

K-6

Mrs. Harding played a John Philip Sousa record and we marched around the room banging sticks together. “Children. Children. Children!” She clapped her hands. “Please,” she said. “Please, please, please keep in line.”

I banged my sticks. Mrs. Harding played the same song over and over. “It goes like this,” she said. “It goes like this.” Her voice went up and down, up and down. She marched around. “Da-dee-da-daa.”

The girl on the record cover wore red underpants and white boots and looked just like my sister. My sister twirled a baton in the Nazareth Youth Band. Sometimes when she marched she clicked her heels and threw her baton so high it would get lost in the sun. I walked to school with my sister. I wanted to twirl a baton like my sister, but Dad said only girls did that.

“Da-dee-da-daa.” Mrs. Harding drew little circles in the air with her finger. “Da-dee-da-daa. That’s the way. Da-dee-da-daa. That’s the way, Da-dee-da-daa – da-da..dot-da.” And up went her finger.

Up went my stick, red end over blue end, twirling so fast the colors blurred and it crashed into the ceiling, into the light; and the tubes popped, exploded. The record stopped with a screech, and I just stood there with one stick in my hand.

She told us to fold our arms and put our heads on our desks. She told me I would have some explaining to do. “After quiet time,” she said. “It’s time to rest.” She did look tired. She looked older than my grandmother. She looked like Captain Kangaroo. She did.

I got as far as the door and she said, “Clay Bachman, where do you think you’re going.” Thirty little heads turned to the sound of her voice. I ran. I ran down the hall, up the alley behind Shuman’s Bakery, and I ran even faster when I got to the Old Academy because there were ghosts in that building. I’d been in there once. I’d heard them. Dad said they were rats but rats don’t rattle windows. I ran through the Moravian Cemetery and I didn’t look back until I got to the Indian Tower.

But the old yellow busses were gone. The fields were empty. Low, dark clouds slid into the Blue Ridge, and I walked beside a deep furrow toward home. Over by Mr. Fensetemaker’s field I found a potato. It looked like my favorite red marble. I spit on it, polished it, and wondered where the pickers had gone. Some of the tracks were so fresh you could still see ridges from the soles of boots, or little triangles like the ones on my sneakers.

It started to rain and as I ran over the tracks they looked like arrowheads, giant arrowheads. I wanted to stop and hunt for arrowheads, but the rain came too hard.

A police car was in our driveway, and Mrs. Harding was there, and Mom squeezed me so hard it hurt. When Dad got home he came into my room and rubbed his thumb across the buckle on his belt. I told him school was worse than being sick. I told him I'd rather dig potatoes with the colored people.

He told me about a machine that dug potatoes; and when I asked if I could take my potato to show and tell, he called me a knucklehead and I knew he wasn't going to whip me.

"This is red. This is blue. That's the way. One. Two." Our heels clicked. I made black streaks with my new shoes. Mrs. Harding slapped my hand and pointed to my desk. "No marching for you. And no show and tell."

I put my head down on my desk so no one could see me. I listened to the rain. I could see a million little puddles across the field and I wondered if my potato would sprout eyes. I reached my hand into my pocket and felt the smooth red skin.

When the Old Nazareth Cement Mill sounded its siren, we marched single file into the basement. Boxes, brown boxes with bright yellow triangles stood against the wall beside gray barrels marked "water." It smelled funny down there. It smelled like our root cellar. It smelled rotten.

We knelt on the dirt floor and covered our heads with our arms. Mrs. Jacob told us not to make a sound. "Not even a whisper," she said. "Not even a whisper." And when the light went out, you could still see her standing in the corner, with her finger to her lip, and her little black book pressed against her bosom.

Donald Ray made believe he was an owl. I was a spider soaking in the light that filtered through the cracks in the foundation. Jocelyn screamed when I touched her arm.

The light flashed on and I saw the surprise on Mrs. Jacob's face. She looked like she'd seen a ghost. I saw my classmates crouched on the floor. There was a moment of silence, a long silence, like the silence that follows a giant streak of lightning. You wait for the thunder, the crash. And slowly, as if the sounds had travelled a long, long distance, I began to hear the stifled sounds of breathing again.

Donald Ray broke into laughter. Mrs. Jacob asked if he would like to spend the rest of the day down there and pointed her finger to the dirt floor. Donald Ray asked if he could get his lunch pail. But I didn't say a word. Not one word. Jocelyn didn't either. She smiled at me and I noticed a dimple on her cheek, like a puddle where the single drop of rain would settle.

I asked Mom if she ever went to the basement of her school, but she said her school didn't have a basement. Dad said it was because of the Russians.

I thought the Russians must be like my brother Bobby. He went to the Tatamy Home. He came home one weekend a month, and I had to hide so he wouldn't beat me up. He was big. As big as Dad. I thought he must have been a hundred years old. When he died I got to stay home from school for three days.

I remember looking down the hole at the cemetery. The dirt was the same color as the floor in the school basement. And I wondered if Bobby's box had any cracks for light to get through, or if he could see me with his eyes closed the way I can see him. I wondered what he would eat, and I wondered why he never came home any more. I wrote to him one day in school. Mrs. Jacob taught us how to write a letter.

Dear Bobby, I said. Please write soon. But he never answered me.

Miss Flory had a globe on the corner of her desk. She talked about the world, and waltzed around the room spinning the globe and waving her hand. Her shoulders bobbed and swayed. "The tide comes in. The tide goes out. I am the moon. I control the tides."

"I call my grandfather Tide."

"He must be from Wales," she said. "That's Welsh for grandfather."

I said, "No. Tide lives across the street from us." But she just went on dancing around the moon. She didn't even look like Tide. She looked more like a clam, a smiling clam. She wore great big earrings with gray stones in them and her legs were covered with dark, knotty veins that looked like the twisted rivers on the maps she gave us. They bulged. I wanted to touch them. I wanted to stick them with a pin.

"Color them blue," she said.

"Brown," I said.

"Blue, blue, blue," she said. "The world is blue." She spun the globe and pranced up and down the aisles.

"The Bushkill is brown."

"It only looks brown. Water is blue. Water is blue because it reflects the sky."

She took my brown crayon away, put it in the corner of her right-hand desk drawer, and told me I could have it back when it came time to draw faces. "Eyes are brown," she said.

My sister had brown eyes. Miss Flory had brown eyes. My mom had brown eyes. Everyone I drew had brown eyes. Big brown eyes. Eyes so big the faces didn't need lips or noses. Jocelyn had green eyes. Bright green. Green like no color crayon.

On the Jungle Jim Bars I could hang upside down and even spin a full circle. I told Jocelyn I could go over the moon and back. But she said I was just being silly. She said boys couldn't really do that. And I told her that when I was grown I would jump over the moon. "Really," I said. "Really." But she just put her hands on her hips and looked away.

Miss Flory handed out books and told us to smell them. "Smell them," she said. "Smell them." The new ones smelled like Mom's bread. One had a picture of the earth and the moon and a word I couldn't read. Dad said, "The moon is our nearest neighbor."

"Like Mr. Fensetemaker?" I said.

But Dad just put his John Deere cap on my head and pulled it down over my eyes. I was Buck Rogers on my way to the moon. I was the world. I ran through the fields waving my arms, blinded by the colors, blinded by the absence of light.

In third grade I wrote notes, folded them in little squares and passed them under my desk to the girl I loved.

I won the Charles A. Van Vleck Penmanship Award. Miss Wormersley made me stand in front of the class with her. She said Charles A. Van Vleck was Principal of Nazareth Hall over a hundred years ago. I wondered if he whacked kids with a rubber hose like our principal. She said his handwriting was more beautiful than any she had ever seen. And in spring, if we were good, she would take us to the Whitefield House. We would see very old things, including a letter Mr. Van Vleck wrote.

She asked me to tell the class why penmanship was important. I just shrugged my shoulders. She frowned, and for a moment I thought she was going to take my ribbon away.

I said, "Neat penmanship is important because. . .because words like to look pretty." My face felt so hot I thought I was going to be sick.

Miss Wormersley clapped. Donald Ray called me a sissy. Jocelyn said she could write prettier any day. I walked home alone and buried my ribbon in the woods. I told my sister. She told Mom. I had to dig up my ribbon, and I swore I'd never write another word. Never.

I tried to scribble when I wrote my notes. One day Miss Wormersley caught me. I cringed with each crackling sound of the paper unfolding. She read aloud, "I have something you don't." The class giggled. Jocelyn blushed. Miss Wormersley put her hand to her throat and pretended to fix her necklace.

At recess Jocelyn said, "If you promise not to tell, I'll show you something after school."

I had to stay after and write "I will not pass notes" on the blackboard a hundred times. When I got out I kicked a stone. I kicked the same stone all the way home.

I kept it in my pocket. It rubbed my leg when I walked, but I didn't mind. It made me think I discovered something.

Miss Hummel took us places. Stocker Brothers Dairy. Lost River Caverns. She even took us on the Appalachian Trail. She was prettier than my sister. She was new. I wondered why all teachers couldn't be like her. I wondered where she came from. I wanted her to come home with me.

On Fridays I stayed after to wash the blackboards and clap the erasers. I was the only one who didn't know the times tables. Even Donald Ray knew them up to ten. He still wore his black boots to school. He still smelled like his father's Durocs. Sometimes I walked home with Donald, but mostly walked down Center Street with Jocelyn.

One day we stopped at Heckman's Pharmacy for a Coke. Mrs. Heckman gave us four squirts of syrup instead of three. She winked, and I thought she'd never stop stirring it. Miss Hummel was in the back booth with a man. Jocelyn said he was the handsomest man she had ever seen. He had a black mustache and coal black hair, and he blew smoke through his nose. But Dad could do that.

One Friday in April Miss Hummel just stood by an open window. We went over the times tables as I washed the blackboards — just like we always did.

But she just stood there by the window with her head tilted in a funny way. I kept glancing at her, but she didn't move. Her voice sounded like it would never reach me.

When I asked if I could leave, she touched my cheek with her finger. It gave me the goosebumps and I thought she was going to hug me. Her hands were perfectly smooth and white. White like the hyacinths outside the window. She smelled of hyacinths. She could have been the air itself.

She said, "Hyacinth."

I said, "What, Miss Hummel?"

And she told me a story about Hyacinthus. She said he was killed by accident. She said hyacinths sprang from his blood. But I didn't understand. On Monday we had a substitute, and the Monday after we had a new teacher. Mom said Miss Hummel had to leave town.

I never knew why. But when I walked past that window, I could see her standing there, with her head tilted in a most peculiar way. And if I closed my eyes, I could smell hyacinths, white hyacinths.

"Nazareth. Nazareth, Pennsylvania. Founded in 1740 by the Moravians. Can you remember that?" Mr. Reimer slapped the palm of his hand with my history book. He walked from the window to the blackboard and back to the window. Back and forth. Back and forth. His shoes squeaked. The back of his pants were shiny, and there were red and white stripes on his tie.

I tried to count the number of boards in the floor. I tried to remember my times tables. He covered the same distance with each step. With each step he slapped his palm with my book. Eleven boards to the step. Eleven steps. I licked my finger and wrote on the desk top. 11×11 . I drew a line.

"Look at this," he said, and my paper slid across my desk and into my lap. "You didn't even answer the questions." He sounded tired. He smelled like the stick of wax he put on his flattop.

"Who was George Whitefield? George Whit-fi-eld." He rapped his knuckles on my desk with each syllable. "What is the name of your school?"

"Whitefield Elementary." I wanted to kick him. I wanted to poke him with my pencil.

"And why is it called Whitefield El-e-men-tar-y?"

I felt tears welling up inside me. I clenched my teeth, squinted my eyes, and wished for him to hit me so I could go home. I wondered if all men teachers were going to be like Mr. Reimer.

He sat in the desk beside me, with his elbows resting on his knees. He talked. He didn't make me look at him. I did once, but he was spinning the ring on his finger. His voice sounded sad. I didn't know what he was talking about. He said, "When I was your age, I thought life would get easier as I got older. I thought that." Then he talked about all the people he'd talked about in class. Such odd names. Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf. Captain John of

Welagamika. Sir Theophilus Oglethorpe. I wondered why they didn't have names like the ones carved in my desk top. Dan. Mark. Jeff. I ran my finger across the grooves.

"The Moravians," he said. "The Moravians built a tower to watch for Indians. The Indian Tower. There is a monument, too. With names of all the Moravians murdered by the Indians. Can you remember that?"

"Yes. I live there. Dad says we live on top of the Lenne Lanape bones. We hunt for arrowheads. Most of the ones I find are broken. The best time to hunt for them is in the spring when the plowing is done. And if you go after a rain it's easier to see them."

"And what do you know about the Moravians?"

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to spit on him. I wondered how Donald Ray passed his test. I wondered why Jocelyn didn't give me answers from her test.

"The Moravians?"

"My Mom boils potatoes until they dissolve. When the water cools she adds yeast and sugar. She shows my sister how to knuckle in the flour. That is Moravian Sugar Cake."

He told me that was not enough to pass.

So I told him that when I stand in the Tower I can see the Delaware Water Gap. I can see Wind Gap. I can see Schooneck Farms and the Haydriers. I can see the steeple on the Moravian church. I can see as far as Bethlehem. And if the wind blows from the south I can almost smell Mom's Sugar Cake.

He called my mother.

She told him it was the yeast I smelled. She told him my father would see that I learned enough names to pass.

Mr. Reimer wrote down twenty names; he folded the paper and stuck it in my book. "By Monday," he said. "By Monday."

I passed. But that summer, when I stood in the Tower, I could no longer be an Indian. I wanted to be Captain Jones of the Welagamika. His body was carried in the cemetery right behind our house. I learned that. He was buried in the cemetery right behind our house. I learned that. His body was carried all the way from Deep Hole by the Bushkill to Welagamika. I learned that, too. But it seemed funny, somehow, that I could know something but not be something.

I wrote my name on the walls of the Indian Tower with a piece of sandstone. Over and over. I wrote my name. I printed my name. Clay Bachman. And when I walked across the field toward home, the earth was silent.

In sixth grade we left Whitefield Elementary for a new school. Floyd R. Shafer. I wondered what he had done and if I would learn. A voice came from a speaker in the wall. The minute hand on the clock jumped. The blackboards turned green.

I learned how to spell Britannica. Every day I stood in the corner with an armload. Mr. Bitner said I should study. He said I should go to college.

I went to Nina's Steak Shop instead of Bible Studies. Reverend Long told me to memorize the names of every book in the Bible. I asked him why. He said if I didn't believe I didn't belong. I went to Nina's.

Six games for a quarter. And I was in love with that feeling, that feeling when all the bumpers lit up, and all the miniature cards — ace through deuce — had been knocked down, and in the middle a red light glowed. Special.

Some guy came all the way from Texas for Nina's special. He drove a big white Lincoln with bull horns on the hood and his name on the door. Ernest Tubb and the Texas Troubadors. It wasn't the man himself, but I didn't care. He played me his song on the jukebox and danced behind the counter with Nina. He made her laugh.

I told him about a great snowy owl that circled our new school every morning. We pledged the flag, read from the Bible, said the Lord's Prayer, and went outside to watch the owl. He laughed, flapped his arms, and said in Texas they had owls as big as that white Lincoln. He talked funny. He said "Martin guitars might be made here in Nazareth, my boy. But in Texas we've got rivers that sing and starts that whistle. All for a pretty girl." He grabbed Nina's arm and they danced across the floor.

Jocelyn's voice trembled. Her legs quivered. She'd told me she was scared to read in front of the class. She said Whitefield was better. At Whitefield we whispered the Pledge of Allegiance and bowed our heads. "It was best," she said, "when we were the only ones with our eyes open."

She stood with her back against the front wall. I had to laugh as the pee ran down her leg. I was the first to laugh. She kept right on reading. Her voice grew quiet, more quiet, and steadied. She was whispering; her lips barely moved. Mr. Bitner rested his hand on her shoulder and a hush of laughter circled the room. His head snapped toward us, and with a stern gaze he quieted the room.

Jocelyn closed the Bible. Her arms closed against her ribs; and slowly her head fell forward and rested on the top of the Bible. The very tips of her fingers pressed into the soft cover, bending it, and against the black cloth they looked like little slivers of moons pasted in a dark sky. The silence unsettled the air.

The clock jumped with a loud click and Jocelyn's shoulders gave a sudden shudder. The Bible hit the floor. "I hate you," she said. "I hate you." Her eyes fell on me; and she ran. My face stung and felt like the last time my mother had slapped me. My cheeks burned.

We all ran. We ran to the sound of my laughter, to the sound of the driver's voice. Mr. Bitner waved his arms, pushed us away. "Get back to the room. It's just an accident. A little accident. Everyone's going to be fine. Get back. Get back, now. Go on. Back to our room. Please go back. Go on, now."

We crowded closer. Mr. Bitner turned in circles, with one hand on his forehead, and the other outstretched before us. The Walker twins ran back to the room. Donald Ray looked like someone had just jabbed him hard in the stomach. His jaw hung down and his tongue was rolled up way back in his mouth. His arms were wrapped around his waist and his eyes looked like big black marbles stuck in fresh cement.

The radiator on the car ticked as it cooled and the black streaks from the tires still had a faint burning smell. In the distance I heard a siren. My legs shook. My hands were cold and clenched, and my stomach twisted and hurt and I tried to swallow. I shivered.

Jocelyn didn't move. Her cheek had the tiniest scratch just below her right eye. A thin stream of blood trickled from her nose, tracing a line along her upper

lip, and curling down across her chin. One arm was tucked beneath her, and the other formed a white triangle on the pavement. Her head was turned to the side, resting on her open palm.

A burst of cold air blew in from the east. With it came the smell of alfalfa, drying. The red light on the ambulance reminded me of Nina's. And when the man tucked the blanket under Jocelyn's chin, the slightest smile came to the corner of her lips. She blinked. Twice.

Someone said, "Hey. Look," and pointed to the flagpole. The snowy owl tilted its head, puffed its wings, and dove into flight. It swooped toward us and with one stroke of those wide wings it veered away. We stood, our faces set against the Blue Ridge, and watched as it disappeared, a speck of white against the cloudless sky.

Mr. Bitner picked at the lint on his sweater, brushed at his sleeves and rubbed his hands together. "Thank God," he said. "Thank God it wasn't worse." His voice was deep, different. It was uneven. I knew what he meant but I still couldn't stop the trembling in my knees. I pressed them into the bottom of my desk, and wiped my palms on my shoulders.

When we started our spelling lesson, I stared out the window, twirling my pencil between my fingers. The Blue Ridge was a dark quiet blue; and I wondered how the bright green of the fields, the dark green of the oaks, the softer green of the maples and poplars, could roll into the mountains and become blue. I held my eyes shut, rubbed them. And that speck of white became a thing imagined.

"Acorn." Mr. Bitner kicked my foot.

I tapped the eraser on my thumbnail.

"Amber." He pointed to my paper.

I glanced out the window again.

"Biscuit." His cheeks drew tight. He frowned at me. "Chiefly." And I began to write. Dear Jocelyn.