that they went whole days and weeks at school without wondering about something

enough to ask a question? Without going home and thinking more about something they'd learned that day?

In a spasm of pity he almost went over to the nearest player and took him by the arm to tell him about the virtues inculcated by his school, but at that moment there was a change of possession, and the benches were consumed by a flurry of chinstrap snappings and clipboard brandishings and butt smackings. No one would have heard him if he had yelled his pitiful questions, no one would have listened if he had told his heartfelt story. But Noel's heart was full, and he cast about for the one person who he thought would share it.

She was only a few yards away now, up the metal stairs from the level of the track around the field and a few rows further. Noel wished he knew her name. He realized with a shock that even if he called out to her, she could not recognize him: the only time she had seen him, he had been wearing his East Cliffs uniform and his helmet. Suddenly he wished that he had them on now. He wished that he could take on the whole varsity team single-handed, or with Carlton and Sam and Gordon and a few of his friends. A lump came to Noel's throat instead of words, only actions came to his mind, mad exhibitions of impossible prowess, which conveyed significance even he could not guess, much less expect his beloved to intuit.

Then, he remembered Carlton's advice. Forcing himself to walk up the stairs slowly, he waved to her until she realized it was her he was waving at. He reached out his hand for her to shake. Up close he could see her freckles and the shape of her eyes. He also noticed, for the first time, what should have been obvious: that she was not watching the game alone, but was surrounded by her friends. Until that moment, everything had taken place in his head, where no one could see it but Noel, but now it was clear that they were observed.

"I'm Noel," he had said. Probably. It seemed that she had replied, but her words, like his, were lost in the roaring in his head. Where his head met this night, where it had been broken open by the world like an egg on the lip of a hot pan. Noel realized he still held lightly onto her hand. He let go.

"I'm Noel," he said again. "I don't know if you could hear. I didn't catch your name?"

"It's Alma," she said again. "How about we talk over there, so we're not in everyone's way."

Noel backed up--he had been leaning forward almost at full length, across a number of Alma's group of friends, he just now noticed--and she joined him in the narrow aisle at the side of the stands by the railing where more homecoming banners hung.

"You looked familiar," she said. He had explained, in jumbled words, seeing her the night before.

"Just here," he said. The atmosphere was so different, it hardly seemed like the same place.

"I was trying to get a sense of how big to make them," Alma gestured to the paper cut-outs, "and how many would fit."

"You did beautifully," Noel said. "You--you go to this school?"

Because you are beautiful, and you make everything light up with life, his eyes, he was sure, were saying. There must be something about this school they're getting right.

"Yeah," she replied. She was in tenth grade, it turned out.

"And you must like it, you showed a lot of school spirit, coming out after school to make the decorations. And all these friends of yours, are you all part of some kind of spirit club?"

"Spirit club? You mean like, catching ghosts and solving mysteries?" When Noel didn't laugh right away, she pouted, and he saw that she had been making a joke. Why hadn't he been expecting her to make dorky jokes?

"Of course!" he said aloud. "That wind that was blowing when I saw you yesterday, trying to work on the banner--definitely ghosts."

She shook her head, "No, it's not a school club. Some of my friends are involved with the student government, but I just wanted to help out and support. I have a lot of friends who play on the team, too."

Student government? Noel filed that away for another time. Right now he had to know: "When you say friends...?"

Alma nodded. "Guys I've known since we were kids. They're like my brothers. I don't give a hoo about school pride, but I love my friends." She regarded him. "What's your story?"

"I came for you," Noel said simply. "I'm really glad I did. Find you. But...So I should let you get back to the game," he finished lamely. There were so many things he wanted to say, but again he remembered Carlton's warning. "I have this project I'm working on, too," he heard himself say in a rush. "I wonder if you could tell me more about your school sometime, and I could tell you more about mine, and we could... talk." She raised her eyebrows. "You could bring your friends!"

"You know what...Noel, right?" she said, pulling a sharpie out of a little handbag she had slung over her shoulder. "I'd like that. I'll give you my number," she took his hand, and with elaborate attention she wrote on his palm, "and we'll figure something out."

"That sounds great," he said, wondering at the digits emblazoned on his hand, which still tingled from the touch of her fingers and the wet felt of her pen, like a cat's tongue. "I'll see you around."

"All right," said Alma, and sidled back among her group of friends. She picked up the cheer in the middle, and laughed at something her friend said to her. They were probably giving her grief about chatting with him, Noel thought. Then he said to himself it might be nothing to do with him. He smiled.

Hurriedly he clattered down the steps and into the shadow of the bleachers. The bike was still there, thank goodness. Noel took out his phone and painstakingly entered the new contact. Alma. He put his phone away before he did something unforgivably stupid, calling her or texting her right away with breathless words too naive to be believed.

With her name in his hand, and still deeper in dreams of her, Noel headed for his friend's home.

To Shine in Use

Ms Milliworthy had to stop by the school one last time to pick up a few things. Some of them she knew about, like the business book she had lost and knew must be around the school someplace. Others she did not.

She decided to come in early Saturday morning when no one else would be there. When she saw the stack of papers in her mailbox, she couldn't bring herself to retrieve them at first. The thought that there might be notes from her students among the memos and reminders and the rest of it did little to cheer her. If anything, it would make going through it that much more difficult. What would she have left written for them?

So she went first to her desk, instead. She kept it clear at all times, but there were a couple of pictures she had taped to the wall by the window where she could look from time to time to give herself a break from grading or working on her laptop. In one, a whole flock of birds, maybe they had a name but she didn't know it, arranged themselves in the shape of a comma against the sky. Punctuating the clouds' ineffable messages. It somehow gave meaning to the hours she spent arranging the students' punctuation for them, with notes about the relevant conventions and ambiguities they helped to avoid. The other picture there was not a photo, but something drawn by a student for her in her first year. It was a scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which had always fascinated her: the part where the fairy queen and her friend played on the beach in India, pretending to be ships on the sea.

On the one hand, you had something described for you but not represented on the stage. Everyone in the audience could be imagining something completely different. Yet another way in which the characters and the language became infinite. And on the other hand, one possible way to read the passage was as one of those places where the infinite playwright was simply a man of his time. Professors she had had even went as far as arguing his time and place had determined him, and made sense of the infinite possibilities by cutting through, or rather catching them in, that web of superstition and trade which was Elizabethan England.

She looked at the ships on the horizon with their sails blown full of white crayon, intangible air, and their brown hulls freighted below the waterline with who knows what spices and human cargo.

Ms Milliworthy got a few folders out of the drawers, old lesson plans and extra copies, more samples of student work and official paperwork. She left them piled on her empty desk while she went to remove from her classroom the few things belonging to her which she wanted to keep.

She took a couple of posters down from the walls, landscapes and still lifes by her favorite artist, Van Gogh. The rest could stay. It occurred to her that she had been covering that archery club for Mr Fraye the last afternoon she had actually been at school. In some way, hadn't that been the straw to break her? In any case, maybe she had left the book there in the cafeteria somewhere.

She didn't care too much about the book as far as reading it went; it had given her some ideas she was interested in, but they were of a general kind, sparked by thinking about the topics freely rather than directly conveyed by anything she'd actually read. So she doubted that

reading the rest of the book would make much impression, but since it was a library book, she had to return it.

That gave her an idea, then. She had noticed that the lost and found books were not piling up as much this year as they used to. It seemed that the new part-time librarian had got permission to put them in the school library after every so many weeks, for other students to use. Now here was economy in its original sense, as the Greek words would have it: housekeeping, home economics. The conventional definitions, discussed early in her book, and the Marxist theories based on harsh industrial facts gathered in stuffy reading rooms in Britain and applied most lucratively to classical literature by people like Ms Milliworthy's professor, were more concerned with scarcity of resources and the exploitation of the laboring class, respectively.

Now, Ms Milliworthy mused as she strove not to think about how this was the last time she would be striding these halls, and how they were strangely silent now except for her footfalls, the brushing of her clothes as she hurried along, these were all fine ways to think about the foundations of human life in the world, but they seemed to her to be summed up best another way. The theory of economics she had been devising had less to do with resources and labor, or the exchange of money, and more to do with the spending of time.

In the library, the lost and found books were lined up on their shelf by the door. This way they would be most readily at hand for a student realizing she had left her book at home to grab on the way to class, and be spared the ignominy of coming unprepared. Her book was not among them, and Ms Milliworthy was about to go out, already contemplating the fine she might need to pay, weighing it against the thought of just moving back East, a fugitive, when she spotted something on the librarian's desk.

It wasn't her book, but it was her book: not the library book, but the book she was writing, one blog post at a time. Its title was written on a fuchsia post-it note. The book that had got her fired, she thought with a bittersweet sense of elation. "You shouldn't leave that lying around," she said aloud.

Just outside the door, Noel froze. He rapidly backpedaled to the hallway crossing and shot a frantic glance along it the way he had come. Carlton and Nica were nowhere in sight.

Ms Milliworthy knew that the board of directors held their meetings in the library. They brought donors and potential investors here because it encapsulated the vision of the school neatly: old books, bright windows, the lively front hall right there where you could watch the kids come and go. Had she seen someone just now, a face pop in and out around the corner by the mural? Ms Milliworthy peeled up the post-it and shoved it into a drawer. It would give her some satisfaction to lay on some of these spoiled kids a verbal thrashing they wouldn't soon forget. It felt somehow fitting for her last act as a teacher at this school. Or perhaps anywhere.

And how had Noel and his friends got themselves into such a pickle?

His sister gave them a ride to the school that morning, but she didn't come inside. Playing sardines in the school sounded fun, she admitted. Alas, she had a paper due on Monday. She would leave them to it.

With her dad's key returned, Dominique wanted to celebrate. Carlton was willing. The stories Sam told of the school's mysteries made Noel want to join.

"You're sure I won't be too much of a third wheel?" he asked them.

"Sardines wouldn't be much point with only two," Nica pointed out.

So it was that Noel got to explore East Cliffs, poking into the space under the bleachers and behind the stage--but making plenty of noise first, in case he happened to find the others--until the last teacher he expected to see there almost caught him in the open.

Noel ran down the middle school hallway to a room where he'd noticed a bookshelf tilted outward from the wall. It looked like someone inept with perspective had drawn the scene. He ducked inside. The lights in this room were on a motion sensor. As many times as Noel frantically tried to turn them off, they flicked back on again as soon as he took a step towards his friends' hiding place. If he hadn't been in such earnest, he might have laughed at the irony of whose room they were in.

Carlton's head peeked out from behind the bookshelf, blinking. "How did you find us so quick?" he said, a little breathless but affecting pleasant surprise.

"Shhh!" Noel whispered, "Ms Milliworthy's here!" Then he added, "Push out the other side of the bookshelf a little bit, it's way too obvious."

He had finally settled for simply crouching down right by the door, hoping that if the lights remained off, at least--

They sprang on again, though he hadn't moved, and a voice said, "You can come out from behind there, too."

The bookshelf stopped scooting forward. One more student she recognized, and one she didn't, emerged. No one spoke for a long moment.

"Let me tell you," Ms Milliworthy folded her hands and stood before the kids. Then, looking at their faces, she seemed to change her mind. She sat down at the table by the door. She pulled a chair for them, inviting them to sit. "Let me tell you a story. In my first year of teaching--this was at another school, before East Cliffs had opened, and before I came here--I had a friend from college come down for a visit.

"He was a boy I knew, not the most handsome, but one of the funniest people I have ever met. It took a little bit longer for me to see that he was also very sad, actually, and that a lot of his sense of humor came out of these very sad places he had been."

"So, your boyfriend?" Nica said. She somehow felt she was the real audience for this, and resented it.

"Oh, you might call him my boyfriend, but it was complicated. Anyhow, he came to visit during his fall break, right around this time of year. We decided to take a trip to San Diego, to visit some of our other friends who lived not far from the beach.

"We left on a Friday right after I got out of school. I hadn't told my classes about it, of course. When they asked me what I was doing for the weekend, I lied. I don't remember what I said, but it certainly wasn't, 'I'm going to the beach with a guy I like.' But that's all right, I told myself, it's none of their business.

"The parking lot was still crowded when I came outside, and there he was, waiting by my car. He had come to school with me in the morning and waited in a coffee shop the whole day, or maybe it was in a bar. In that moment, when I saw his face light up, and all the kids streaming by to their parents picking them up, so that I had to pretend not to know him, I had this terrible feeling: what am I doing? Am I in love with this person, or not? Do I care more about how the kids see me, or do I just really not want to get his hopes up anymore? Either way, I'm sure some of the kids saw us get in the car together, and I am definitely sure he was disappointed. Things

were even more difficult between us after that. It was a very uncomfortable car ride, though we both tried to pretend everything was fine..."

"Yeah, that's awkward," said Nica as savagely as she dared.

Ms Milliworthy laughed, but her face was set. "Can I make it really obvious for you? I know it's not usually how we do things here, but well. Let's speak as one person to another, not teacher and student for now. The power of knowing you are wrong, accepting this because it can lead to learning, is a tremendous, dangerous thing. Most people are completely unaware of it, they do not accept it, and they do not learn. But you still can. You have been given every chance, and you will be given plenty more, you can take it from me. So I say, embrace that you've made mistakes, and know that you're wrong. Make good use of it, share it carefully, cherish it--and, by the way, don't abandon those few good things that you know to be right, either."

After a moment, Carlton, who up until this point had been like a turtle trying to pull its head back into a shell too small for it, said hoarsely, "Is that it?"

She paused, regarding each of them in turn. His face was very red; Noel looked to be on the verge of tears, but met her gaze openly. The girl was still defiant, but looked thoughtful. "Yes, I think that's it."

"You're not going to tell our parents?" Nica asked.

Ms Milliworthy pursed her lips. "No," she said, measuring her words. "No, I thought you should tell them. I thought that I'd made that rather clear."

"It's clear, Ms Milliworthy," said Noel. "Thank you. We're going to miss you."

Harriet was at home the night of the concert. She thought it was hardly fair, in the strictest literal sense of that phrase, for her to be kept in while her hero, the man she loved and would have loved to see in person just once, was playing downtown. It was her parent's word, she must obey; that was fair, for she was their daughter, but hardly, and it was hard, too, that all this came out of something she hadn't even done. The way they reacted to things, though, was not for her to choose, either. All she could do was her filial duty.

For good measure, they had taken away the use of the computer. The whole family sat there, reading or doing homework or trying to write, each in his own part of the house, but with all the doors open, so that they could look up whenever they liked and see one another there, and safe. Many times Harriet felt her mother's glance raking her and ranging over her brothers, too. Most of the time she managed to keep her attention on her book, but a few times she couldn't help forcing a thespian smile to reassure her. For awhile then she really did get lost in her reading, smiling a little at the tepid gentle flow of it, then gradually she became aware of something at the edge of her hearing, a low keening that had been going on for an indeterminate time while she had been there and elsewhere. Finally she heard her dad go over to her mom and give her a handkerchief to blow her nose. He said something in a low voice, right beside her with his hand on her back, and she answered with her nose gummed up. They stood that way together for some time.

After Harriet said goodnight to her parents, she resolved to imagine the concert for herself, enwrapped in complete vagueness of remembered songs, with as much detail as she could manage filling in the rest of the experience for the rest of her senses. For all that they kept her in tonight, or any other time any friend might ask her to come out with them, when her

parents didn't approve of them, she could never hold anything against them. They could keep her in and she might wish she could be out, but they had given her and they still gave her the freedom to think. With that, she could never really resent their word, their rules, and for the reason that there was nothing to resent.

She let the favorite songs and parts of songs among the ones she had been listening to lately on repeat, from the new album, flit through her mind, not reciting any whole song straight through so much as calling up a setting for more rigorous thinking to take place. Harriet turned her more focused attention to the matter of the hall, first of all. It might be the desert, but on the night that she saw him in concert, she chose it to be raining a little, a light mist that haloed the shop windows and streetlights, wet the pavement and clung to the ends of her hair, the cuffs of her sleeves, the hem of her skirt. She felt the warmth of the crowd on stepping through the broad bank of doors in the front entrance, and hurried under the marquee into the short line for Will Call. The light was dazzling in the foyer, the carpet thick, and the shadows dimly layered across it by the many different sources of the different layers of brilliance: the chandeliers hanging immense and archaic above the staircases, the bulbs around the main signs, the damp streetlights shining in over the slick pavement, the bright eyes and buttons and shoes of the people milling around.

With her ticket in hand, Harriet fell into step with them, a languid mote in the turbulent stream of folks who loved something she loved, but were otherwise strangers. The usher directed her up a stair and around a corner, another welcomed her into the actual seating area and indicated with dapper gestures the best way to find her place. The usher had her jacket draped over her own seat there in the aisle. A water bottle nestled against the backrest.

Harriet gently begged pardon and tightroped down the row until she found her letter close to the middle. From her seat she could see everything, from the painted ceiling to the patina of the stage, the patterned proscenium and the fixtures for the lights. Below, the heads of the people were in Brownian motion. She sat and watched them for awhile, and heard the murmur of the audience grow, rising and falling, as people came into the theater, the words indistinct, even as she made out here and there the individual conversations. Each voice was like the instruments in the orchestra her family sometimes went to see, in some of the other theaters around town, tuning up before the performance began.

When she could not sit still anymore, Harriet got up again, squeezed out back to the aisle, descended the stairs, and went exploring. She used the bathroom, though she barely had to go at all. It was the same feeling she had before a soccer game, a choir show, or a test for school. A combination of exhilaration and dread, which expressed itself in the most quotidian ablutions: pee, wipe, flush, wash. In the broad hall, on the stairs, she saw a few people she knew. Friends of her older brother, who stayed local for college, waved and blew her kisses over the crowd. There was a teacher she recognized from school, dressed nattily and wavering in uncertainty of acknowledging her. Harriet found a table with cookies. Nibbling on one, she went back to her seat.

After a fair amount of time had passed and most of the audience had arrived, the lights went partway down. The opener welcomed them and thanked them. She, like most of them, had no idea who he was. He was a young black singer, immaculate in his white outfit and sneakers. He belted out passionate bursts of song, each one building rapidly to his preferred falsetto register, then swooping back down to the give the audience time to cheer his virtuosity. The

songs sounded alike, but they were exciting, catchy enough while still true to something that must lie behind that passion. At any rate, she and the performer both seemed to be glad that he was as it were a free bonus on top of the real reason she had come. He could do no wrong, so long as that expectation was soon to be fulfilled. He concluded his set, thanked them again, and the lights went back up while the stagehands brought out instrument after instrument. They plugged in cords and checked sounds. Then, sooner than she would have guessed, the lights went back down.

Here Harriet's memory and imagination simply fused. In the dark of her bedroom, she had watched countless times the cell-phone recordings people had made of his concerts, Amsterdam, Seoul, Columbia. All around the world, people were conspiring to let her conjure his presence, even if she was as close to seeing him in reality as she would ever get in her life and could not be closer.

He came onstage even before some of his bandmates, wearing a ballcap and a long-sleeve shirt. He had a cup of tea, as he sometimes did when he was a little under the weather, and this was how she would have him be on this depressing, ecstatic, wet night. There was honey in it. She could imagine it better, because she had a cup warm between her hands. She leaned her head against the windowpane. This was how the first song would feel, a little cold at the outermost edges, the kind of cold that makes it better when you can get cozy inside. But this was a song that invited the space between feeling chilly and warming up to extend, pushing you out under the pine trees and along the rime that sparkled on the dirt uneven beneath the sparse grass in the woods, and out of the woods under the sky. The light show casting patterns on the big screen like a cathedral front behind the musicians gave the impression of the sky, the mist rising from the ground or the coast.

When, after a few more songs, he took a break from singing to talk, Harriet supposed he would say all the normal things, welcome and thank you and it's so nice to be here, which were only true if you were a musician, she knew, and then something to put everyone at ease, something about the weather, something like, "This place without seasons, as if the Earth rotates or swivels on its axis less here, has surprised us and blessed us with rain tonight. Thanks for braving the weather to be here with us tonight, ha ha. Or maybe the desert does have its seasons, only they aren't the ones I'm familiar with. We have the snow, and the falling leaves, and here you have varieties of sun and sudden thunderstorms that we just wot not of." Then he would go into some variation of the stories he was telling about his family, since that was the theme of this album and this tour, and seemed to be in the background of many of his other songs, too, from before. And maybe he would play some of them as interludes, or as encores. Maybe he would sing a cover with his opening act, as he had been doing in some of the live shows Harriet had been watching online.

Ch 7

Much in Little

Sunday morning. It meant church services for his friends and their godly families, but for Rory and millions like him young and old it meant lying in bed late, reading internet articles on cell phones, playing handheld games, watching the light through the curtain shade. Rory's favorite food was ramen soup on the weekend. What did all this have in common? Immediate gratification, indefinitely sustained. A noodle made of processed cardboard, long and squiggly, salty and good in its broth that was only water, miraculously changed.

Even though rehearsals would be starting soon, Rory had been procrastinating writing the rest of his play by researching more about the game. Very intriguing source material he began turning up, indeed. He learned more about its origins in other games from the 16-bit era and connections with online comics. Somehow, by some concatenation of clicks he would not have been able to explain, nor was there any need--each following the other for the sole purpose of putting off the moment when he should tap out the next sentence by moving his fingers slightly to another part of the keyboard--he found himself reading the website

What Landsdreamer means to me. Otis Gibbons

What is Landsdreamer? What does that even mean?

It's always the *what is* questions that are hardest to answer.

Is it like an orphan abandoned in an another child's room?

How he would shyly touch a toy sword, an old shoe,

Pots and pans found inside a play oven,

Plants in the windows, dust on the sills.

Would he curl up on the floor and hum songs to himself

Ready to cry about that world that he had been missing?

Whatever it is, I think this was where Landsdreamer was born.

Well, by the world's standards I was a grown-up then,

So I couldn't keep from making it up as I went along,

Putting in more twists and turns,

Hiding secrets where a kid like me would look,

and sometimes not, just out of meanness.

Then I invited you over to play.

And you helped the game spread to the whole house.

You gave it hallways, shingles, and doorframes,

And made a family live at home.

To each family member that played belongs a meaning of Landsdreamer.

As I got to know you, by happenstance,

You told me, "I heard of you playing Landsdreamer."

This was not after the game was out a week, a month.

People kept talking to me about all this years later, to the present.

All different kinds of people share with me their nostalgia,

Their visits with me in the living house called Landsdreamer.

Finding the push pins, the pine cones, the sea glass.

I have to wonder, has it really been so long?

With eyes that tell the truth, my visitors say,

"I love that place so much I bring it with me."

I think at once to myself "It could be."

Ah so! That's it.

It's that I wanted to make a place that moved.

A place overflowing and flowing along,

Portable and folding up to fit in a heart.

You ask because you have discovered the meaning that lies in the way you play and stop playing in this place – even though we might get lost there first.

I see, the joy is finding out.

I was not so young when I was working on Landsdreamer,

But now that I'm old enough, I've grown young at heart.

I ask questions that I took for granted then.

I ask, "Will this place still be here if I die?"

You will have to answer that one for me.

You could say, "Listen for the songs we sing at your wake."

The dead me listens in the little ways you imagine for me.

What we've left undone, how cruel we were, what kind of sense of humor we had,

and how good a neighbor we might have been.

All the survivors are laughing, are singing,

Hoping to say and be the example to the rest.

The question I want to ask can be answered with a party, laid to rest to resurrect.

Wealth, glory, renown and ambition are all nothing to us.

Places abide inside those stories we tell,

where we bare our vulnerabilities, openly and plainly.

Well, it's still alive, and it's not literally a place,

but to me Landsdreamer is a game that's a story like this, too.

Now that we can all play Landsdreamer till the cows come home,

I hope we'll play it together and share what will be good to relive.

Thank you for listening to my long story.

And I say this on behalf of everyone who had a part in making this game.

Thank you for everything.

Rory resolved to find the original game and download it on his console system, or, if necessary, to play it on an emulator. He thought that starting to play it would be a bad idea for right now, though, since he was still in the middle of so many other things. His responsibility to the club was reasserting itself, and to his play. As a bridge from indolence to activity, Rory took a moment to choose his favorite lines from this strange poem-letter, so that he could adapt some

of it into an epilogue for his play about the game that he loved, which had, essentially, been based upon this other game, Landsdreamer. And he never knew!

It reminded him of the time he was in sixth grade, when his teacher pretended for the whole day to be someone else. That dissonance, that dysphoria, when he realized it wasn't so, and that it had all been a game. To think that one of the teachers who ran Chivalry Club would have played a trick like that. Still, it was evidently a feeling that he would be encountering again from time to time.

The story of Mr Fraye's alter ego was one of the best things Mr Thomas had overheard recently. Apparently, Dillon had, on a bet, gone around school for a whole day disguising himself and his voice and pretending to be his cousin visiting from Ireland. Most of the kids, for most of the day, bought it. Even, he heard him say more quietly, a few of the teachers had been hoodwinked.

Mr Thomas resolved at once to find a way to weave it into a story. He wouldn't write it whole-cloth, of course, because there was too little art involved in that. Much as he admired her work, her integrity, he would leave the journalism to Dolly Milliworthy. This hadn't stopped him, however, from wishing for an opportunity to do something as hilarious and outlandish, so as to be able to tell the true story, perhaps with some embellishment, at a later time, and enjoy the effect it would have on his audience. He enjoyed it now, in imagination, and pondered what he might say.

Mr Fraye's story made him think of the time he'd had a real visitor from Ecuador, sitting in on their class discussion of *The Red Badge of Courage*. What ever had happened to that story he had written about the house in Quito?

After a few moments, he had found it:

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The church next door has a sign out front. A little box cantilevered from the avocado façade above the door, with red and blue and black letters. It is lit up at night.



Whoever made the sign spelled Sunday wrong, but they must not mind all that much.

Sunday is when there is the most noise from next door. All morning we can hear them through the brick walls singing and playing guitar and electronic organ. It makes you feel peaceful lying in bed, just another sign that it's really Sunday, and in the shower you can sing along, the sounds are especially clear in there, echoing.

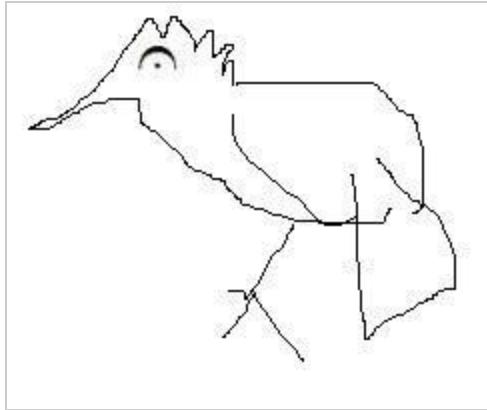
On Saturdays is the market, which is sort of annoying, because it's much louder, earlier. The people have to set up their wares on their blankets in the street, and then there's a few old ladies who like to sit on our steps and chat while there's no customers.

Our house was empty for a while, but now I think they realize we're living here. My roommate talked to them one time and they said a nice old man used to live in the other house next to ours, on the other side than the church. But then for a few days no one had seen him, and they finally had to unlock the door and found out he'd died. That house is still empty. I hang my sheets on the clotheslines on his roof, feeling uncertain the first time if it was ok, but now I've gotten used to it.

The roof of the church is about a half story lower, and it is made marginally less accessible by a low wall with a rusty railing across part of it where there's a gap. They have a little patio with a lot of plants overlooking the street. In the back is where they hang their clothes, and sometimes there's a little black dog—at least it looks small from up on the roof. It barks when other dogs are barking in other back patios or balconies, or whenever our flimsy metal door at the top of the stairs bangs open or closed.

One morning when I was brushing my teeth, hearing the music from the church next door—so it must have been Sunday (or maybe Thursday—the sign out front is ambiguous)—I realized something strange, and it was that I had never seen anyone go in or out of there, or hanging up the clothes, or feeding the dog, or watering the plants. No one sitting on the stairs or in a lawn chair in the sun, now that it was turning springlike. I listened more carefully—when I spit out the toothpaste and nighttime gunk from my mouth and sinuses my roommate shouted from the kitchen ‘That's repulsive!’ but then she was quiet and my mouth was fresh—and I couldn't tell, but I thought maybe it was just one voice singing after all.

I couldn't make out the words, or even what language it was. But then there were more harmonic things happening, and the voices weren't practiced so I could hear them coming in late or holding a note too long, exuberantly. That little bird's eye.



So there had to be people, more people. Someone was playing the organ, and someone else was strumming the guitar. It could be the dog wagging his tail, brushing the strings, but I didn't think so. Just to check I went upstairs and opened the roof door, let it bang against the wall, and while the dog came out and started barking I hurried back down into the living room and heard the same voices, the same instruments, unperturbed.

The chords were the ones I was familiar with from when I went to church back home, what passes among white protestants for joy. But they really did sound like they were getting into it, those few Christians who gathered in the house next door.

And if there really wasn't anyone there, it could have been the ghosts of the first of them from the catacombs in Rome, and the nice old man next door, or a few angelic old friends, a dog that could be in two places at once. When I believe in God, I think he must be something like that.

And then there were the conversations he had with his friend, who wrote poems. What if he translated some of his poems? A voice like his friend's was already demurring that they were too dark, but he found one he had copied out for him, and rendered it briefly into as literal a translation as he could manage with his rusty Spanish and his Larousse:

Shrugging off my dreams

I keep sensing latent that rending feeling that dusks and dawns each day upon some table.
Hell makes itself present in each opportunity this sets itself to appearing, it was feeding on the demons
shrugged off of my body like members amputated by some outside force.

I record intact the cramp of my hand in dancing over the papers, the knot pressing down that hung captive
of my throat, the tears from the whisky that dispersed upon the white table, with those which daubed
immense suns attempting with them to illuminate me.

The nights of storm tend to be auspicious for awaiting the coming verse that would fall with the first
violent burst of a bolt in the sky, and in striking the first raindrops on my neighboring window, they were
bawling my letters full of anguish and anger.

And so I went on emptying, with each storm, with each lightning flash, with my demons and my suns imaginary.

That day his friend from Ecuador had visited their class, some of his students still remembered that being one of the best discussions they'd ever had. His friend had sat beside Mr Thomas and listened good-naturedly, remarking from time to time that he had no idea what the hell anyone was saying. One girl, however, spoke fluent Spanish and took upon herself the role of translator, so that Mr Thomas didn't have to be the only one mediating for his friend. She, Ms Lobos, in particular was more active that day and seemed more cheerful, as a result, than he had ever seen her at school.

The question that his friend finally asked, if Mr Thomas recalled correctly, was a simple one: Who has the right to decide who lives and dies? He had led up to it quietly and with consideration of such background knowledge as he had of the American Civil War, alluding delicately as well to the dirty wars of his own America. It was a question that required and invited an imitation of that consideration he showed in asking it, and the students all seemed to sense the importance of their responses. They were courageous, who were usually reticent, and sober, who could be so giddy on other days. Mr Thomas relished the memory still.

He wondered, would this be a good enough story to tell her? Would she be amused, enticed? He still could hardly believe it, that she had said yes to seeing him today. He checked his phone every so often, just to read the couple of texts that attested to its truth:

Hey how are you? Want to get a coffee with me at Sully's? Whenever you're free

Hi Lane

OK Sounds good!

1?

One it is. See you there

There they were, on the little glowing screen. One just like it would be in her pocket or on the table by her bed. Maybe she would be reading it, too, right now.

But that didn't mean that it meant the same thing to her that it meant to him, that he wanted it to mean. He had to remind himself of that, too.

To be ready for the reading group, though, just in case they talked a long time and he didn't get to read this afternoon, Mr Thomas figured he had better read some now. The reading group used to meet at a coffee shop downtown. Now that only a few of them showed up at all regularly, all teachers at East Cliffs, they had started just meeting there in the library. On his suggestion, they were reading short stories lately, in the hopes of enticing a few more newcomers, people teaching at other affiliated schools, alumni in the area, friends of friends, or even students, if they could be persuaded to read and attend a discussion outside of class, during their weekend. So far the results had been mediocre.

They had tried the Borges story *Pierre Menard*, and their minds were blown for days; they had done the *Tao Te Ching*, reading substantial passages from it on the spot together, and joked that it was this show of faculty support for Eastern works that had spurred some of the students to start their yoga club. It had the extra layer of irony, as they retold this joke amongst themselves, that Yoga Club had turned out to be vastly more popular than Sunday Colloquy.

Currently, with fun accents whenever they read a quote aloud, they were making their way through some of Flannery O'Connor's stories.

What if you invite her to reading group? insinuated a voice, with a hint of that rugged Southern accent, in his head. The worst that can happen is she says no. And you can say, Yeah, I can't blame you, I imagine you get enough of sitting in the library all week long. And you'll see her there tomorrow, and you can talk about how it went, assuming she asks. Which she would, if only out of politeness. But what if she wants to go? Maybe she's even already read it, today's is one of those stories that gets assigned in high school and college classes and people actually read it. In that case, you get to talk to her that much more. You get to see her in another setting, in other company. And once reading group lets out, it's practically dinnertime, and then, who knows? Asking her to dinner would be going too far, you know, but after all, whether she says no or you don't ask, the outcome is the same.

He had no good answer, though he knew there was a flaw in that voice's logic. Is it impossible? That was all it came back to, and he was loathe to concede that it was.

He read the funny little family yarn with the breathtaking denouement. *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. What double entendres that opened up. Mr Thomas had read the story many times, he had even taken it as a point of departure for writing exercises and imitations, but he still couldn't get over that title. What a stroke. And the counterpart to it, how did that go again? A good woman...The internet provided a cornucopia of pastel wall-hangings with the proverb: Who can find a virtuous woman? And the Misfit's take on that, Mr Thomas skipped to the ending to read the great line: "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." And like Chekhov's gun above the mantelpiece... But how dark! I am black, but comely...

Mr Thomas wondered if he should have gone to church this morning. He could imagine Mr Fraye there, and the Warriners; some of the young teachers, too, with their babies, he could imagine in their various churches. Ms Milliworthy had even talked about going with him that time, though she never did. She must have worried about seeing the others there, people they knew, who might have started to talk.

He looked at his phone again, but he had deleted those conversations a long time ago, of course. Dolly had never been comfortable texting in the first place, and they had mostly talked on the phone, at first long conversations about teaching and ideas, later, short ones, coordinating where and when to meet, when she felt like talking in person. She hadn't been to church in years, perhaps, but Ms Milliworthy took their conversations as a kind of confessional, and guided them as completely as if she were both the penitent and the priest behind the lattice. What Mr Thomas contributed were his support and his willingness to listen, and as they grew closer, he ventured to give some advice, which was always patently dismissed.

Why should she bother to get involved in anything physical at her age? Just because she wasn't against it, was hardly a reason to be for it. It would only lead to problems, hurt feelings. She had found herself in trouble before, when she was much younger, but still old enough to know better--why should she open herself up to that again, when she didn't feel anything close to as strong. No offense. You've been a good friend.

You're barely in the ballpark of middle age! You're still a good-looking woman! He gussied up his blandishments a good deal, he cajoled her as frankly as he could find words for, but she would not budge. So they had wonderful conversations, and she consoled him for his

loneliness, heard him out with some of what he was ruminating without ever being able to come to a conclusion, and they remained close friends.

Somehow Mr Thomas knew that he could not expect quite the same thing to happen with the librarian, and yet he needed to believe that an outcome like that, too, was possible, to permit him to go through with proposing the outcome he wanted most of all. If she wasn't interested, they could just be friends. The contrary, the nothing side of the all or nothing, was too bleak to bear considering. So he clung to his unconviction.

Rory decided to take a break from writing. There was something on his mind, but he couldn't think about it directly, somehow. He found that, in these situations, his writing became annoyingly murky, vague without actually opening up fruitful avenues of development, and baldly self-referential. Until his ideas were refined within his mind, there was little point then in trying to express them. In the interim, he found that it helped to rub the uncouth matter of his mind up against whatever was sharp, distinct, and particular. Challenging poetry, films, and even video games sometimes stimulated his thinking and motivated him to write again once his ideas were more fully formed. Or so he liked to rationalize.

He turned on the system he had recently been playing again. The new-ish iteration of the classic franchise that had made the console's fortunes ever since the beginning had been made-over as a game-maker. It was an intriguing departure from the expected, and yet in the way that it departed, it came full circle, in terms of the game-play, to the very foundations of the series. Only the framing element, the way the player was invited to access, to shape, and to share that game-play, was entirely novel.

Rory had not figured out yet how to do much with the game-making mechanics. His levels were still very limited in terms of the kinds of items and obstacles he could include, the layouts for beginning and ending the level, and the textures for the background. He still had only the most basic game designs to work from, though he knew that more could be unlocked somehow. If it was simply by spending more time tinkering with the game-maker features, he was not likely to unlock more anytime soon, because he had spent minimal time on his levels so far. He had not even made the first steps in modifying the music and sound effects.

Instead, Rory played the levels that were randomly selected from among those that people all around the world had created and uploaded to the game online. Somehow, these people had managed to put together, from the very same initial elements that Rory had at his disposal, levels ingenious in their puzzles; beautifully decorated for the simple pleasure of looking at, usually with some particular character featured in the pixel art background; hilariously automated, so that the player was guided like the ball in a Rube Goldberg machine and could only possibly lose by touching the controls.

Rory's favorite feature so far, though, was the way comments that players left about the levels could be integrated to appear in-game. If the comment was general enough, it scrolled after completion of the level. As you might expect, like the excerpts from a review on the back of a book. Fair enough, but if the comment was keyed to a specific point in the level, it could be set there to display the words or pictures left by another player as you were in the process of trying to play. It was as if, as you were reading a book, the other readers who had come before suddenly tapped you on the shoulder to tell you what they thought of that sentence. And some of them chose to do so through interpretive dance.

Granted, some of the people playing the game might actually be so young that they preferred to draw pictures of their frustrations at failing or feelings of elation at completing a certain segment of the level. Most, though, had to be at least Rory's age, he thought, to have bothered to write a comment at all, or even to figure out how. Rory had not left any comments of his own yet. He had starred his favorite levels, but he considered the posting of any comments premature until he had actually uploaded a level of his own. It was no good being a critic, he reasoned, unless you had at least once really sat down to try your hand at writing.

And maybe that was all it took, was time. Sustained through the temptations to give up, the distractions and force of habit drawing you to other pastimes, until noticing enough that was interesting enough, it became the diversion, and habit grafted you to it. Rory settled in to work on a level, and after a few minutes, the delivery truck arrived on the screen with new materials. The underwater background became available, along with all its tricky baddies. Rory hardly cared. He was engrossed in the possibilities of the power-ups he had arranged, the spacing between platforms for jumps, the height of the walls and the generators of enemies.

As he played through the level he had made, he discovered that the way he had intended the player to go about clearing it was not the only, or even the most efficient, way to beat it. Without meaning to, there was much more he had included than he realized.

Still, Rory had not quite figured out the commenting mechanism. Maybe it was for the best, though. Rather than leaving notes to the other players about how to bring the bouncy spring with them, or how to wall jump here and stomp this enemy here, how to run the gauntlet at the very end and come at the goal by an accidental back door, he would leave it up to the people playing the level to figure it out for themselves. They could leave their own thoughts if they felt like it.

There was certainly something about entering into the spirit of the game that he could take back to his writing desk, Rory thought. Embracing the limited stock of devices, the parameters of the given world. Writing more easily when one had framed the story. Another way of coming at the problem of getting the voice right. It was another level of imaginary remove, as it were tricking yourself into writing more effortlessly, less egoistically, because not falling into conventions, cliches, but rather letting the characters speak.

As he had allowed his hopes to get up too much, meeting the librarian for coffee could only be a disappointment. This was how Mr Thomas reasoned with himself afterwards. If only he had been more of a pessimist, he could have enjoyed the company. And still his incorrigible hopefulness betrayed him, for he immediately reflected that at least he had not brought up his ex-wife, more than in a passing way that he could hardly have avoided when he *did* want to refer to his kids to show her that he was still in touch with what the young people liked.

He had kept from talking all about himself, the librarian thought, for her part. He asked me how my studies were going, and where I wanted to go with them. He mentioned the towns where his kids lived, and seemed genuinely willing to have them help me out if I should end up going there at some point.

For some reason, he had found himself talking about Dolly. The librarian had actually had her as a teacher at her old school, it had turned out. When she first came to the school, she wasn't sure that it was the same person--but how many English teachers named Milliworthy

could there be running around the Canyon? Mr Thomas thought to himself, she only wanted to see what I would say about her.

When he had described her, he said, She has black hair and small hands. He avoided saying anything more about her appearance, but went on to confide in the librarian about the situation, just enough to make her wonder what had happened. She would have wanted to ask, but she also did not want to pry.

"I still have to check out her blog that you told me about, I just haven't got around to it." He remembered watching her write it on a note in the library, and press it on her desk.

He asked next how the classes were going for her. Years earlier, when the school was just starting, he had taught some of the first middle school classes with Ms Milliworthy. What did she think of the readings? How were the students behaving for her?

So he sipped his coffee as slow as he could, and the time for colloquy came closer. Finally he asked if she would like to go.

"No, I've got a lot of work I need to do preparing for this week. Yeah, grading, and planning some lessons. Thanks for the offer. I'll try to make it one of these times."

It raised some questions for him. If Dolly was not sending her sub plans anymore, or doing the grading, that must mean...but the long and the short of it was, she wasn't coming.

Instead, in the library without a librarian, a few of the other teachers gathered around the time they had set, and to everyone's surprise two eighth grade boys showed up. Very infrequently a high schooler might attend, much as Mr Thomas tried to invite them, and dropped hints for the stronger students in particular that they really stood to benefit by it, but there was no precedent for middle school students being there. It meant he would have to pow wow with Mrs Hendersen about Ms Milliworthy later, though they did not see each other much outside of school and reading group.

He tried to feel out what had brought the boys there, but they seemed reticent to say too much. The smaller one said something about a project for Chivalry Club, and the bigger one seemed impressed that he had divulged even that.

"You're welcome to stay," Mr Thomas said, "but it might not be very interesting for you."

Mrs Hendersen had been looking for something in her text that had to do with the opening question she had been about to ask, but she looked up sharply. "Woah woah. If anything boring happens at seminar," she said, "we're all equally to blame. But did you say something about Chivalry Club? Is that the one where you have to recite a pledge and do good deeds? Why don't you just do good, why do you have to be in a club for that?"

The smaller one said, "Why do you need to read a book, why can't you just have a conversation?"

Mr Thomas spread his hands and was about to say something about having something they could all talk about, which he knew did not entirely answer the objection, but Mrs Hendersen was already grinning and looking around proudly. "Who are these kids?" she asked. "Why aren't they here all the time?"

"I mean, we are at school," said the bigger boy. "Practically every day."

He turned to Mr Thomas, "Remember you subbed for us that one day, for Ms Milliworthy's?"

"I remember," he said, but it was hazy at best. He didn't, really.

"That's what I wanted to ask about," Mrs Hendersen said. "Where is it where the grandmother recognizes him, the Misfit, as her child? What's going on there?"

Even Mr Thomas had to admit that it was a fine conversation. He only wished he could have shared it with her.

Revaluation of All Values

When his mom stopped being so mad at them, and a rebuke was only about one out of every three or four words she said to them, instead of the start of every sentence, Noel and Carlton deployed their next and greatest ploy. It would require deceiving her again, by going to school again when he was not supposed to, but it would be a different school this time, and there would be other people in it. And he would tell her about it soon, about all of it. Then she could ground him if she chose, but secretly, Noel hoped, she would be proud.

Every so often, East Cliffs gave everyone a bit of a break for working so hard the rest of the time. School would let out at noon on Friday, or on the day before a long weekend, and no homework would be assigned, school-wide. In practice, many of the older students used the breaks to catch up on work anyhow, and came back far from rested. But for the younger ones, it was paradise.

In this case, it was the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. "Happy Thanksgiving Eve Eve!" Mr Fraye boomed at them in the crosswalk that morning as they clattered off the practice field. The coaches had grumbled at them to go running on their own at least once or twice over the break. The final playoff games were the following week.

When school let out, Noel piled into the car with Carlton and his dogs. Carlton's mom had taken the day off to go hiking that morning, and she chattered along happily like a simmering pot puffing out little bursts of steam as she drove. "Nothing like the Supes," she kept saying. "You get these people moving here all the time, bellyaching about how ugly it is. Oh, the desert, the heat, there's no trees, no water, blah blah, it's all strip malls, blah blah, and ticky tack houses--like all those young teachers that come and go at your school, it's like a revolving door. Here for a year or two, then off to the next thing. People like that need to go to the Supes. There's nothing like them down in the canyon, and yet they're just right there! They make the canyon a canyon! There's a riddle for you," she said, pleased with herself. "What makes a canyon a canyon? Mountains!" Rosie howled along. "Shh! She did that while we were hiking and I thought the coyotes would converge on us. All because I felt like yodeling from the top of the ridge..."

After they'd had some lunch--"Gotta eat up all the leftovers now, to make room for all the leftovers we're going to have day after tomorrow! Eat up, Noel, and help clear up some room in my fridge!"--Carlton told his mom they were going to the park. She was suspicious at once.

"To do what? When was the last time you went and played monkeybars right after a meal, Carl?"

He pooh-poohed her objections. "Not to play, Mom. When was the last time we played on that playground? is what you should be asking."

"We just want to go outside to read," Noel said. "Since we're usually on LL this time of day anyway. To get some sun."

She approved of that. The boys took their dishes to the sink, got their books and put them both in Noel's backpack, and headed out the door.

"Just be quiet when you come back in," she called to them. "I might be napping."

In a few moments, Carlton had brought out his bike and one of his old ones. He offered Noel the bigger one. "You're used to it already," he grinned. "You've been down this road before."

"At least it's in the daytime this time," Noel said. "Let me ride the old one for now, as far as the park. Then we can switch."

They did so. Carlton rode much more slowly this time, so that Noel on his tiny bike could keep up without pedaling too comically fast, though he was impatient to arrive. Though it was the middle of the day, the streets were nearly as empty as on that other night when he had come this same way. Carlton whistled as they rode.

"How was it seeing Nica today?" Noel asked.

"She said her dad was upset," Carlton said. "But he would forgive her before too long. She just wanted to be more discreet, she said. Which meant no more holding hands in the hall where he might see. But," he brightened up, "she said she had her dress for Green Knight's picked out, and she couldn't wait to show me."

"That's good! Have you figured out your outfit yet? Are you guys going to match?"

"I see what you're doing, Noel," said Carlton. "You're looking for ideas for yourself."

"No way!"

"You won't trap me that easily. A Knight is always cognizant, verily--"

"Hold on, you're only a squire," Noel said, but he was impressed at Carlton's vowels and the trill on the r.

"Technically, but I think it was you who said that my services in this great quest would surely be recompensed with knighthood this year." Carlton beamed. "And that means a seat at the high table. With my lady. Feasting! Now, what about you? Nevermind what you're wearing--how are you gonna ask her?"

Noel, low on his little bike, looked up at Carlton. It wasn't only their mounts. His friend had certainly gained in stature since the summer. "We'll see how today goes," he said, pondering.

They still made it to the public high school with plenty of time; it was about an hour until their regular day ended. Carlton had the key for the bike lock this time, but finding a place for them among all the other bikes clustered in front of the building wasn't easy. Finally they leaned them up against a VISITOR parking sign and locked them there. Noel had in the meanwhile texted Alma that they were there. Soon she appeared in the entrance.

"Come on," Noel said eagerly. Carlton made one last attempt at standing the bikes up straight, then scampered after his friend.

"Alma," Noel said on stepping inside. She took his arm and he almost forgot what he was in the middle of saying. "May I introduce you to my best friend, Carlton. Carlton, this is Alma."

"So," she said, once they'd shaken hands, "I already got these visitor passes off the front desk this morning. Keep them just in case, but I doubt anyone will stop you guys. There's still kids I see in the hall who I've never seen before."

Noel tried to imagine what it would be like to go from classroom to classroom in these cavernous halls every day, surrounded by strangers whose very faces were always new.

"I told my teacher I had a Spirit Meeting to go to," Alma said, and gave Noel a sly look. He laughed, and briefly told Carlton again about their first meeting at the homecoming game.

"If there were a Spirit Club at East Cliffs, Noel would be, well, at least a Secretary," Carlton gushed.

"But the whole school is like one big Spirit Club already," Noel said.

"Hard to imagine," Alma remarked. "Sometime, I'll have to visit your school."

Carlton wiggled his eyebrows at Noel. May as well, he said to himself.

"Actually," Noel said out loud, taking Alma's arm just above the elbow, in imitation of the way she had his a moment ago. "There's a day I had in mind, in a couple of weeks. If you're free?"

She gave him a blank look. "You're inviting me on a date... to your school?"

"It's like a Christmas party, the last day before break. There's food, and a dance."

Alma laughed and wrapped him in a quick hug. "I'm just messing with you, boy!"

"So you'll go with me?" Noel practically felt tears of relief springing to his eyes. Then he felt Carlton's hand on his shoulder, and pulled himself together.

"Sure!" Alma laughed again as Carlton gave his friend a high five.

"Nice!" he said.

A passing teacher, headed for the main office, gave them a quizzical look. Alma led them further down the hall, suddenly businesslike. Noel's head was swimming. What a girl.

She was saying, "In a few minutes the bell will ring for everyone to go to their last period of the day. What would you guys like to see first?"

"Give us the full tour," said Carlton, but Noel vetoed before Alma could respond.

"There isn't time to see everything," he said. "Not today, at least. Maybe we can come back another time. But for today, let's focus on just a few rooms."

"Sounds good," said Alma.

"Where do you think we could make an impact?" Noel asked. "Where could we really have some conversation?"

It's so funny, she thought, that he thinks of having conversation as making an impact.

At that moment the bell rang. The electronic tone was different from East Cliffs' simulation of an actual bell ringing, more like a robot church-bell tolling its measured peals. Even a few moments before it sounded, doors had begun opening and students spilling out into the hallways broad as boulevards. Now the entire student body flooded around them; Alma and her guests hugged a wall.

"Holy cow," Carlton muttered. "Even at my old school, it was nothing like this. We have to be careful we don't get separated--" A kid brushed past roughly and nearly knocked him over. "Or trampled in the stampede."

"As long as we move like the rest," Alma said, unperturbed, "like we know where we're going, it's no problem."

"Do we know where we're going?" Noel asked her.

She nodded. "We do. Let's go." Carlton gave him a miffed look, but Noel was already keeping stride with her, and he hustled to catch up.

Alma led them through the press, staying to the outside. Each room they passed, Noel scanned every visible inch. They all had windows, which was great, but almost all had the blinds drawn; they all had projectors hanging from the ceiling, and most displayed websites or slideshows. The thought of what it all must have cost astonished him. Even the lockers here

were much larger. But there were no reproductions of classical art, instead motivational posters and exhortations to Be On Time, Bring a Pencil, or Show Respect.

Eventually, they turned to follow a hallway that branched off to the right. Short and stubby, it had no classrooms, only windows and sliding doors opening onto the outdoor patios that ran between the wings of the building. Alma led them out the doors and across the patio. The sun felt good, and Noel realized that he had been cold in the air-conditioned school. That was never a problem in the halls at East Cliffs, only in certain rooms. They came under the shade of an awning that overhung the doorway of a house-shaped glass structure standing off by itself.

Alma tried the door, but it was locked. "I guess she doesn't have any classes now," she said, half to herself, as she peered through the window set into the door. All the glass was opaque, whether because of the way it was made, or because, as it appeared when Noel looked closer, it was fogged up with moisture inside.

"Is this a greenhouse?" Carlton ventured. Shadows of what might be plants made patterns on the walls.

"Yep. For horticulture class," Alma explained. "There's a few other trade classes they offer--auto-body and -tech; cosmetology; child development, of course, which doubles as a child care for the students who are moms; woodshop--but the horticulture room is the coolest, I would say. The teacher also runs her own lawn and garden business, and has got a lot of the students set up in business, too. She would have been interesting for you to talk to, it's too bad she's not around."

"Do you think she's out on a job?" Carlton suggested.

"I doubt she would have scheduled anything she would have to be at during school hours." Alma turned and led them back towards the entrance to another wing of the main building. "There's one place she might be. They sometimes have the teachers who work part-time, especially the ones within the trade program and who have a little better relationship with some of those students, help out in the Resiliency Room."

"What's that?" Noel asked.

"That's where..." Alma replied, with a quirk at the corner of her mouth Noel remembered from the night they met. "It's kind of hard to explain. That's where we're going now, so you can see."

It was quiet at this end of the school, except for a whirr of machinery that rose and fell, coming from the end of the hall. The air smelled like sawdust. As they approached a door standing ajar, she warned them, "You guys just follow my lead. It can get--it might not be what you're looking for, but at least we can see if Mrs Lawson is in here."

Noel and Carlton followed her in, suddenly unsure. At first, the room appeared to be empty. They could hear quiet voices, but Noel couldn't tell where they were coming from until a head appeared over the filing cabinets in a corner. The face, a woman's, flashed a toothy smile and held up a finger for "Just a minute." Noel realized that the filing cabinets there weren't pushed flush against the wall, but instead were arranged several feet out from it so as to make a kind of nook there. Each corner had a similar arrangement, with low bookcases, old free-standing chalkboards, and more filing cabinets pulled out to make room for single desks or study carrels facing the walls. Along the far wall was a teacher's desk with a computer, and a small table was set near the middle of the room with a few chairs around it. This room, too, had

its projector mounted facing one of the walls, but it was not running. The lights were on and the windows were open.

The teacher, who turned out to be Mrs Lawson, came back out around the dividers. She dropped off a folded paper on the desk, then greeted Alma warmly. While they chatted together in an undertone, Noel and Carlton stood hesitating by the door, still not letting their guard down. Along the walls, there were whiteboards and posters. The boards were mostly empty, but on one panel Noel could see someone had written out pieces of an argument. By some of the lines, like, Shut Up, and, Your Friends Say Stuff About You Behind Your Back, there were X's; beside others, like, I'm Having a Tough Day, and (Avoid the Confrontation), there was a check mark. The posters were all of famous political and social leaders.

"You'll notice," came the teacher's soft voice beside him, "None of them is by themselves. Caleb has each of them juxtaposed by a companion. You know what I mean by juxtaposed?"

How had she moved so silently? Noel turned towards her, nodding, only to find her already passing before him to point to a pair of posters next to each other.

"OK, so here," and still Mrs Lawson's voice was quiet, breathy, so Noel had to move closer to hear, "who this is, I think you probably know?"

"That's Mahatma Gandhi," Noel said. "He was a great leader in India."

"Gandhiji, yes, or the Mahatma. The Great Soul. His given name was Mohandas K. I forget what the K stands for. Then juxtaposed beside him here, is Mr Ambedkar. Have you heard of him?"

Noel shook his head. He shot a glance at Alma, who had sat down beside Carlton and was writing something down as he spoke.

"I would have been so impressed if you knew about him, too!" the teacher went on. "From the poorest of the poor, he went on to become a doctor. He studied with John Dewey at Columbia University in New York. Ambedkar was of the Untouchable caste. He was a great critic of the system of caste, in some ways even greater than Gandhi, even more radical. So you see him placed alongside Gandhi here, the same way Malcolm is next to Martin; Ella Baker and Paulo Freire; Jane Addams and Studs Terkel..." She named more of the faces paired up around the room. "And they're only indicative of the countless, rather, uncounted people who were the lifeblood of these movements. Talk about grassroots, maybe even talk about lower than the roots, the dirt clods, the worms. They might be the lowest of the low, laboring in the darkness. But they do not give up and do nothing."

"I know this is probably not what you came to Resiliency to talk about, but I want you to promise me something: try to look up more about Ambedkar before you forget. Do it later today. I have a book I could lend you, if you want?"

Noel assented readily. She took a book from a low shelf by the desk, and placed it in his hands. She also took out a blank piece of paper from a stack in one of the drawers.

"Take care of it, now. And next time I see you, whether it's in here if you need to come back, which I hope you don't have to, or around the school, tell me what you find out!"

"So, you want to tell me what's going on?" She pulled up a chair for Noel, and sat at a corner of the desk. He saw her scribbling the name of the book and then the pen hung in the air as she paused to ask him his name.

"Noe-- No-elle," he said. He looked around at Alma. She avoided his eyes again. It looked like she was coughing, but Noel thought from the way her eyes sparkled she might be concealing a laugh. Or maybe she just had sparkly eyes.

"All right, Noelle," Mrs Lawson said. "Alma already told me Mrs Bolton sent you and your friend out for calling out that word. You don't have to say it if you're shy, we can just call it that word, or that game. I'm sure Mrs Bolton will appreciate knowing that you do have some sense of when it's not right to say that stuff, though I'm sure she wishes you had realized that her class is also one of those times."

As she wrote a note of that, Noel wondered what Alma had told her. He spoke up.

"Ma'am," he said. "At-- at my old school, the teachers were always encouraging us to speak up and ask questions. Sorry if what I said was inappropriate."

She nodded vigorously. "That's wonderful. I am sure she will be able to forgive you."

"The asking questions part," Noel went on. "It was something they modeled, too, the teachers at my school, and they took Socrates as their model. Have you considered putting Socrates up on the wall, maybe next to Homer or Aristotle?"

At that, Mrs Lawson wrinkled her brow. "Now I am impressed! Are you talking about what they call the Socratic method? I know they had some trainings here about that when it was the new thing, and about helping with critical thinking and all that. But that's a long time ago! Then the past decade or so it's all been trainings about how to help you out on these state tests, is all we seem to hear about in our meetings and professional development."

"I don't know," Noel said. "I should have been prepared like you, with a book I could let you borrow. Do you want to look up something by Plato, for when I tell you about Am--" He glanced down at the book again-- "Ambedkar?"

Mrs Lawson still looked like she wasn't sure if Noel was messing with her. He went on quickly, "What do you think about the Socratic method?"

"I don't know much about it," she said, looking up in thought. "Plato, well, he's the one who talks about how we're stuck in the cave, right? I think we actually read that part during one of our trainings. I could see how there's some truth to that. What I remember asking the fellow, though—this was back around the time I was just turning a profit in my business, and just starting to get students of mine who were graduating and going into business for themselves—I said to him, If we are going to start by questioning everything, even the reality we see, and say, maybe the real reality is outside, I can see a couple of big problems with that. First, there's just the logical thing, How do we know that's the real reality, and there isn't just another one outside again, you see? That's just logically confusing. But the bigger problem, I said, what do you think that might do to our students, if they feel they have to question everything? I can see how that's a powerful thing, intellectually, and even socially—many great leaders would advocate questioning all of the unjust structures and beliefs in society. But our students, I said, these young people, who are they going to start by questioning? Themselves! And they're going to doubt themselves, when they are the person they need to believe in most. I saw it then, with my students in school and going out to try to make their business work, and I see it now, even when we have the Resiliency Room and we're not so much about punishments and consequences any more. It's very difficult to build that trust, which you need to have a strong relationship with somebody, whether it's a teacher or a friend, who can help you get through school and make you successful in this world, Noelle, it's so difficult when you don't have confidence in yourself."

That is what I would say to you about Socratic method—you need intellectual confidence first, I think, not just curiosity or humility. Though maybe you're right, I should read some more Plato, and think about how those things might go hand in hand. Who were those other two you mentioned, to juxtapose with him?"

Noel, meanwhile, had been the one to listen, open-mouthed. "Homer, Aristotle," he stammered.

He had never even thought about it like that. Mrs Lawson had turned back to writing notes to herself; Noel, too, wished he had had some paper to write on, and thought about asking her for a sheet or even just a scrap of hers. He rummaged in his backpack.

"Is there anything else you want to talk about, then, or are you about ready to go? I could let you go a little early if you want, though Alma said Mrs Bolton did not want to have your follow-up talk with her today, I could write you a pass to the media center and you could read quietly in there. If you promise not to talk to your friend too much."

Noel shook his head. "No, thank you. I mean yeah, a pass to the library would be great. Come on, Carlton," he said. "Let's let Alma get back to class, Mrs Lawson is letting us hang out in the library."

Carlton came over as Alma went out with a wave. Noel felt nervous to see her go, but he knew she would be watching him somehow, to see how he reacted. If she could put him up to a challenge, he could play that game, too. Only what game had she said they were playing?

"Do you really run your own lawn business, too?" Carlton asked. "Is it a lot of work? Do you make more money at school or doing that?"

Mrs Lawson gave her toothy grin. "Every little bit helps." She handed him her card along with their hall pass. "If you're interested, we can get you working this summer."

The boys thanked her and went out. Just behind the door, they found Alma waiting for them. She beckoned them over and held out a hand for silence.

"I was trying to listen to what you all were saying," she whispered. "But I kept overhearing them next door."

Above the industrious sounds from the woodshop, Noel heard the shouting from the room across the hall. "What class is that?" he asked.

"That guy sounds scary," Carlton said, wincing.

"He sounds furious." Noel listened closer. There were times when kids at East Cliffs were messing around too much in class, or weren't showing that they cared about the conversation that day. The teachers there would give them a pep talk or a tough lecture once in awhile, but they almost always did so by getting quieter, not louder. The teacher across the hall was bawling out his class, shouting at them to sit down, stop talking, and take out their notes from the day before. He threatened detention, he threatened to take phones and food if he saw them, and finally he threatened to call home on those who refused to comply.

"It's not that unusual," said Alma. "Walking around the school once class has started, you overhear a lot of crazy stuff. The Resiliency Room can be a delight, too, if there's more than a couple kids in there at a time. They feed off each other, rather than calming down. That's why I usually prefer to take a walk. Even if there's something I need to talk about, unless I'm in class with the couple of teachers I really like, like Mrs Lawson, I walk around the school and just listen instead. The shouting from the teachers, the loud conversations the kids have, talking over one another—I think they need to overhear themselves, rather than just being told to be quiet, or

that they aren't being respectful. The teachers, too. They say some really rude things, but I don't think they realize what they sound like. They don't listen."

Noel said, "Sorry about that. I didn't realize that taking East Cliffs conversations into other schools would be so stressful. I'm trying to listen more, though."

Alma squeezed his hand.

"What if you record their classes and play it back to them?" Carlton said. "They would probably be ashamed of themselves."

"That reminds me," Noel said. "What did you tell Mrs Lawson that Carlton and I were doing to get sent down there?"

Alma blushed. It was the first time he had seen her so uncomfortable. "I'll have one of my brothers tell you, if you really want to know."

She changed the subject. "So back to the thing about taking videos, I have to show you guys some really funny ones. There's this one substitute teacher who is always dancing. We all try to take videos of it."

By this time they had only about ten minutes remaining until the end of the day. Alma showed them the library through the windows beside the entrance, but they did not go inside. All the bookshelves were unvisited; all the computers were occupied. They headed back to the front of the school.

Noel said, "Next time you're taking a walk, if you want someone to talk to, you can always call me. I'll say it's an emergency and answer, or at least you can leave a message. I'll definitely listen."

"Text me the details about your party!" She held his hand again.

"Thanks for showing us around," Carlton said. "It was nice meeting you. Sorry about your school."

"It's OK," she said. "Now I know it doesn't have to be like this. Maybe we'll find a way to change it."

"It might not have been what I was expecting," Noel said, "but it's what I've been looking for."

East Cliff families often marked the long weekends on their calendars from the start of the year, and timed family trips to coincide with them. They could be grouchy about any hint of studying for tests or long-term projects coming due the following week.

Mr Thomas had resolved to write his evaluations early. Every year he wanted to, and every year he somehow found himself writing furiously on the plane, or even at his old house, at the kitchen table in the mornings. His parents were deep into retirement now, and watched him work with pity.

He wished there were someone to write him an evaluation. He was sure he could still improve vastly as a teacher. Not having to spend so many hours cobbling together fresh insights for each unique learner from a hamper of threadbare language, he thought bitterly, would be a good start. But to have someone coach him would mean taking that many hours out of someone else's life. They might have creative work to do, too, and resent trying to help him as much as he resented having to write evaluations for that students. He couldn't bring himself to think of it as helping them, only as inconveniencing himself, and wasting the time that should have been his break.

They used to talk about starting their own school. Mr Thomas wondered now how much of that was simply out of a desire to keep almost everything about East Cliffs the same, and get rid of the evaluations. They talked about rearranging some of the course sequence, they wished for a more beautiful building, certainly, and wanted to offer all sorts of extra programs, study abroad and robotics, for parents who were willing to pay for them.

Above all else, though, he wished that he might stay at the school and grow with it. He was afraid that he would not be able to do it, and, like Ms Milliworthy, would find himself unable to return. Not so much burnt out as so tired of the jarring against realities she preferred not to engage with, she had burnt her own bridges instead. If each year he could simply be sure that he had done a little better than the year before, that he hadn't actually made the students hate reading and resent learning, that he had found a way for them to find these books interesting, and that the bane of his classroom, that it was boring, had been thoroughly exorcised--that should be enough, right?

Sitting on Mr Thomas' porch late at night, working on evaluations their first year teaching together, Ms Milliworthy had said, "If poets are the legislators of the world, teachers had all better be poets, or else they are little more than sycophants, promulgating laws they can neither understand nor live up to."

He realized that she had been working on her blog the whole time, even if she was also writing her evals. Maybe even then, she had decided that before long, she would not be able to bring herself to return. In some ways he wished he were as dedicated to his writing as that, but worried that he would not have enough distance then to write about anything other than school. He supposed the same could be said for texting and reading old messages when he tried to write, that the love story he was always writing was only his own, which he had not managed to live.

Harriet had gone to pick up Noel at Carlton's, and when they got back, a washed-out-looking beige car was in front of the house.

"Matt's home!" Noel whooped. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"He wasn't here yet when I left, nerd," Harriet said simply. "He does travel through space and time like the rest of us, though I know you think he's made of finer stuff."

Noel hurried inside to find his brother. Harriet shook her head, wondering.

Matt was in his second year of college now in California, and they heard from him every so often, but never enough for Noel. He would have called more, maybe, if he weren't driving this old car down to remote parts of the coastline, surfing with his friends, or going to play music at people's houses where strange new art was made. It was Matt who first sent her a link to one of her favorite-artist-to-be's songs, though, so she certainly did not begrudge him his freedom.

From inside the house, there came another whoop as the brothers were reunited. Harriet stepped across the threshold and saw Noel come back down the stairs, followed by Matt. A look at their faces told her something was wrong, but neither said anything as they passed her and headed for the kitchen. Another pair of feet appeared at the top of the stairs, and at first Harriet thought they must be Sam's, but as the rest of the legs and the torso and finally the head came into view, she saw it was a boy around her brother Matt's age.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Paul. Matt's... friend from school."

"Hey, welcome," she said, introducing herself. "Is everything OK?"

"Yeah," Paul said, puzzled. "I think it just surprised your little brother to see someone else here besides Matt."

They went into the kitchen, where Harriet saw a strange tableau. Noel was standing very still in front of the refrigerator, staring at an indefinite point among the family photos affixed by souvenir magnets. Matt had his head resting on his arms on the countertop next to his brother, from which position he endeavored to look into his face, and was speaking to him quietly but animatedly.

"Hi, Matt," she said, "Noel was so excited to see you, it looks like your friend Paul here spooked him."

"Harriet, good to see you! I was just trying to explain to Noel--"

Noel said something to the refrigerator in a flat tone.

"What's that?" she said, shooting a look at Matt that said, what's going on?

"Matt was in the bedroom," Noel said in the same tone, only louder. "With a dude. They were kissing."

She drew in her breath sharply. Beside her, she felt Paul put his hand to his face.

"Really?" she said.

Matt spread his hands. "Harriet, listen, like I was trying to explain to Noel, we're both OK with it. We're not ashamed that you saw us, it's totally OK! We were planning to tell all you guys tonight, including Mom and Dad, before Thanksgiving, and not make it a big deal. Harriet, you'll be able to back me up, right? There's nothing to be upset about." He looked at her imploringly over Noel's shoulder.

"Hey, Noel," she said. "None of us want to see our siblings that way, I get it. I wouldn't want to see you and one of your little girlfriends kissing, either. Or a boy, whatever. But it happened, so you just have to try to accept it." She shrugged.

"Is this why you wrote about Shakespeare's sonnets for your thesis?" Noel said sharply to the refrigerator.

"I actually met Paul in the Royal Players, the Shakespeare Club at college," Matt said. "He's really looking forward to getting to talk about it with us, maybe even visiting East Cliffs, since I've told him so much about you all, and the school."

Noel seemed to startle again. "Oh! That reminds me. I just got a text from Rory as we were pulling up to the house: he needs help with his play at the school tonight. Do you guys want to give me a ride there, and you could look around?" A bemused smile spread over his face. "Just stay out of Ms Milliworthy's room...seriously. I don't know how this keeps happening!"

On the way over to school, Noel told Matt and Paul about the key and sardines, and how Ms Milliworthy had caught Carlton and Dominique in her room.

"In flagrante?" Paul laughed. "Oh, man!"

Noel didn't know what he meant, but he took a guess. "Like I caught you guys just now."

"Gosh, I could have just locked the door," said Matt, shaking his head. "Oh well, maybe it will turn out for the best. So what happened?"

Noel said how they'd all been grounded, with the exception of going to school, which they'd parlayed into going to Sunday Colloquy, and how Harriet had missed her show because of them. "But I snuck out and met a girl," he said proudly.

"Wonderful for you, little brother," Matt said with some awe. "Well, I'm glad it's not just me being a bad influence on you, but you're able to do for yourself!"

While Rory enjoyed writing, he found it exhausting. More than the effort of keeping straight what all his characters were up to and moving along the plot, and even more than that of maintaining the clarity of his initial vision and finding inspiration in the midst of continually feeling like he fell short of it in the execution, Rory found it exhausting because he had to be making decisions constantly. Each time he made something happen by writing more words, he had to deal with the consequences and contingencies. He committed himself every moment to following something through that he had begun in total freedom, and he ached for it to become real.

This was why, as nervous as he was about other people reading his work, he felt such relief as well. Particularly in the case of his play, once he had written out the parts, it was up to the actors to perform them. He could let them make the decisions. And in turn, when it came time to perform the play, he could let the audience make of it whatever they would. The work was again free within the confines of the words he had chosen, the ones the actors had actually spoken, and the way the audience took them.

This was also why he had texted Noel in a panic that afternoon. The girl who had expressed an interest in playing the main character was struggling so much with her classes this year that her parents were making her stop going to writing club. Much less would she have time to help out with the play, then. A short time earlier, Rory had finally come to a decision that he wanted to see through, and with the opportunity arisen here with the leading role of his play, he saw a way to put his thoughts into action.

Rory met Noel at the door to let him into the school. He seemed surprised and glad to see Matt and Paul with his friend. The older boys accompanied them as far as the theater doors, where they introduced themselves to the librarian as an alum and his friend, whom would it be all right to show around the school? She acquiesced at once. Matt could not resist giving Noel a sly look as the heavy theater doors were closing, but he couldn't keep a straight face.

"Thanks again for coming on such short notice," Rory said. He wondered at the inside joke that seemed to be running between the brothers, and between the older brother and the visitor. There was a kind of tingling at the edge of his mind about the latter, but he could not think about it too closely, as all his attention was taken up by the endeavor before them.

Noel turned to walk with him towards the stage. The librarian was off to one side, a fat test-prep book propped open on the folding desk over the seat beside her, doing something on her phone. Onstage, girls were working on putting together the panels of scenery and costumes they had each been working on separately over the past couple of weeks.

"So this is your first rehearsal?" Noel said, waving to Nica. She was playing the spear gladiator, and had her face made up with blue.

"We did some of the scenes separately over the last couple of meetings, just as read-throughs, mainly, to check that people were working on their lines and thinking about their characters. This is the first one we've brought everybody together for," Rory said. "Well, almost everybody."

He explained the situation with the lead. Noel said, "Sorry, that sucks. But I'm really not an actor, I don't know how much I can help..."

"You have a couple of options," Rory said. "You can try the part for today and see how it goes, and then either you could say, Not interested. I'll try to shuffle around some of the actors,

or find someone else who can take the Main Character, and maybe you could fill in for one of those smaller roles instead. Or if the part is OK for you, we'll only have a couple more rehearsals before the performance at Green Knight's. Depending on how that goes, we might do another show in the spring, but I could probably find someone else by then. Sorry, I know I'm sort of rambling... Again, I really appreciate you stopping by, that you were willing to do even that much for me when I texted you at the last minute. It means a lot."

Noel, meanwhile, had been flipping through the script Rory had handed him.

"You notice, the Main Character only has a few short lines," Rory said.

Noel had been wondering about that. "So how is this the main character?"

"It's kind of a pageant," Rory explained. "I thought it would be fitting for the occasion. It's also how the game works, I don't know if you played it? Anyway, it would make it pretty easy to memorize your lines. But you can just have the script with you for today, of course. The other actors will be able to help cue you, and most of the action you can basically improvise if you just follow their lead."

"That's...that's why I thought you'd be good at it, actually," he went on after a moment. "You're naturally good at movements in sports, so as I was writing this part, trying to make the movements graceful onstage, I was actually thinking of you."

Noel couldn't tell in the dim light in front of the stage: was Rory blushing? He raised a hand, demurring. "Rory, that's very kind," he said. "I just don't think I'll have time. We just got knocked out of the football playoffs, and it's our first few tryouts for basketball coming up. Then there's some other stuff I'm also doing for Green Knight's, that I need to make sure I get set for then."

Rory was crestfallen. "The stuff you've been doing with Carlton, right? That's fine, I guess that comes first."

"Sorry, man." Noel hastened to amend things, if he could. "But Rory, everything you've just been saying, doesn't that mean you could play the part just as well yourself? I don't think there's anyone who knows better than you the way you want the play to go!"

Rory seemed unconvinced. "It's one thing to write out how I want it," he said. "It's something else to actually achieve that."

Noel went on, "I'm here now, so I can try give you some exercises and things to work on, that I do for sports. As far as making your movements more graceful, I don't know, I never really thought about it. But I think that would just come with a little bit of practice."

He went up onstage and bid Rory follow him. Then Noel beckoned to the rest of the actors, "Could I have everybody circle up. I have a few warm-ups I want to show you."

Throughout the play, Noel had Rory shadow him. He made a few comments for Noel to try differently; he also made some notes on the script they were sharing. At times, they switched places, and Noel would follow Rory's movements, suggesting a slight change from time to time. It was a dance Rory would never forget.

Harriet looked up something she had heard Noel and Carlton talking about that afternoon. The dancing substitute videos were all for songs that were plenty good by themselves, but with the addition of the goofy visuals they transcended moral-aesthetic categories altogether. She watched the videos for *Soy luz y sombra* and *Dimelo*, noting the sub's predilection for the Spanish language; something that sounded like the opening single to a

concept album, telling the story of an exhilarating technological breakthrough and making it sound like the consequences might actually be a deepening of human life, rather than its coarsening; the theme song for an old television show called Reading Rainbow, which was so strangely gratifying to him that even the students in the classroom found it all much more confusing than hilarious; a song from a videogame from around the same heyday of the 1990's, featuring a big city loosely modeled on New York; a performance of Spirit in the Night played live at Hammersmith Odeon; and, most intriguing of all, a song that was played by her hero's heroes, about being at the zoo.

With that, she made a note to listen to more of the folk duo's music and think more about how it compared with his. In one or two places on a concept album of his own, he quoted them more or less verbatim, she thought.

In looking up that more recondite material, Harriet turned up a live version of a song that she had not yet been able to find on any album. It reminded her of the first live recordings of his she had listened to, from a visit to a radio studio to promote his second album.

Did a famous pop artist have something to do with this song, or was she misunderstanding some stage banter? She looked through the comments below, and only had to wade through a relatively small amount of crudity to find out who he was talking about. It turned out to be another of the dancing substitute's favorites, too!

The lyrics she managed to turn up for the song hardly made sense. They spelled stitches wrong and eschewed punctuation, but then that was in the nature of lyrics and verse, after all. They said so much more aloud with the music than they could on the page. Still, for thoroughness' sake she copied them out and provided them along with her reflections.

I'd like to end with a song, uh, called Leaguer Wall. I'd like to dedicate it to Bruce, [audience laughter] I stole some ideas from him, he's also from New Jersey originally, I wonder if he's here tonight, should put him on the guest list...Oh this is, this is a sad song. [plays]

Oh, where is a ground
A fantastic player
A long-sought goal?
Faith isn't a name
For bidding your sister
A devil-may-care.
And I'll record gameplay
If you stay at home
I'll run up the dark
If you set up your stone

Don't set up your leaguer wall
Don't set up your leaguer wall

Oh, where is a ground
A fantastic player?

A devil may care.
Three or four years ago
I couldn't redeem it
I couldn't esteem it
And I'll wear the stiches
You set by my stone
I'll run up the ark
If you set up your stone

Don't set up your leaguer wall
Don't set up your leaguer wall

Leaguer wall
Leaguer wall

It feels like I'm letting it all fall apart
It feels like I'm letting it all fall apart

[Nervous laughs], of course I haven't let it fall apart, I'm a very together, capable human being [maybe there was more he was going to say, but the audience applauds and he seems relieved, as if he was going on talking until they would release him, the way you sometimes go on talking in conversation until someone responds] Thank you very much

That God did not only make the sacrifice in becoming, but in creating, in generating all becoming. Dancing before the ark and being despised. This is how the priest-kings talk about the paradox, in terms of God descending to dwell in a house built by men. And perhaps that is some of what is being portrayed by David's dancing, a joyful recognition of the mystery, and by the heart-despising of Saul's daughter, who thinks herself high in her tower, and does not perceive the much greater abasement God has made, instead fixating on how her husband the king looks.

Christmas Break

A week passed. The teachers and students oscillated between bracing themselves to cram in the material they had to get to before the end of the semester and giving in early, unwinding themselves to the season's festivities. A student who was crying in the morning would be laughing again by lunch. Which was only the way the students always were, raised to a slightly manic pitch of intensity.

Excitement was building for the annual Green Knight's Feast, with its promise that the half a year's worth of studying and succoring would be crowned with cheerful recognition and wassail. There was also a dance, which meant that the kids who cared about that sort of thing were anxious. Who would take whom? What would they wear for their finery? The younger kids chiefly looked forward to the tales of valor the Feast held in store, the archery competition and the bouts of minstrelsy and other light entertainments. The parents were festooning the school with paper snowflakes and glittery stars, tinsel and colored lights, and, forfending any charges of religious favoritism, here and there a candelabra with seven or eleven light bulbs. The teachers were alternately beset by requests to know the the current grades and placated with gifts of candy, homemade baked goods, and gift cards they could use for their own holiday shopping.

For Noel and his family, it was ever a period of fruitful harvest. They gathered the good grades and glowing comments, purchased or made presents for their grateful teachers, and then squirreled away the ones they planned to give one another, and generally looked forward to the break and its expanses of time for repose. Noel and Carlton exulted in their basketball games, Sam worked at target practice with his new-made bow, Harriet sang in her several choirs' extra rehearsals before their holiday concerts, and Matt was in more frequent contact with each of them, still smoothing over the ripples from Thanksgiving. Their parents were still in some shock, and moved through their days by the momentum of habit. They were in delicate consultation with some of their friends at church who had undergone the same crisis of re-orientation with respect to a child's, spouse's, or self's sexual identity, and were finding some solace there.

In the midst of this season of general goodwill, and as it were a precursor of the holidays to come, was the particular celebration of Noel's birthday. Besides a German chocolate cake from his mom and a couple of books from his dad, mixtapes from his sister and a decorated arrow from Sam, and well-wishes and birthday punches from his friends at school, Noel got a call from his older brother.

"How's everything going, birthday brother?" Matt said. Hearing his voice was disorienting for Noel, who had just been looking at the card he had sent. Their mom had set it a little bit to one side of his other presents on the dinner table, he saw when he got home that afternoon. He thanked Matt for the card, and assured him that the day had been great, but decided to tell him that part of it another time.

"Things at East Cliffs are chaotic as ever?" Matt ventured with a chuckle.

"Totally," Noel replied. "How about with you? Do they do anything special for the holidays there?"

"Nothing like Green Knight's, but sure, people are going around looking more demented than normal, with finals and papers and holiday shopping frying them at the moment. Looking forward to a break, but of course it's only a few weeks and will fly by. Paul and I are going on a trip to Philly, I don't know if I told you that—and I saw a tab open on his computer the other night, where he was looking up information on visiting Niagara Falls. So maybe we'll be visiting New York, too."

"Hey, that's cool," Noel said, genuinely impressed, though he still felt vague bouts of vertigo when he thought of his brother having a boyfriend. "If you do go, don't let him talk you into any barrel rides over the edge."

"Actually, I was kind of looking forward to just seeing some of the Revolutionary War sites around there. I thought about visiting Valley Forge, even Boston, but now I'm thinking maybe Saratoga."

Matt launched into some of his stock of gruesome stories, about the British general whose personal retinue contained enough silver to have bought and sold the whole starving, shoeless continental army, the Boston bankers who profited even during the shelling of their city, and the Sons of Liberty tarring and feathering the tax collectors. He had always had a colorful grasp of those little details from history. As a student at East Cliffs, he had especially delighted in bringing them up in class whenever the conversation was flagging, or the consensus around the table became too airy and unconnected with the gritty reality of conquest, plague, greed, and the like. Noel was looking forward to reading that stuff next year, as a freshman. And they also talked about how Harriet, along with the rest of the seniors, would have a chance to go to Washington, DC for their class trip.

"I might be able to coordinate something with her, to meet up with her there, if I end up getting an internship--with all of you as you get old enough!"

"I'm sure you'll be a Page by the time I'm going," Noel said, with complete confidence. "And representing a district or running a department by when Sam is a senior."

Matt laughed. "It's lobbyist or nothing. Or something even more heinous, so I couldn't even tell you about it; not even on K street, but in some bunker underneath the Pentagon or the Post Office."

He wished Noel good luck with sports and classes, and with Alma. "By the way, she do anything for your birthday?" he asked innocently.

"I got a bunch of nice texts from her throughout the day," Noel said. He hadn't told anyone, and wouldn't elaborate any further despite his brother's teasing.

"I see how it is, Noel," Matt said, signing off. "Just don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

"You realize that I don't want to do any of the things you do, anyway," Noel heard himself say. They were both scandalized and amused.

"Good for you, little zealot. But seriously, take care of yourself. I love you."

"I love you, too, heathen. Goodnight!"

Before he put away his phone, Noel read over Alma's texts. He could not deny that there were things he had started to want with her, the kinds of things Matt had meant, though by taking him literally Noel had tried to deflect them from applying to himself.

I'm going to take a cold shower now. Goodnight

Before he fell asleep, he saw her response. It kept him awake a good while longer.

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In her room, Harriet had on her headphones. Listening to the copious Christmas song repertoire of her hero and to single miraculous tracks night after night, she was thinking engrossing thoughts of her own, writing on her blog:

Joy to the World: And Heaven and Nature sing, And Heaven and Nature Sing, And Heav'n, And Heav'n, and Nature sing. If they repeat the sounding joy and if among the wonders of his love there are many different heavens, Heaven and Heav'n and Heav'n, are there also many Natures? How big is a thing, and if it is repeated is it the same still? Let every heart prepare him room. Prove and love rhyme. Christmas songs ad infinitum

Not far away, Rory was putting the finishing touches to the soundtrack for his play. He had got sidetracked again with music from the original game. As he listened to the short songs one after the other, even though he was not super musical, he could hear the same themes repeated again and again. Even in the very different moods and settings evoked by the hometown and the zombie town, the beach town and the exotic desert and the far-eastern mountain-top, the core notes stood out clear enough to hear. If Harriet had been listening with him, she could have pointed out the way the great Russian composer's largo melody had been re-purposed as a counterpoint, and Rory might have incorporated it in the seaside scene in his play, too, but the volume of what he did notice for himself was more than enough. Eventually, he got up from his desk and went outside, now and then swinging his arms and lunging out his steps in the ways Noel had shown him, thinking through his cues.

Mr Thomas forced himself to stay late every night after school the final week, slogging through his evaluations. The truly depressing thing, he reflected for the thousandth time, was that the good kids' parents would have their egos stroked and the bad kids' parents wouldn't read them; and then he immediately felt guilty for thinking of the students as good and bad; he felt even angrier for not knowing how to judge them, then, or what was even the point, really, if moral language were to be proscribed; and then he felt like a canting jackass, beset by sophistries when his coworkers had the good sense to simply copy and paste them; and he felt bad for putting himself above them; and so on.

For her part, Ms Milliworthy had been turning the time she used to spend typing up her evaluations towards pursuing more abstract lines of thought in her own writing. Without self-recrimination, and exercising her judgment without moralizing or agonizing over the effect it might have on the reader, or even worrying much that anyone else would ever read it at all, she wrote:

That there really are things written which are wrong, bad, dangerous, but not the Bible, is evident to anyone who takes the time to read it and yet does not read only it. If more people took reading seriously enough to discern how powerful words can be, perhaps more people would evaluate such a claim for themselves, and not dismiss it as apologetic thinly veiled, or misconstrue it as the lead-in to a critique of the single book that most forcefully advocates for just that power of words. The Book itself is in fact many books, it is worth remembering. In its very arrangement it propounds that most mind-numbing mystery, the Trinity, by being itself three and one. Not only two, the Old and New Testaments, Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions; and not only one, though certainly it is a *sine qua non* that the parts ultimately come together to say one thing in many ways; but really three, because the text itself is only read in the reader's own context. If the essential claim that there is a God is to be approached as a mystery, not dismissed out of hand as internally contradictory, or accepted in a humanistic grape

unconnected to its vinous theology, or as some withered raisin, unanalyzed ideas accepted in childhood as Sunday habits or rejected in adolescence as strictures and sources of guilt and prejudice, what do we find? Certain passages of great compassion, others enjoining violence, but all within a worldview that values words and engages with the ways we might live them out, that seeks compassion where there is suffering, and yearns to bring meaning out of the most terrible violence. We cannot simply take passages and words by themselves and pretend we have understood them, if we also cannot read indiscriminately as if everything written in books, magazines, and websites were equally good, or even equally innocuous.

Student writing, of course, is full of such solecisms and cherry-pickings. When they actually write, that is; and the lack thereof comes in many forms even more problematic. Plagiarism outright and in the mouthing of meretricious ideas—the most dangerous writing might not even be published, it might never be read by anyone but a teacher or a peer editor in the classroom, and yet because it bespeaks a total disregard for the word, it is very dangerous.

Here Ms Milliworthy paused and looked at her student's apology letter. It had all started with accusing Amaya of plagiarism. The parents must have asked, granted that cheating is wrong, what does it matter, kids make mistakes, if she just rewrites the paper? Fail her for the class over one essay? It could jeopardize her getting into a good school! Who does this teacher think she is? Then the student must have shown them her blog--she knew some of the kids knew about it, though she doubted they read it--or by googling her the parents could have found it themselves. Ms Milliworthy knew she should have kept it private, waited longer before making her writing available, but she had waited so long already and had not been able to get it published in the traditional way. And if what she wrote was the truth, after all, what harm could that do?

In all likelihood, the parents had not understood what they read, either, but they recognized how they could use it against her. Because our daughter looks differently, they said, because we do not believe the same things so many of you do, she is not welcome in the school. Along the lines of this grievance, the Headmaster would have been remembering the rumors of malpractice regarding the waiting lists at a charter school in the wealthier part of town. They said that kids with Latino names or with addresses in certain parts of town somehow never made it to the top of the list, but always came out of the lottery disproportionately underrepresented. The Headmaster did not know if the rumors were true, but the accusation alone of some such racism or intolerance could be the difference between East Cliffs expanding to new campuses and being relegated to one side as reactionary.

The Headmaster had to do what was in the best interests of the school. Ms Milliworthy heard the words and felt the reality they stood for unmoor itself under her feet and float off, a plastic paddle-boat in a man-made lake. She watched the Headmaster as if receding into the night, and could not distinguish which of them stood on the dock and which on the boat, but knew only that an irretrievable distance of water divided them asunder. The water in these unreal developments shone dark green in the artificial light, just as the patches of grass under the lampposts were bright as highlighters. She would be allowed to finish out the semester, if she chose, but would not be asked to return.

Ms Milliworthy asked if she would be required to write the evaluations. Not if she quit now, the Headmaster supposed. Ms Milliworthy tendered her written resignation that very hour.

She met Lane Thomas for coffee that afternoon for the last time, though they had spoken on the phone infrequently since. He congratulated her on her integrity and, she perceived, simultaneously praised himself for his prudence and despised himself for his cowardice at not standing up for her.

Ms Milliworthy had never had many expenses, and had a small amount of money saved up. She had been working full-time on her book ever since.

She unfolded the letter and read it again:

Dear Ms Miliwothry,

I am very sorry I cheated on the essay. My parents think this school is too hard for me so, I am changing schools now. Please forgive me.

Your student,

Amaya B.

Between the unmooring and the written resignation she left on the Headmaster's desk, however, Ms Milliworthy had taught her final class of the day. She tried to remember if everyone else was there that day—Amaya's seat in the front corner, she remembered distinctly, had been vacant. She visualized the room, but the memories from earlier that year, from previous years, and from other rooms where she had taught at East Cliffs and elsewhere, all began to blur together, with the faces of her students flashing past in attitudes of befuddlement, excitement, anger, and shame, and reconciliation. She even saw Amaya, who had not been there to hear her final words to the class that day.

From humble beginnings, and almost against its founders' better judgment, Green Knight's Feast had grown to rival the Flowering Festival in the spring, which was the PTO's big annual event. In spring there was still the talent show, and the community auction, the major fundraising showpiece, made certain that its importance would not soon be overshadowed. Green Knight's, though, had captivated the middle schoolers' imaginations early on, so that as the first cohort of the new school's students proceeded towards graduation, they added more and more to the tradition each year. Many of the alumni now at colleges nearby even still attended as a kind of unofficial order emeritus.

The teachers began the trend themselves by reciting bits of poetry from the Pearl Poet, and retelling the story of Gawain and the Green Knight with more elaborateness each year. Soon the students had started requesting other chivalric legends and heroic myths, then other fairy tales and fantasy stories, and soon science fiction and fan fiction made inroads, though so far the teachers had managed to keep the old legends at the heart of the program. Alongside the storytelling, singing and musical interludes seemed like a good idea, and eventually short concerts opened and closed the event. The past couple of years, the writing club had written and performed skits; this year there were murmurs of a full play. For food, Mr Warriner had initially done clearance sides and desserts from after-Thanksgiving sales at the supermarket across the street, but once the event grew and word got out about how long the food had been frozen—he wouldn't have had space in his freezer for the amount of food he would have needed by then anyhow—they opened it up as a pot-luck. If people were ever still hungry, Mr Fraye would occasionally step out, no one knew where, and return after a few minutes with extra plates of what he claimed were lean cuisine, but which seemed suspiciously filling. He replenished the stock of MRE's downstairs after his next trip to the military supply store.

This year, in addition to the writing club requesting the theater for their play, the archery competition had grown too big to hold out on the cafeteria patio. Since they had to move it out onto the field anyhow, Mr Fraye had arranged for a little surprise. When Harriet arrived with Sam, she noticed a trailer parked behind the gym. Noel and Carlton had come with their moms almost an hour earlier to help set up, and had no idea when she asked them about it. They had been inside decorating. The front hall, among the stars and snowflakes, had sprouted evergreen boughs. Pies, casseroles, meats on a stick, and dumplings gathered into heaps on the tables as people arrived.

The costumes ranged from eye-patches and horned helmets to barbarian leather jackets to Roman legionnaire breastplates and plumed elfin hoods, to babies in dragon onesies.

Mr Warriner conducted Harriet and the rest of the choir through a couple of songs, and Mr Fraye gave his welcoming remarks.

"I want to thank you all for coming, it's wonderful to see so many familiar faces—and, like every year, it seems, even more new ones. Let's head out front first for the tournament portion of our day, but first, just a quick line-up: We'll do food in here after the tourney, while the storytelling is going, do the costume contest and some trivia, and then head into the theater for the play. That's where we'll do the mustering of the orders, too, this year. I think that's everything!" he said cheerfully.

Immediately, the older kids roared, "The Dance!"

Mr Fraye doubled over, delighted and embarrassed. "Oh, right! Then whoever wants to stay and dance, you're more than welcome! I want to thank all of you for helping out! Another round of applause for the choir! And a merry Green Knight's!"

With that, the Knights led the Squires outside, followed by parents and siblings. The older students helped everyone get settled on the bleachers while the teachers checked the straw targets, set up at varying distances, and the bows and arrows one last time before they were ready to begin. Though Sam had not decorated his bow as much as either of his brothers', which still hung above their mantle at home, it was made from a length of PVC pipe taller than he was, and he had practiced with it every night for a week since finally managing to get it bent to the right shape and strung. On their first heat, shooting at the nearer target, the judges spent several minutes searching for Sam's arrow all around in the grass, though he insisted he had hit it.

"It's seriously about a foot away, how could I miss?" they heard his shrill voice from the stands, and Noel and Carlton laughed, though Harriet and Mrs Curran winced, for some of the archers had indeed missed it on their first try and were disconsolate about it. Finally though, one of the judges looked closer and saw the butt of an arrow buried deeply into the straw by the powerful bow. So Sam progressed. He made it to the last round, but while other arrows fell short of the most distant target they used for the finals, his overshot the mark. When they had the judges measure by paces which had been closest, he was narrowly beaten by one of his friends.

"Yah," Sam said, shaking the champ's hand with a shrug, "I knew I should have taken a little off it to play it safe, but I thought I had it lined up, so I said, what the heck? Fortune favors the bold!"

As the applause for the archers died down, Mr Fraye held up a hand for the audience to listen.

"At the request of some of last year's knights," he said, "If you could just keep your seats a little longer, we have what should be a very entertaining addition to the tourney this year: a wheelbarrow joust! I have been assured that the arms are all pool-noodles-covered and foam-dodgeball-tipped and the shields are all made of old frisbees. While they're doing that, I thought it might be a good idea to have something to offer the pacifists in the crowd, and any of the little ones who get sick of sitting still. So if you don't care for wheelbarrows, and in case you'd rather not hold your horses, I had Mrs Hendersen bring hers!"

The knights took turns pushing one another and jousting, and Mrs Hendersen pulled up her trailer and unloaded her horse, Coconut.

"If any of you guys shoots my horse with an arrow, I'll be really mad," she warned the assembled parents and younger siblings, as she helped them up on the back of the placid animal. Some only rode for a few paces before asking to get down, but most were happy to let the horse carry them around the conflict, until Mrs Hendersen had them get down to give someone else a turn.

Mr Fraye presented her with a salt lick, "and all of the leftover straw!" he said magnanimously. Then he beckoned everyone back into the front hall of the school for the Feast proper to commence. They had invited Mrs Hendersen to stay, and she even might have

considered it this time, having gone to all the trouble of coming out with her horse, but she expressed her regrets and headed home. Though they did not tell the students, the teachers would also have a bonfire with all the decorative boughs at her house afterward, along with a little private wassail among themselves.

Mr Fraye held court at his table, and Mr Warriner moved about the room, listening. He heard his friend going on about various pagan holidays, a conversation topic that sprouted up this time of year with him as plentifully as poinsettias and mistletoe. "Have you all heard of the festival of Mithras?" he was saying. Soon they would cringe at the dismemberment of ancient god-kings, sacrificed in accordance with the cosmic order by civilizations on far-flung continents. He would not let up until they all began to get uncomfortable, then he would regale them with the genius of Christianity's approach to the problem of mortality. The same, comfortable stories.

"A holy kiss," he heard, and looked over to see who was talking. As he figured, it was some of the kids who had been in Mr Thomas' classes. That old cretin was always asking them about the piquant bits of whatever they read. Leave it to him to spend their conversations on Romans asking about the valediction. Is it a kind of love letter, though? was his infamous question about everything, and opened the doors on ceaseless speculations about the authors they read, and perhaps even some fruitful investigations of their purpose in the midst of more dubious amateur psychology. The alums hailed Mr Warriner and called to him to come and sing a carol with them, so he must needs oblige.

He had them sing with him quietly God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen. At the far end of the room before the mural, the storytellers were having their turns, and Mr Warriner moved closer to hear how it was going at the close of his song. He saw more of the younger kids among the audience and those standing waiting to tell a story, and he recalled that the writing club members in high school were busy putting themselves in readiness for their play, instead of telling stories this year. The naval officer boy who had been up finished his recitation of the Jabberwocky and sat down to applause; an elfin huntress rose next, pushing her golden headband into the right place on her fair hair, and delivered the opening lines of the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales in lightly Californian-accented Middle English. Mr Warriner decided to check on things in the theater.

"There's Mr Warriner," Noel said, pointing to a tall figure opening a door and going through. "He teaches music here. He told us this story about Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata--you know that one, right? Well, I'm sure you would recognize it if you heard it--where the name actually doesn't come from the composer at all, but from some Romantic poet who liked the song so much, but didn't really seem to understand it at all. It's more of a moonless night, the funeral march might imply, and yet his name Moonlight stuck. It is a sonata, which means it has this regular structure of beginning, middle, end, developing a theme--like a sonnet, only with music, not poetry--"

Noel saw she was looking around, smiling faintly, but clearly more interested in anything other than his explanation of classical music right now.

"Well, are you going to introduce me to anybody," Alma said, mock-petulant, "or just tell me lots of stuff about these people I don't know."

"I'll introduce you to Dominique, Carlton's girlfriend, after the play," he reminded her. "The rest of the writing club, too, and Rory, my friend who wrote it and will be playing the lead."

She went over towards a group of high-schoolers who stood in a large ring, lifting herself on her tiptoes as she approached. Noel tagged along.

"Is there something in the middle," Alma asked one boy, insinuating herself by his shoulder. "I'm Alma, what's your name?"

"Kyle," he said, looking approvingly at her fairy wings. "Nice costume."

"Hey, Noel," she said, turning back to him and squeezing forward a bit more to make room for him beside her, "this is Kyle. Do you guys know each other? Oh, hey, it's literally just a circle of kids standing together."

At this point, she was partway into the middle of the empty floor around which the kids stood, talking pleasantly and a little awkwardly while they waited for the dinner to wrap up. They had gathered not intentionally, but as in ones and twos they lost interest in the storytelling, or their little siblings found their friends to sit by and they found their own, similarly aimless and essaying to look at ease, though anxious for the dance to start. Now they were interested in this new person who seemed determined to enliven them.

Alma pulled Noel in with her and they regarded the group they had joined, mostly boys, with here and there a couple of girls among them. "Hi everyone," she said, "I'm Alma, and this is Noel."

"Hey, I know your sister, right?" said someone. "She was in my class last year, too. Did she tell you about that day we were talking about *Crime and Punishment*, and I brought up what I thought was a really good connection, about how Sonya's flame-colored feather made me think of the Phoenix. Only there was dead silence, and finally Mr Thomas says, 'You make a very eloquent point, which was just brought up by Ms Curran. I'm not sure what impresses me more: how students can have the exact same insights, or how they can not hear each other say them.'"

"Is this what the dance is going to be like?" Alma asked no one in particular.

Eric was there to see his daughter in the play. In the meantime, though, he was captivated by the stories and amazed at the amount of food everyone had brought. At the last minute, he remembered he should bring something to share. He deliberated stopping in the fast food place or the diner across the street, but either way there was a dilemma. The one was too cheap, the other too slow. In the end, he went to the grocery store and grabbed some chips and dip. From time to time, Eric glanced over to check what was being eaten off the table, and if his chips were popular. By the time he arrived, most people had eaten, so for awhile no one opened the chips. Then he noticed a girl looking thoughtfully at them. A boy came up beside her and she gestured at the bag. The boy shrugged, and took the whole thing. Something about him was familiar, but Eric couldn't place it, until Harriet greeted him. "Is that your brother?" he asked her. "One of them," she said. She pointed out the youngest one after looking around the crowd a minute, who was sitting in the midst of the kids listening to the stories.

"They're really something, the stories they tell," Eric said. "I had never heard the one about the knight that almost killed Arthur. The king himself!"

Harriet thought she might know it, but she listened attentively to Eric tell it.

"There are a number of versions of that story," she said when he had finished. "With other knights, catching each other unawares."

"But that's not a very knightly thing to do."

"And the good knights usually try to point this out."

As Noel and Alma went by, she held out her hand for them to share the chips with her. "Do you guys know Eric?" she asked.

Alma was disappointed to hear that food was not allowed in the theater. "Well," she said, "I guess we'll just have to eat them all before it starts."

"Are you sure this is your date," Harriet joked, "and not your best friend?"

Eric had moved off towards the theater doors, where parents were already gathering, hoping to get a good seat before they opened. A tall teacher was there, trying to hold them back from entering. He shook Eric's hand warmly as he came up.

"Are they almost ready?" he asked.

"Oh yes, there should be just a few more minutes now. In fact, I think Mr Fraye has got the last few storytellers performing theirs as a duet, so that we can get to the play."

In his best booming voice, Mr Fraye sent the younger squires scurrying to clean up the leavings of the feast, though most of the guests had cleared up their own places already, and welcomed Mr Warriner to let them into the theater.

"Come," he said, clasping his shoulder, "we shall have a play."

Eric had already found himself a seat near the front, just to one side of the aisle so that he would not have to worry about blocking everyone's view behind his big head. As many times as he had asked Nica to explain to him what the play was about, and what part she had, she had made him only the vaguest replies. From all that he could understand, she was some kind of mermaid, and the play involved a journey in the underworld. When he googled this, he came up with a couple of books he thought he recognized from seeing students carry around at the school. He borrowed a copy of each from the library. At first, it had been slow going. Both were translations of long poems, and the translators had chosen to try to render theirs in poetry as well. It reminded him of when they had to read the *Quijote* back home, though, in that, daunted as they were at first by its length, and by the desuetude of some of its language, as he and his classmates got into the story and began to know the characters, incredible vistas opened up to them.

Eric followed Odysseus on all his intrepid adventures, he wound with Dante through the divine and torturous route, and was surprised to find the former deep in the latter's Hell, hardly recognizable, and to learn that the latter still had two more books to tell. The way that these books contained one another, and pointed outwards beyond themselves, gave Eric much more to ponder than he ever expected from the books he had read before. He was not sure whether he should bother to read the rest of the vampire series, which he had set aside to try to figure out Nica's play, or if he should go ahead and find other books to read by Homer and Dante. Apparently Dante's guide had written one, too.

As the play began, Eric struggled to decide which story it was telling. The character was lost, alone, in a dark place—it could have been either of them, at first. Soon, however, he began to doubt that google had steered him right. There were no homicidal flowers in the epics, and no female guides that he knew of. There was certainly no comical skeleton sidekick with his delusional skeleton hero to mess with. He laughed along with the rest as the child solved with ease all the so-called nefarious puzzles they laid for him. The music for the snowed-in town was so cozy that he felt himself nodding off, but the mood shifted to something even lonelier in the watery depths that came next. Eric watched more attentively.

A monster child came running by, and then there was Nica, in her fearsome blue battle-gear. It was all Eric could do to keep from cheering her along with the little monster. Still, the human child dodged each of her spear-thrusts in what must have been a vexing way. Eric had to admit, it was a difficult play to explain. But he enjoyed the rest of it more calmly, without irritably trying to make it conform to his expectations, or worrying about when he would see his daughter come back on and how she would do. Then the factory and the flame, the bizarre TV show and the final castle, a recapitulation of the main theme in more soaring music—Eric was entranced. He was strangely moved by the end, and when all the characters came back out to applause he almost forgot to join in.

"That went well!" said Mr Fraye, not concealing that it came as a pleasant surprise to him. "Can we now have all of the squires eligible for knighthood come forth. Up on stage, yep, that's how we're doing it this year. I know, it's all very daunting. Have a moment to think. For those of you out there in the audience, I think so that things don't get too stuffy around here I would invite you to recite alongside us.

"But Mr Fraye,' I know you're saying, 'the oath changes every year!' And maybe, though I hope not, what you're actually saying is, 'Oh no, I forgot the oath!' Shame on you! But as far as the oath changing every year, that's the fun of it, isn't it? So, let's give our new squires their turn first, and then when they're done, we'll go through the recitation all together."

The squires began, some tentatively, others, like Sam, belting it out, to recite the oath of chivalry. As Harriet heard them speaking the part she had added in, she felt the warmth spring to her cheeks. The words sounded so innocent in the mouths of the kids, but Matt had been telling her how he understood some of the lyrics, especially in the more recent songs, but also latent in many of her old favorites, and she was astonished to find that his interpretation, aside from whatever bias he might have due to this identity he had embraced for himself, made a compelling sort of sense. Still more than before, she was interested in understanding where her hero was coming from, both musically in terms of his influences and in the meaning of his lyrics as they related to his actual life. She joined in the huzzahs as the new knights were knighted by Mr Fraye, and then, with a wave of his hand, she was carried along by the emeritus orders mumbling through their half-remembered oaths, laughing as much as managing articulate speech.

"Well," he said. "That was more like it! I can see you all have still got it! What else? Oh, Mr Warriner, do you want to announce the winners of the trivia and the costume contest?"

"Sure, Mr Fraye," he said. He invited all the entrants up onstage while he read off the answers to the trivia. There were groans and cheers. Each year the trivia was hotly contested, especially among the youngsters. It was a not-very-closely guarded secret that certain of the trivia questions were chosen with the input of He Who Sits and Thinks, and that, whatever happened overall, whoever scored highest on those questions and was still in middle school would be the new arch nemesis of the Chivalrous. Momentarily, the results were tabulated and the winners announced, both for the overall insufferable smartypants award and the middle school mystery gig.

Anticipation was building, for the costume contest was the last thing standing between the students and the dance. Those votes had already been counted, according to some system known only to the judges—in fact Mr Fraye and Mr Warriner had conferred briefly just before the play and made up their decision—and Mr Warriner delivered the news.

"This year's winner of the Green Knight's costume contest, a young poet whose words are just as beautiful as her armor is rad: Nica Lobos!" he said, and conferred upon her the laurel crown.

Until that moment, she had never won anything. She grinned defiantly, still in character, but she would scream in triumph as soon as she was backstage with her friends in the writing club.

"Well all right then, thank you all for being so patient while we have our fun and celebrate what passes for culture in this depraved age of ours," Mr Fraye remarked finally. "And since it will soon be too loud for you to hardly hear the person right beside you, and the strange urge to dance comes over you, using the word 'dance' very loosely, moving sort of together but sort of apart, whatever, I don't really get it, but it certainly looks uncomfortable to this old coot—anyway, thank you all again for coming, and a special thanks to all our volunteers, another round of applause for the tourney champs, the playwright and his troupe, the storytellers, the trivia whizzes, the choir and the squires and the knights, and even He Who Sits, you've done a wonderful job this past year and I trust that you can keep a secret if you know what's good for you ALL RIGHT ALL RIGHT START THE MUSIC!"

For the second time that night, the circles began to form, more openly protective this time, more closed-ranked by closeness of friends and unlikelihood that anyone in it would ask an immediate neighbor to dance. Instead of standing quite still, the whole circle would sway, like a jellyfish caught in a shallows; instead of the well-bred ease affected earlier, this was a jelly whose tide was going out, and the circles held together desperately whenever they came close enough to brush against one another, or when the denizens of the dance swirled around.

There were a few different groups even here, among the kids who felt no need to hug their little circle for safety, and exulted in their freedom. There were those like Noel, who had no idea what they were doing, and they were in the majority. Essentially, they could not be

distinguished from their jellyfish brethren, only they had the misfortune to have arrived without friends, or to have jettisoned them in a moment of wild abandon from which they were unable now to recover, or they had somehow been convinced that dancing was worth a try by someone they liked enough to believe.

These latter were the second group of dancers, much the minority, and many, like Alma, had taken on the persona out of a desire to help somebody else have fun, and not because they really had much more notion of what was going on than that. A few among them, perhaps, knew how to dance in some respect that Mr Fraye might recognize, but even kids who might naturally have wanted to dance and been good at it if they tried were so busy avoiding the opportunity that they could only discover it by chance, if one of the more willful, maybe less skillful, kids who had already broken free convinced them to try.

At first the music remained fairly classical, to appease the parents who were still gathering their leftovers and their children so as to leave early and get a start on their vacation. Mr Fraye and Mr Warriner themselves would be taking off as soon as those parents had dispersed, to toast another calendar year's waning, and the tail end of another school year, sooner than they expected every year, coming into sight.

Mr Thomas, who up until he heard his cue, which was the music starting, had been ensconced in the office writing, finally emerged to keep an eye on things so they could leave. For reasons they preferred not to pry into, he volunteered every year to supervise the parent chaperones and the kids who stuck around until the end of the dance. It was by no means late, but what kind of sick person, after all, would willingly spend more time than he had to at even the best of schools, who did not have children there of his own?

Mr Thomas had been writing a speech for his main character. Unlike Rory's, his had a habit of saying too much. He felt he was too close to the writing to judge it fairly, so he sought out a reader who might be able to render it for him to hear what it actually said. The librarian was not there, but he left a copy in her email so that she could give him some comments on it. He imagined what it was like for those two, dancing together oblivious to the world around them.

Alma and Noel were hatching plans for her to visit East Cliffs again when the classes were in session.

He imagined what it was like for Ms Curran, singing there aloof with her friends in the choir, loudly enough just to be heard over the music that was playing.

Harriet wished she could have asked her hero even just one question, about just one song, and been able to hear his response, but she sang instead, because it was all she could do.

And because he had written it with all of them in mind, he felt good about how the speech was turning out, after all, and thought it might make a good one to go last:

A speech, read out for the absent one by the present? I believe in Jesus Christ and Sufjan Stevens, William Shakespeare and Muhammad Ali, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, and the Mary Celeste. I believe in people, but I believe the way that people are is not the way that people are always supposed to be. I believe in ghosts, which is to say, I don't think we know everything about the universe, and we need to spend less time arguing over our words for what we don't know about, and more time learning about them. Because I believe in people, because I believe in learning, because I believe in things for which our words are inadequate because our thoughts and what we know about them are only a beginning, I also believe in love. Without that, none of this would be possible. But with it, nothing is as simple as I might wish, or believe

On the fuschia note in the library...

[Notes for a New School](#)