

New Fiction from Kirsten Eve Beachy: “Soft Target”



For Sallie.

By Picture Day in November, Sophie had perfected the downward stab and counting to twenty. She clenched her soft fingers around her rainbow pony pencil, raised her fist high, and then smashed it down on the practice balloons, barely wincing when they popped, scolding when they escaped. The other children rallied to bounce stray balloons back to her desk. She got *thirteen*, *fourteen* at last, and from there it was an obstacle-free trip to *twenty* with her peers chanting along. She hadn't yet mastered our *Go* protocol for intruders, but neither had a handful of the general education students. However, Caleb could shout *Go* instantly and often got to the Rubber Man first, tackling its knees to disable the joints. Jazzmyn was the most formidable of all the students; when the Rubber Man

dropped from the ceiling, she'd grab my scissors on the way and disembowel it in two slashes.

Picture Day is tense for second-graders, with the boys trussed up in buttoned shirts, the girls eyeing each other's frilly dresses, and the lunch cart loaded with chocolate pudding and meatballs with marinara. Caleb endlessly adjusted his bowtie and Jazzmyn fretted over a smudge on her yellow pantsuit. But Sophie was thrilled with her rustling crinoline and the biggest blue bow that anyone had ever seen. When they lined up for their scheduled foray to the library for pictures, she sashayed to the end of the line, tossing her cascade of red curls and humming softly, off-key. Todd was the only one left at his desk, digging out torn pages and broken pencils—looking for one of the pocket treasures I pretended not to notice, his tiny plastic dinosaurs. Sophie called out, "Todd, we go now!" and jabbed her finger at the spot in line behind her, right beneath our Superstar of the Week bulletin board where a large-as-life photo of Sophie scowled at flashcards, surrounded by an array of exploding stars.

Todd pretended not to hear her. They used to be the best of friends, building tiny dinosaur colonies in the sandbox and sharing their turns to feed our guinea pig, but then his mother met Sophie at the Food Culture Festival last week, and he had ignored her ever since.

"Come on, Todd!"

He turned from his desk at last and jostled into the line in front of Sophie, muttering something that I didn't catch.

It must have been bad, because Jazzmyn decked him. Fist to his cheekbone, she sprawled him right out on the floor, then loomed over him with her fists on her hips, her face resplendent with fury. "We don't use that word in this class," she shouted. "We don't use that word ever!"

"Jazzmyn!" I swooped in to inspect the damage. No nosebleed,

and his eye was intact.

Jazzmyn burst into tears when she saw my expression, then collected herself enough to run to the sink and wet a paper towel for Todd's swelling face. Ms. Jackson, my morning aide, logged into our classroom portal to open an incident ticket.

By this time, Sophie had flung herself to the floor beside him in a swirl of yellow and white skirts. "Todd, you okay? You okay?"

Todd finally caught enough breath to begin howling.

"He'll be fine," I told her. "Go with Ms. Jackson so I can take care of him."

Ms. Jackson gathered up Sophie and guided the children down to the library for the scheduled pictures, and then I buzzed the office for security clearance to walk Todd to the nurse. He still whimpered and clutched the towel to his eye. Jazzmyn came, too—she'd be wanted at the principal's office.

We escorted Todd to the clinic, and then I steered her toward the main office. She stopped me outside Melkan's door with a hand on my sleeve. "I had to do it," she said between sobbing breaths, and then leaned in to whisper, "He called Sophie a *tard*."

That word, in all its forms, is banned in my classroom.

"Jazzie," I said. "You can't hit another student, ever. Not even when they say something horrible. It's your job to protect each other."

Jazzmyn nodded once, quickly, her lips pressed together. My policy is to not have favorites, but I loved Jazzmyn for the meticulous care she took of everything: wiping the crumbs from her bento boxes with a paper towel, coloring every millimeter of the day's vocabulary coloring page with crayons—even the bubble letters and the background spaces—and persisting with

practice drills until her form was perfect.

“Will they call the cops?” she asked, almost keeping the quaver out of her voice.

“No.” She may be Black, but she’s only seven years old.

“Will I get suspended?”

If Todd’s mother raised hell, Jazzmyn could get expelled, but I didn’t tell her that. “Let me talk to Mr. Melkan first,” I said.

“If I get suspended,” said Jazzmyn, “I will never get into Wellesley.”

Melkan buzzed me in then, so I was spared the need to answer. I entered his lair while Jazzmyn perched in the center of a chair in the reception area, fists tucked together in her lap.

Melkan liked to carry gallon-sized promotional mugs from gas stations. That day he stirred half a dozen scoops of protein powder into his 64 ounces of coffee while I explained the situation.

“She’s out,” he said.

“Please,” I said. “Todd used a slur against Sophie, and Jazzmyn responded instinctively. She won’t do it again, now she knows what she’s capable of. Review the surveillance tape. Her aim was perfect. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“We shouldn’t give her the chance to do it again,” said Melkan, but he was already clicking through the surveillance queue, intrigued. The walls of his small office were lined with large-screened monitors, barely leaving room for his collection of ultra-marathon numbers, the plaque declaring Stoney Creek Elementary last year’s Hardened Target Regional Winner, and the AR-15 hanging over his office door.

“Plus, her first quarter grades are off the charts. We need her here next week for standards testing,” I said.

“You need a genius around to offset Sophie Clark. That child can’t even count to ten. You chose her for your class. You worry about the test scores.”

I kept quiet and let him watch the video. He winced when the punch, replayed in slow motion, sent Todd flying in a smooth arc to land on the floor, where he bounced gently—one, two, three times. Melkan looped the video and leaned in closer.

At last he turned back to me. “Her aim is flawless.”

“They’re the best group I’ve had. Jazzmyn is so good—have you looked at the Rubber Man logs? They took him out in 12 seconds last week.”

He looked impressed, then doubtful. “That’s impossible. Just number two pencils?”

“Jazzmyn had my scissors. She punctured all the vital pockets single-handedly.”

“You started second graders on teacher scissors?”

“Just the ones who can handle it, if they want to stay in from recess to work. Just Jazzmyn and Caleb.”

He swiped through the logs, comparing our performance to the other second grade classrooms. We were leagues ahead of the others.

“Sure you aren’t inflating the reports a bit?”

“No, sir. You know it’s automated.”

Melkan leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, and nodded to himself. I hated it when he looked thoughtful. Hated it. Something new, something ill-considered, something downright stupid was likely to result. With lots of fanfare.

But he just buzzed the nurse and asked her, "You examined the Lawrence boy?"

"He's here now, sir."

"His eye okay?"

"No permanent damage."

He rang off. "We're done here, Campbell. Send Jazzmyn in. I'll talk to her. No recess for the rest of the quarter, but keep training her on the scissors."

It was much better than I expected.

"But if the Lawrence boy's mother complains..." he warned.

"I know. But I hope we can avoid a suspension. It would break her heart."

"We'll see."

He actually smiled as he waved me out. I almost felt neutral about him as I left the office and gave Jazzmyn a departing pat on the shoulder, but then I remembered what he said about the test scores, and Sophie.

Sophie, short, round, and wise-eyed, had established herself as the small Mayor of Stoney Creek Elementary by the end of first grade, high-fiving everyone all the way down the hallway with her soft hands. However, she was in danger of becoming a mascot. She'd been pushed out of her class for longer portions of the day as the year went by, and by the end of the year was brought out of the resource room only for feel-good forays into the mainstream classroom. Melkan gave her a nominal placement in my class, but insisted she would do better spending most of second grade "in a more supported environment," especially given the rigors of the new

programming. I argued that there was no better support for her than the examples of her own peers. Her parents agreed, and they had a lawyer.

She became, as I hoped, the heart of our class; she would applaud when we finished with the subtraction workbook activity for the day, and the rest of the class got into the habit, too. They also caught on to her victory dance each time they vanquished the Rubber Man, with lots of stomping and fierce whoops and high-fives. The children competed for the chance to help her with her counting bears and sight words, and sharpened their own reflexes as we drilled again and again with her, *Danger, Danger, Go!*

Parents, however, were thrown off by Sophie. Inclusion was still new. When we were growing up, the special kids were always kept in a special room, ketchup counted as a vegetable, and anyone could walk right through the front doors of the school.

The week before Picture Day, two mothers took me aside at the Food Culture Festival, each to whisper that her son called Sophie his best friend, but she hadn't realized until just tonight who Sophie was. "I mean, Leroy hadn't said anything about how she was different," said the first, over her Crock-pot of Mac 'n Weenies.

I could see the story writing itself behind Leroy's mother's shining eyes, how her son had befriended a little Downs girl, and wasn't he such a big-hearted hero?

"It's such a good thing for Leroy that Sophie took him under her wing, isn't it? He's too timid for almost eight. She's really helped him to break out of his shell." And it was true. I explained how Sophie coaxed him to scale the peak of the climbing structure in our reinforced play yard. I doubted that Leroy even ranked in Sophie's top five friends, but I was glad she made him feel at home. "She's quite socially

advanced," I said.

But Todd's mother, one of the West Coast refugees, reeled me in over her quinoa tabbouleh (labeled free of gluten, genetic modification, dairy, and cruelty) and asked me to encourage her son to play with different children: "It's sweet that she likes him, and I'm glad he doesn't mind playing with a girl, but now I see that she's not the best playmate for him. You know we don't want to stunt his social development while he's adjusting to his new life. He needs strong children he can look up to."

I wound up to give her six different pieces of my mind, but by the time I had organized and prioritized them, she had already pulled Todd out of the circle of kids gathered around Sophie for an impromptu *Danger, Danger, Go!* drill and was steering him over to Caleb's parents to arrange an advantageous playdate.

Maybe Todd's mom wasn't always like that. I heard she escaped the Siege of San Francisco in a pontoon boat, in the bloody days after the Repeal Riots, telling Todd they were going on a picnic. I heard her husband didn't make it out, and she told Todd they got a divorce. You hear a lot of rumors these days. It's hard to know what's true.

After the Food Culture Festival, Todd stopped playing with Sophie or even high-fiving her. He took the long way around the room to get to his desk each morning. Her eyes followed him, but she didn't say anything.

When I rejoined my class at the library, picture-taking was almost over. The students were making faces at the photographer, well over the initial wariness they have of strangers in the school. We often remind them that people with visitor's badges have been screened for safety, but then we tell them they need to be alert to the behavior of every

adult, even the trusted ones, because madness has no method.

Sophie clambered up onto the photographer's stool, but instead of giving her signature crooked-toothed grin for the camera, she just stared. Her face was still bloated from crying.

"Come on down, Sophie," I said, and let her initiate a hug so that I could wrap my arms around her. "Now what is it?"

"Miss Campbell," she snuffled, "Todd okay? Todd hurt bad?" She rubbed her snot-nose on my sweater.

"He'll be okay," I said. "The nurse is taking good care of him."

I had her wipe her eyes and nose and convinced her to try one more smile for the photo—then told the photographer we would hold out for the make-up day. When the line of students entered the hallway to our classroom, Sophie waved and took off in the opposite direction, towards the clinic.

"I go see Todd," she said.

"No, Sophie. You don't have safety clearance. Time to go back to class." I took her arm.

She narrowed her eyes and shrugged away from me. I hadn't seen that look before. Sophie's first grade teacher had complained to me that she was unmanageable, "a real handful," a dropper. I'd never had trouble; I got to know Sophie, so I knew what she needed: warnings about transitions, a clear routine, and as much praise as the other children. Sophie had never dropped to the floor to resist my suggestions, but now, watching her stubborn face, I had an inkling of how that might happen.

"Miss Campbell, I really need to go see Todd." A nine word construction. I'd tell Speech later.

I got clearance for an unscheduled trip down the hall, and Ms. Jackson took the class to Bathroom Access to prepare for

lunch.

Sophie greeted the nurse with her usual high-five, then tiptoed to peer around the curtain that divided Todd's cot from the rest of the room. "Todd, you okay?"

I followed her. Todd was sitting up, holding a cold pack to his eye. He looked at Sophie, opened his mouth, closed it, and then rolled over to face the wall, drawing up his knees in a fetal position. I would talk to him about what he called Sophie later. That wasn't the Todd I knew. I loved how Todd chatted all through the morning gathering with Sophie, and giggled over his pocket treasures and armpit farts with her, and how he remembered to check the guinea pig's water every morning—until this week. Avoiding Sophie had made him downright sullen.

Sophie confronted the nurse. "Where's Todd mom? He need his mom."

"Can she come for him?" I asked.

"I left a message. He'll be fine. No lasting damage, but that eye might not be back to normal for awhile."

"Make-up day for photos is Monday."

"His face is going to be a lot of interesting colors by then."

Todd's mom would love that.

"Well, send him back to class if he gets bored," I said. "Or if you need space."

"It's quiet so far. But rumor has it Melkan's bringing in a gator this afternoon. I might need to clear the beds."

"So early in the year? Are the fourth-graders ready?"

"Maybe just a rumor."

Sophie just gazed at Todd's forlorn back. She didn't care about the gator, maybe didn't even know what the Gator Drill was. This is what Sophie cared about: The colony of salvaged pencil stubs in the back of her desk. Being ready to dance when the music started. Salisbury Steak day. Laughing at Todd's fart jokes.

"Time to go, Sophie," I said, and buzzed for clearance to enter the hallway.

She bent over the cot and tucked something orange into the fold of Todd's pinstriped elbow. "Todd, come back soon."

"He okay," she told me confidently, watching for the green light above the door.

Todd peered around the curtain at her, but she didn't notice.

Jazzmyn returned in time to be kept in from recess, and Caleb opted to stay in for practice. She drew me aside while he practiced switching grips on the teacher scissors, and whispered accusingly, "You said they wouldn't suspend me!"

"I didn't know." Todd's mom must have called at last. "How long?"

"Two whole *days*. Mom was supposed to pick me up right away, but she couldn't because there's no one to watch Grandma, and Mr. Melkan said he was busy this afternoon, and his assistant said she couldn't have me crying in her office all afternoon and they sent me back here. *Without even a safety escort.*"

If I would have had the chance, I would have explained to her how lightly she'd gotten off, and how Mr. Melkan and I were impressed with her work and doing our best for her. She was a rational child, and that could have been the end of it for

her, but I didn't have the chance, because the nurse buzzed Todd into our room. Apparently, Mrs. Lawrence could give Melkan an earful about Jazzmyn, but didn't want to pick up her son off schedule.

Jazzmyn had the grace to look embarrassed at his entrance, as did he. Then she shrugged. He made a half-hearted fart sound with his armpit.

"Come on, Todd," said Caleb, hailing him over to my desk.

"Okay," said Todd, and pulled out his newest treasure to show Caleb. "Check this out! An orange pachycephalosaurus!"

Caleb gave an appreciative dinosaur roar, Todd made T-rex hands, Caleb made his own, and they sparred ineffectually with their shortened arms. Then Todd asked, "Whatcha doing in here?"

"We're gonna practice with the teacher scissors." Caleb swiped them from my desk and demonstrated a slash hold. "Ms. Campbell, can Todd do it, too?"

"Why not?" I said. "I think you're ready, Todd." He had made astonishing progress in his few months at our school. This would give him something to feel good about. I would pull him aside later to talk about Sophie. "Now, remember, these stay on my desk at all times, except—"

"I know," said Todd, reaching for them.

"Start with the downward stab," I said. "Just like you do with your number two pencil, but you hold it like this." Caleb helped him adjust his fingers.

Jazzmyn stared at us for a moment, then slouched over to her desk.

"Do you want to help, Jazzie?" I asked.

"I'm not supposed to be here," she hissed at me, then put her head down on her desk.

She was still glowering that afternoon after story time, when we took a break to practice Go reflexes, my own innovation on the usual training. In case of an event, I wanted each one to be confident enough to shout "Go!" Jazzmyn is usually the first one to shout "Danger!" when I pull a colored ball out of the practice basket, but she watched stonily as I lifted the green one into sight.

"Danger!" shouted Adam.

"Danger!" chorused a dozen other voices in response. Not Jazzmyn's.

The children held their breaths, ready.

I threw the green ball to Leroy. "Go!" he shouted, before it even touched his fingers.

"Excellent response time!" I surveyed the class, looking each student in the eyes in turn. "That's what I want from each one of you. Remember, if you are the one closest to the threat, everyone else will get ready, but they will wait for your signal. We'll lose precious seconds if you aren't ready to yell 'Go!' Remember Peoria."

I pulled out a purple ball. "Danger!" they all shouted, then giggled when there was no answering call.

Natasha recovered first. "Danger!"

Most of them hovered over their seats, their hands eager to catch the ball. Sophie, in the front row, was bouncing up and down. I dropped the ball on her desk. Sophie loved to holler a good, clear, "Go!" Still, it took her about five seconds to register that this ball had landed on her desk, to wind up,

grab it, thrust it into the air, and shout "Go!"

The other children clapped politely, because they loved Sophie, but we all knew we would have been dead by now in the case of an event.

"I'll come back to you in a few minutes, Sophie," I said. "Be ready."

I turned to the rest of the class. "You've seen the news. We all believe that we'll be the lucky ones, that it can't happen here. Well, it can. And if bad luck comes our way, it's up to us to make good luck. Good reflexes make good luck."

I passed the orange ball to Todd.

Blue to Casey.

Pink to Jazzmyn, who couldn't help but catch it and shout "Go!" Her reflexes are too good to sulk.

I pulled out the yellow one.

"Danger!"

"Danger!"

I slammed it down on Sophie's desk. Her eyes went wide, and after barely a beat, she shouted, "Go!"

The room erupted in cheers. Even Todd joined in. "Go, go, go!" Sophie chanted, for good measure, waving the yellow ball above her head.

"Okay, balls away! That's enough for today." I passed the ball basket. "Check your pencils, and make sure they're sharp. The Rubber Man hasn't dropped today, and you never know when you'll need to be ready."

"Or where he'll fall," added Caleb, testing his pencil point.

"That's right," I said. "He might fall right next to you. We'll be depending on you to shout Go!"

Half a dozen children glanced apprehensively up at the ceiling, then lined up at the pencil sharpener. Jazzmyn stalked to the end of the line. "Miss Campbell?" she snapped, raising her hand.

"Yes?"

"When will we get to have a real intruder?"

"Never, I hope, but if you're prepared, you don't have to be afraid."

"Will they have a gun?" asked Todd.

"They don't have to. They just have to pose a danger. That's why you have to look. That's why you have to agree as a group that they are dangerous."

"But most of them have guns. All of them I've seen on the news," Todd persisted.

"Why can't we have guns?" Caleb asked.

"Guns are for grown-ups," I explained.

"Who decides that?" asked Jazzmyn, resharpening her pencil until the tip gleamed. "Oh, right. Grown-ups."

"Yeah," said Todd. "Why can't we just get rid of guns?"

I said, per my contract: "People want to be able to choose to have their guns, children. It's what we call a fundamental right."

Jazzmyn turned from the pencil sharpener to stare at me calmly. "Grown-ups are the real danger. All of them." She pointed straight at me. "Danger!"

Like a kid in a pool, answering “Polo” to her “Marco”, Caleb sang out a confirmation, “Danger!” and reached into his desk.

The children balanced at the edge of their seats, gripping their school supplies, unsure. I was standing right next to Sophie’s desk. She took it all in, looked at me, almost past me, and then her eyes widened and she shouted with glee, with pure delight, “Go! Go, go, go, go, go!”

And the children swarmed, pencils raised.

It was a gator. It took me far too long to realize that Melkan had deactivated the locks in our classroom door and ushered in a gator behind me. Gators are primeval and scaly and horrible, and they do not belong in a second-grade classroom. There’s a reason that they’re the only large animal approved for child defense drills. No one feels sorry for them. As it twined past my desk and then, when the wave of children broke upon it, scrabbled across the carpet in a desperate bid to escape, I just stood and watched. In my defense, they didn’t train second-grade teachers for the gator drill at the time. It wasn’t expected. By the time I remembered that I should be using my greater body weight to incapacitate its thrashing midsection, the children had neutralized it. It wasn’t dead yet, but pinned and winded, and twitching as the children caught the rhythm of the stabbing. Sophie finally found her own sharp stub of a pencil and stood at the periphery, pencil raised, looking for an opening. Jazzmyn darted in and out between the other children, stabbing, testing methodically for weak spots. McKenzie anchored the end of its nose. Caleb, pinning the gator down at the base of the tail, shouted, “Someone go for the eyes! Go deep! Get the teacher scissors!” Todd had already snagged them from my desk and was gouging the gator’s flank.

“Get the eyes! Get the eyes!” the other children hollered at

Todd, making way at the head. With the lateral thrust we had just practiced at recess, Todd blinded the gator in one eye.

Sophie shrieked and applauded. "Go, Todd! Go, go, go!"

Todd turned, grinning, to see her teetering at the edge of the melee, the only child without something to do, and waved her in. "Get in here, Sophie!" he shouted, and wrapped her fist around the teacher scissors.

"How?"

"Down, like your pencil, right at the eye." The other kids leaned further away from the head. A broad stain of blood was spreading across the carpet, and the gator was barely twitching anymore. "Sophie! Sophie!" shouted the children as she raised the teacher scissors.

Her first blow bounced off the bony socket and tore down the gator's cheek, but she was already raising the scissors and got it square in the eye on the second blow. She kept going.

"Sophie! Sophie! Sophie!"

Eventually it dawned on them that the gator was dead, and they fell easily into the Rubber Man victory dance, stomping and whooping. Sophie flung the scissors up in victory, and the wicked points of them lodged in the ceiling tiles, where they stayed, and she slapped Todd so hard on the back that he stumbled across the gator's body.

The children giggled and shouted, giddy with victory. Everyone high-fived Sophie. Sophie high-fived everyone. But one by one they fell silent, looking at what was left of the gator. Not much, really. "I thought it was bigger," said Caleb. I had, too. It looked shrunken, there in the spreading pool of blood, its scales torn. The only formidable thing about it was the stench of blood and feces. With its clipped claws and the duct-tape muzzle around its jaws, it had never been much of a

threat. Hardly six feet long, it couldn't have weighed much more than I did.

"Did it hurt?" asked Todd, finally.

I found it hard to answer.

Jazzmyn said, "It was going to die anyway. It was a nuisance and was going to be culled. My sister is in fifth grade, and she says they give the gators drugs so they don't feel pain." She wiped her bloody hands on the lapels of her yellow jacket. The hems of her pants had soaked up four inches of red, and the rest of the suit was splattered with gore.

Bruce from maintenance buzzed in to clear up the remains, and I ushered the class down the hall to Bathroom Access, where they took turns silently signing in to wash their hands. There was nothing to be done about their Picture Day clothes, hanging in bloody tatters of khaki and tulle. The nurse came by to apply butterfly strips to the deepest scratches. And then the children gathered around me in the authorized holding area to hear what I had to say about the drill. Our stats: 3:07 from release to probable death, twelve broken pencils, four cuts requiring bandaging, one pencil puncture wound.

For a second there, when Sophie gave the signal, I actually thought—no, I won't say it. It was a foolish thought. The children would never. At least, not to me. What we were doing was a good thing. They knew it. We were giving them a way to protect themselves. A chance to fight back.

When I was sure my voice wouldn't shake, I congratulated them. "Pretty good work. That gator bled out in under three minutes. But you'll have to do better. If it had an AR-15, at least fourteen of you would be dead by now."

They nodded soberly, but in the back Jazzmyn whispered, "My

big sister's class finished the Gator Drill in five minutes, and they were best in the school."

I made myself smile then. I would wait until later to remind them that they could have flipped the gator over to quickly access its vitals. "You're right, Jazzie. This class is good. This class is the best. I am going to have that gator made into a purse."

And I did, although there wasn't enough skin left on the gator to make a purse bigger than this little coin clutch. I keep it in my pocket still, and in it, right here, is the stub of a rainbow pony pencil that Sophie gave me the day she was promoted up to the middle school, ecstatic and resplendent in another blue bow.

"For luck, Ms. Campbell," she said, patting my cheek with one soft, gentle hand.

"We make our own luck, Sophie," I said. "You of all people should know that."

You see how sharp it is?

New Nonfiction: "A Bridge" by Kent Jacobson



Take me to the alley

Take me to the afflicted ones

Take me to the lonely ones that

Somehow lost their way

Gregory Porter

The twelve-foot chain link capped with concertina wire said, *Whoever you are, you aren't welcome.* The penitentiary sprawled on a barren hill in a forgotten tract in Connecticut, far from houses or schools or the next town. It was 1990, the dirt and rutted parking lot empty. Maximum security didn't pull many visitors, and this would be my first time inside. I recognized

no fear, not at first.

I remembered waiting as a boy in a lot outside another penitentiary. I perched in the passenger seat of the state car my father drove, the black 1950 Chevy with the siren and flashing light. Dad exited the facility smiling. The men inside fashioned signs for the Rhode Island Forest Service and were likely paid very little. The work, Dad said, was always good, always professional, and always on time.

Great oak trees surrounded that old place.

Here, there were no trees, no flowers, not a planted bush. A twilight overcast pressed down as I made my way to a squat, concrete-block building that appeared to be the welcome center, beyond which crouched the penitentiary, a low mean spread of menace which housed two thousand inmates. I explained to the officer hovering behind dark, inch-thick glass what I was there to do. He grunted.

He asked for a driver's license and peered into the worn briefcase Dad had gifted, checking for anything an inmate might want as a weapon. He dropped the license into a drawer and extended a laminated pass through a small hole in the glass, and with the sweep of an arm, he motioned to a steel gate through the chain link.

Dad had been a hard man. While he never came clean about his earliest days, I realize now he was aware a ghetto kid like he had been, loose with brawlers on a drunk through Providence speakeasies, could have landed in a prison making signs. Possibly he smiled as he left that Rhode Island penitentiary because he felt lucky.

He'd floundered as a student and dropped out at sixteen to do piecework in a factory where he poured out work with speed. A threat to more senior men and making hardly any money, he turned back to finish school. And throughout the Depression, without support except an immigrant father's scorn, Dad bulled

a path through college. He worked a year and enrolled in school the next.

He died a decade before I entered Osborn Correctional.

I flinched as the steel gate clanked shut behind. I crossed a dirt yard on cracked asphalt to an officer in a head-to-toe black uniform, and I flashed my laminated pass.

"Wait here."

His glower said, *Forget it. We have more to deal with than you.*

"Screw 'em," Dad would say, "whoever the hell they are, whatever the bastards do. Sometimes, you've got to stand and be counted."

Black uniform ordered me through a second, heavier steel gate where more guards lurked behind more dark glass. My Harris tweed jacket, the worn briefcase, and the evening hour said who I was.

I'd been warned about the guards.

The second steel gate clanked shut behind me. My stomach churned. Will anyone open these doors when I want *out*?

There seemed to be no laughs in this dwelling, only these cold mothers and their freaking gray walls.

"Why you here?" a voice barked from behind the glass.

"I teach in the college program."

Books won't help thugs, Mister, I was ready for him to say.

He gestured down the wide hall.

"Take a right down there and go till you find a guard."

Still no waste of words.

I did what he said and took a right into an enormous, extended corridor. Voices blasted off the walls and concrete floor. Inmates exited a room far ahead, most of them bulked up bodybuilders in identical tan shirts and tan pants. They thundered toward me four abreast, one pack after another. I stepped faster and avoided eye contact.

They ran over 225. I was an Ivy League poster boy in tweed and corduroy. Their faces said, *Who's the punk? Who invited him?*

What had I expected? I'd joked the inmates might have two heads and keep cobras as pets.

A woman at a party asked why anyone would teach in a prison. Wasn't the place dangerous?

I said teacher-pals declared prison the best experience they'd had in a classroom and didn't say more. Their conviction was absolute and I bit. They'd crossed a bridge they hadn't supposed was there and learned something, though they didn't say what.

Bedlam grew as more streamed from what was maybe the dining mess. Masses of them, and too many to count. They howled.

What am I doing in this place?

I showed my pass to a guard I found. I said I taught the English course. He smiled and proceeded down one more hall to a room assigned to Jacobson.

"Is this experience new for you?" he asked.

The guard seemed curious, not at all prickly. He wished me the best.

Inmates passed and nodded to the new guy. They smiled.

I thought, I must be in a different institution.

The room that was mine had an immense oak desk and a matching

oak chair. I wasn't going with that; I wanted no barricade. I took a plastic chair-desk from the front and turned it to the other chair-desks in neat rows facing the front, the oak desk and chair and the blackboard behind me.

I tried not to think what men had done to end in maximum security. Murder, pedophilia, armed robbery, rape, the worst crimes were the most likely. A section of my brain spat images of fiends.

Get a grip. You can't teach fiends. Dad drank with Tommy Pelligrini, a man rumored to be in the Providence mafia. Tommy wore a navy suit and a modest tie. His memory seemed to quiet my mind.

I understood little, nonetheless, about the actual men I was teaching. I'm certain I looked grim. I picked fingernails and fooled with the marriage ring on my finger. Men were finding seats. I rooted in my briefcase for a pen, a pad of paper, for nothing. My back had a knot the size of a golf ball.

Would I recognize anyone? I scanned the roster.

An inmate asked a question and I gave a too brief answer. I didn't initiate conversation like I usually did in a new class.

I glanced at my watch and a voice inside chirped, *You've crossed scarier roads than this, boyo*. A buddy remarked once on my cool in a crisis and my son, Morgen, cracked: "Dad's good in a crisis. It's ordinary life that gives him trouble."

He was ribbing, though I hoped tonight he was right.

I counted twenty-three men in all. Half, I would learn, had killed someone. Most had spent their childhoods in fractured homes, abandoned by fathers whose savvy might have pointed to a better pathway.

The men sat in four straight rows, seats directed at the

teacher like we had in grade school. I didn't ask them to form a circle because I planned to hog the talk tonight. They were black men except one, everybody in a tan uniform with a buzz-cut. White people can't tell one black person from another, a smart observer said.

The single white sat in a far corner. Outside, darkness had fallen and inside it wasn't bright. He wore deep-ink shades. What lay in wait there?

I'd memorize their names and offer that much consideration.

Now. Let's go.

I called the roll and scribbled a note when a man responded. One had red hair. A coffee-colored inmate displayed freckles. One was Goliath, a second a featherweight. Another wore a bandana. Still another had a sweeping scar on a left cheek.

I went one by one, up a row and down the next. I used the scribbles and named each inmate correctly. Bodies straightened. The room perked. Two mentioned how little respect they received in Osborn and others nodded.

The next would be easier, I thought. I would describe in general terms what we'd read and their writing would analyze in coming weeks: American writers from Irving to Twain to Baldwin to Tobias Wolff, with a handful of accessible poets.

I started to speak and couldn't get the words out. My hands shook and my voice fluttered. Fear had taken a public walk. I stopped. I couldn't teach like this.

A hand shot up three seats away. The Goliath, maybe in his twenties and close to three-hundred pounds, a football player once, I bet. He plowed holes for running backs.

Head down, he waved a hand, hesitant.

"Can . . . can I say something?" He spoke with a stutter.

"Sure," I said.

He held a beat, reluctant to say what he wanted to say.

"You . . . you seem nervous."

"You got that right."

The room exploded. Laughter, every single man, belly laughter, even No Eyes behind the ink shades.

Without a prompt except my fear, the men spilled their first hours in Osborn, last week or years before. The shakes, the diarrhea, the sleeplessness, the stares into the dark, the dread, the guards, the threat they might not live.

They did their best to talk me back from where I'd shrunk. They'd been there. They understood. Don't be ashamed. We managed. You can too.

I'm old. I forget names. Days are shorter and they fly too soon. I admit it was a tiny episode in a prison, years ago, hardly worth a mention.

The moment stays.

We are you, they said. We are you. These men who were like the mill kids I grew up around, only older, and in more serious trouble. Men who brought me back to my brawling father.

They weren't foreign. They weren't strange. For a moment, they saw me as I was. Like them, afraid. They were me.

I came from no fractured home, I hadn't been abandoned by my father, I hadn't ever been so continually disrespected. Yet

here I was, at a bridge my father knew.

And there they were too, waiting.

New Nonfiction from James Warren Boyd: “The Ecstasy of Sister Bernadette”

In seventh grade my Catholic elementary school received a new principal, Sister Bernadette, who strode onto the blacktop that first day like Darth Vader walking down the ramp of an Imperial shuttle. Her determined expression and alert eyes matched her gait, punctuated with her stylish yet sensible thick-heeled, closed-toe pumps. She wore what I would come to know as her signature look: a midnight-blue, knee length, A-line dress trimmed with an immaculate white collar and matching slightly flared cuffs. The fact that she voluntarily chose to wear the now-optional veil long after all but the most senior nuns had abandoned them read radically - conservative.

My experience as a child of the '70s in Southern California was that you could tell a nun's temperament by what she wore. Younger nuns (and some of their older allies) in our parish wore breezy blue polyester separates, tried fervently to be groovy and relevant, and were admirably committed to social justice. Older nuns who wore THE VEIL with matching black or dark blue habits were often mean and more than occasionally violent; they generally, as I saw it, dwelled in the dark recesses of the convent and emerged to discipline and punish.

But it was these same veiled authoritarians who provided the

protection I needed as an obviously queer child. In my first weeks after beginning the third grade as a new student, the boy that would become my nemesis, David, stole my thick tortoiseshell glasses, wearing them in the back pockets of his blue corduroy uniform pants, and taunting "Yeah, try to catch me, butt-face." I was an easy mark; in part because I started 1st grade a year early, I was always the youngest and frequently the shortest in my class. Most damningly, though, I was nelly: one of those little boys with neither the ability nor the inclination to butch it up to avoid ridicule. My parents—my mother, consumed by guilt for the queer son she thought she was responsible for creating, and my father emotionally checked out and gone a good part of the year for business—weren't much help. As a family, we seemed to be universally ashamed rather than outraged about my being bullied, convinced somehow that I or we had brought this social embarrassment upon ourselves.

Sr. Bernadette, fortunately for me, ignored and missed nothing. As we filed back to class after early-morning assembly, she witnessed one of the boys in David's posse hit another student on the back of the head simply because he was standing in front of him. Sr. Bernadette pulled both boys out of line, got our attention, and shouted in exasperation, "*This* boy," pointing at the attacker, "just HIT *this* boy," pointing at the victim, "for *no reason*. What is WRONG with you people??!!"

My admiration and respect for Sr. Bernadette deepened in her duties as the English instructor for the advanced class of our grade. While other students complained about grammar drills, essay revision, and impromptu verbal quizzes on irregular verb tenses, I savored them. I relished the diagramming of sentences, especially ones that had incredibly long phrases and clauses of Sr. Bernadette's own creation with their compound subjects, transitive verbs, overly-modified nouns, appositives, and riots of prepositional phrases. I found those

graphic organizers with their sideways houses and attached ladders beautiful landscapes of thought and syntax.



I think my enthusiasm for writing and grammar put me in Sr. Bernadette's good graces, which was a blessing since she proved immune to my usual sycophantic ploys. Fortunately, she seemed to dislike David and his clan of bullies as much or more than I did—if this were possible. Plus, although clearly a bit of a jock herself, who unlike me seemed as comfortable on an athletic field as in the classroom, she didn't seem overly impressed by David's athletic abilities. She was actually *helpful* to students like me who needed a bit of coaching (since our school had no PE teachers), and sometimes spontaneously joined us on the field and blacktop to participate and instruct.

On one such occasion she offered to be the pitcher for our kickball game. I think she enjoyed expertly fulfilling the variety of polite pitching requests from the kickers (e.g. "slow giant bouncies, please" or "fast baby bouncies, please"). Sr. Mary Bernadette even did some fielding in her dress, veil, and pumps, deftly catching fly balls and scooping up grounders while she pitched for both teams. When it was David's turn, a tense hush fell over players on and off the field; we all knew that mortal enemies were facing off. David took his time getting to the plate, trying to unnerve Sr. Mary Bernadette with his swaggering, lackadaisical lope. Despite this, her, face-framed by a few wisps of hair which has escaped the side her veil—remained unchanged; in fact, her polite half-smile may have increased slightly at the corners like a Grinch grin. Her thick dark eyebrows remained neutral, her forehead unfurrowed. Her body was still, save the slow rotation of her neck which allowed her gaze to follow David to the plate; her steely stare focused on David like a panther stalking prey. When he finally arrived at the plate and looked up from the dirt at her with a smirk, the corners of her half smile quivered ever so slightly.

"How would you like your pitch?" Sr. Bernadette asked evenly. She took a breath, and rolled the ball as requested with

perfect accuracy. David watched the incoming pitch: as it neared, he rocked back on a crepe heel of his brown suede Wallabee knockoffs before taking a few leaning stutter steps toward the red rubber ball and kicking it with all his might using the inside of his foot. His kick bulleted on the ground toward Sr. Bernadette. Despite its great speed and a weird, high bounce, she caught the ball confidently above her head with a resounding, "thwap." We held our breath as she lowered her arms, the ball now firmly gripped in a single hand, and looked at a gaping David. She arched one eyebrow and waited for him to run. David trotted towards first, haltingly, eyes locked with hers; then he broke their gaze and sprinted. Sr. Bernadette cocked her arm with the ball back slowly, seemingly wanted to draw out David's cringing as he ran, and when David caught her eye directly across from her, she launched the ball like a trebuchet, hitting David so hard he stumbled with its impact.

Amidst the cheers from those outside of David's retinue, Sr. Bernadette walked back to the mound with a laugh we had never heard. Her subtle, sardonic chuckle was familiar, but this was an unbridled, throaty laugh from deep within. She lifted her face sightly to the sun in elation for a brief moment, her veil tipping back, punctuating her ecstasy. When she arrived at the mound she had regained her composure, and she turned toward David who had returned to the sidelines and asked, "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," David groused, rubbing his shoulder.

Sr. Bernadette nodded at him, and then scanned the field to see who had the ball. She made a beckoning motion to the student, and caught the throw in the air solidly with one hand.

She smiled and scanned David's team, "Who's next?"

Years later I went to visit Sr. Bernadette at the motherhouse on a trip to see family and friends in Southern California. I waited in the quiet, immaculate, oddly corporate-feeling lobby, until she strode around the corner, and exclaimed brightly, "James Boyd!" She seemed only a bit older, and I realized at that point how young she must have been when she became our principal. Gone was her signature habit-esque dress replaced with business casual separates. Gone too was the veil; she had combed-back salt and pepper hair in a short, flattering style. We exchanged hellos (my recollection is that we shook hands) and she invited me to sit with her. I asked her if she remembered our class, and she said, diplomatically, we were "a difficult class but at least we had energy." The classes who came after us, she said, were "hard to get to do anything."

As she reminisced, I looked into her eyes—framed now with soft wrinkles—still marked with a fierce intelligence, eyes that never missed a bully's blacktop trick. But gone was the sternness I surmise was necessary as a school administrator who valued order and fairness. What was in abundance now was the once rarely seen glint of approval she gave students when a verb was conjugated or a sentence diagrammed correctly. And in the corner of her eyes as we sat evaluating each other anew was something I hadn't seen or noticed as a child: a playful glint.

She asked about me. I told her I had moved to San Francisco and was pursuing a master's degree in English. I told her that one of the reasons for my visit was to thank her for being the person who first got me to love the subject.

"I'm happy to hear that," she replied with a smile, "You know, I'm not teaching anymore."

"Really? Why not?" I think my expression might have revealed how unfathomable I thought this was, since in my mind she was *the* English teacher.

"A few years ago, the order needed someone to be the accountant and I stepped up to do it."

"Do you like it?" I asked.

She shrugged, "One of us needed to do it."

After a few more moments of conversation, she stood up and extended her hand again. "Well, good luck to you, James," she said, shaking my hand, "and good luck with your studies."

"Thank you," I said. "Nice to see you."

Sr. Bernadette squeezed my shoulder maternally and gave me a warm, genuine half smile before she turned and walked out of the reception area without looking back, her footsteps echoing in emptiness and deafening quiet.

I stood still for a moment in the vestibule—not wanting to move or make a noise, not wanting that pause after to end—before exiting the motherhouse to my car. As I walked, I wondered what she thought of these periodic visits of the adult specters of children past. What must it be like to meet her historic fan base, surely the former students most motivated to visit? I regret that I didn't ask her if she, too, remembered that sunny afternoon on the kickball field when she transformed into a superhero.