

You would expect this story to begin on a Monday. It does not. Monday would have made a million times more sense. Or even Tuesday. Those are good starting places for school weeks and stories like this. But no.

I mention this because I want you to understand. This is not your average story. Neither is the kid that this story is about. Even the kid's name is weird. It is *Perry*. This story begins on the day that Perry started going to a new school in the middle of the school year.

Have you ever started at a new school mid-year? It stinks. Sometimes you cannot avoid it. I know. Perry could not avoid it. His mom got a new job in a new state. The whole family had to move. Perry had to suffer. But here is the thing. You should always start at your new school on a Monday. There are some exceptions for Tuesday. But Wednesday is not a good starting day. Thursday is even worse.

And Perry started on a Friday!

So stupid. Friday makes the least sense that any day can make. I have to mention it, though. When you are telling a story, this is called a *precipitating incident*. The whole rest of the story comes out of it. Everything you have read so far is called the *prologue*. There is also (if you care) something called *foreshadowing* going on in this section.

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This is kind of a long story. It is sort of two stories, actually. You should get double credit if you read the whole thing. I will start telling the first part. It begins with Perry's dad dropping his son off at his new school on a Friday morning.

Perry and his dad walked into Perry's homeroom class. The dad said something to the teacher. The teacher said something to the dad. The teacher told Perry where to sit. Everyone stared at Perry. Perry stared at the floor. The dad left.

You might think that this is going to turn into a story about kids being mean to a misfit. Or a bunch of misfits becoming friends. Did I mention that Perry is a misfit? Yes, Perry is a total misfit. He never fits in anywhere. He does not talk much. Especially to grownups. Or, to other kids. He has a hard time looking people in the eye. He does not know how to make friends. Also, his hair is longer than any other boy's in seventh grade. And he dyes it purple sometimes.

Like I said, though. This is not a story about kids being mean to a misfit. That is because, first of all, most kids are not mean. That is a stereotype. Secondly, there are rules about bullying. Those rules are really drilled into our heads. If you bully someone like Perry, you get in a lot of trouble. No kids were mean to Perry.

None of them were especially nice to Perry either. There were many reasons for that. Reason #15: All the kids at school had already chosen their friends by this point in the year. Reason #43: There was a dance that night. It took over the conversations that might have otherwise welcomed a new kid with weird hair. Reason #52: Seventh grade is busy. You move around a lot. There is hardly any time to notice a new kid who never opens his mouth. Let alone be nice to him. Reason #1: It was Friday. There is no good reason to start things on a Friday.

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In a different part of the plot of this story, there is an old man. His name is Ira Clark. He seems to be very sad. Or very angry. Probably both. He is looking out the window in his room. There is not much to say about Mr. Clark yet. I am just getting you prepared.

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Back to the main story. There are some other things you need to understand about being a seventh grader. It is bad enough getting dropped into a new school with no friends on a Friday. There is also the matter of classes. None of them are fun.

Perry had seven different teachers in seven different subjects in seven different classrooms. Perry found some of the classes impossible to follow. Geometry, for instance. French, too. Perry thought they should combine both of those classes into one. If they tried to teach him French Geometry, he was sure he could learn just as much in half the time.

Some of Perry's other classes were slightly better. History was not bad. Perry always wondered why they make kids learn about History even though all the things that happened in History are over. But in this case, the History teacher was nice. She made the other kids explain everything they learned in the months before Perry arrived. They had been learning about different wars.

The teacher asked why people fought other people in History. Different kids raised their hands. "Because of God." "Because of land." "Because they hate the other people." "Because of oil and prejudice." Perry did not understand all the things the kids said. But he was pretty sure those were all stupid reasons to kill people. Still, it was sort of an interesting class. The conversation bounced between a bunch of famous people like Christopher Columbus and Abraham Lincoln. It was cool how the teacher connected them. It occurred to Perry that maybe he liked History.

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You get the picture. The school day is long. Seven classes is a lot. You do not need to hear about all the different subjects. It is not important to this story. I do want to mention one

more class, though. Actually, two. The last one is the whole reason that I am even telling you any of this.

After lunch, Perry had a class called Creative Writing. It turned out to be his favorite class. That is because he did not have to do much listening. He did not have to pray that no one spoke to him. He did not have to avoid eye contact the whole time. All he had to do was pretend to write creatively in a notebook. The Creative Writing teacher explained a few things about writing. After that, the room was silent. Everyone just wrote in their notebooks.

Perry could not think of anything to write. So he wrote about not being able to think of anything to write. The first sentence he wrote was: "Boy, I really cannot think of anything to write."

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"In this class you are not allowed to be a passenger. In this class you must be a driver." The person who said that was a teacher named Mr. Sheldon. He sounded like he was trying to teach a class about racecar driving. Not so. The class was called Community Service. It was Perry's last class of the day.

"Each of you has begun your service assignment. All except our newest student. Good afternoon, Perry. It is good that you are starting school on a Friday. We will get you on track right away."

Do you have any idea what Mr. Sheldon was talking about? Neither did Perry. Over the course of forty minutes, Perry stayed mostly just confused. Mr. Sheldon said some more stuff. One time he asked: "Who would like to describe how you have been serving the community?" A few hands went up. Perry figured out some things from the answers he heard. He learned that the other kids in class were helping different people around town. They were volunteering at cool places like firehouses and animal shelters. Or weird places like the Mayor's Office of Special Events.

Perry still had no idea what he needed to do for this class. He had no idea what "get you on track right away" meant. But he knew that when the bell rang at 3:00, the school day was over. So he concentrated on that. At 3:00 the bell rang. All the seventh graders headed out the door. Perry was almost in the hallway when Mr. Sheldon said: "Perry, please wait a moment."

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This might be a good time to talk about narrators. Different stories have different kinds of them. There is one type of narrator called *omniscient*. That means the narrator knows what all the characters are thinking. This story does not have that kind of narrator. I have no idea what

Mr. Sheldon was thinking. All I know is that Mr. Sheldon was the meanest person Perry met all that day.

Mr. Sheldon spoke to Perry from 3:00 to 3:01. He said: "Tomorrow you will go to the Greenstone Center for the Aged. You will ask for Mrs. Whipple. She will get you on track." Mr. Sheldon had written this information on a blue piece of paper. He handed it to Perry. Perry said nothing. He took the paper.

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It was Saturday. It was one day after Perry started at his new school. It was the second day in a row that tons of people stared at Perry as he walked into an unfamiliar place. This time the people staring were old and wrinkly. Otherwise, it felt exactly the same as it had the day before.

"May I help you?" Perry did not know who asked that question. He was busy avoiding eye contact with everyone in the room. He was also considering whether to run away before it was too late. "Young man, may I help you?" Perry looked up. There was a woman seated at a desk. She was not as wrinkly as the other people in the room. Perry tried to find the blue piece of paper that Mr. Sheldon had given him.

"Yes, um, this is the Greenstone Center for the Aged, right? I am supposed to ask for, um, Mrs. Whipple."

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The not-too-wrinkly lady had called Mrs. Whipple on the phone. Mrs. Whipple was on her way. Perry had to wait. He tried to make himself invisible while he did that. It did not work. There were more people staring at Perry than ever. Some did it silently. The rest made comments about Perry's purple hair. An old lady in a wheelchair rolled up to him. "Are you here to see your grandma?" Perry tried to think of an answer that would end the conversation quickly. "Yes" he said.

A man had been watching from nearby. "Your grandmother is Lois, right? She is allergic to garlic. She tells that to the people in the cafeteria at every meal. 'Do not forget, I am allergic to garlic, did you forget?' How many times do you think your grandmother has told me that she is allergic to garlic?" Again, Perry tried to think of an answer to make the conversation short. "Um, twelve times?-"

"-Excuse me, are you Perry?" It was a welcome interruption. Perry was briefly thankful. "I am Mrs. Whipple, please come with me." Perry followed Mrs. Whipple out of the room and down a hallway.

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Perry was in Mrs. Whipple's tiny office. She was talking. He was avoiding eye contact. "Let me tell you about the Greenstone Center for the Aged. This is a world-class facility, Perry. We have 132 geriatric residents. We are here to enrich their lives. We do that by providing – among other services – housing, activities, amenities, care, respect..." It seemed like Mrs. Whipple was reading these words from a computer printout in her brain. She had probably read the words a million times before. They came out of her mouth quickly. She was in a hurry. She was distracted too. Perry knew that because Mrs. Whipple had also mentioned that she was headed out on a vacation very soon.

"I have not had a vacation in four years. Do you know how long four years feels when you work here?" Perry did not know. "Four years is an eternity. I need a break. I need to clear my head. You are a very lucky young man. If you had not come in today, you would have missed your chance to volunteer here. By the way, I may not be coming back."

Nothing that Mrs. Whipple said made any sense to Perry. He may have accidentally stopped listening sometime around "geriatric residents." He hoped that Mrs. Whipple would signal him before she said something important. Like, for instance: Why was Perry even there in the first place? What kind of volunteering would he be forced to do?

A thought crossed Perry's mind. Maybe he was performing some kind of Community Service by listening to this weird woman babble about "amenities for the elderly" and "patently unfair vacation policies." But no. Eventually, Mrs. Whipple did get around to the reason Perry was there.

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"Knock knock." Mrs. Whipple and Perry were facing a closed door marked #209. Mrs. Whipple did not actually knock on the door. She sang the words instead. "Knock knock." As if she did not find it ridiculous to replace a real action with a fake song. As if it were okay to sing "flush flush" instead of flushing the toilet when you are done using it.

There was no answer at the door. Mrs. Whipple opened it. She went inside. Perry followed her. He did not feel he had another choice. There was a man inside the room. The man did not look at his two visitors. The man was sitting in a chair. He was looking out the window. Mrs. Whipple cleared her throat. She spoke a little louder and slower than usual. "Perry, this is Mr. Clark. Mr. Clark, this is Perry. He has come to visit you. Say hello." It was not clear if the instruction was directed at Perry or Mr. Clark. Neither person said hello. "Mr. Clark, this nice young man will be visiting you regularly. You are going to become good friends!"

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Whoa! Did you see that coming? Perry did not see that coming. He was now standing with Mrs. Whipple in the hallway outside room #209. "Okay, Perry, is there anything else you need?" Perry did not understand the question. Anything *else*? Mrs. Whipple had not provided a single thing that Perry needed yet. Nothing she said had made sense all day.

Perry tried to convey his confusion through silence and awkwardness. Mrs. Whipple was not observant enough to notice. "Okay, then, you go back in there with Mr. Clark. Once you get to know each other... Once you get into a routine, I am sure you will..." For some reason, Mrs. Whipple did not finish either of those last two sentences. Maybe she got distracted. Maybe she was still trying to think of the right words as she exited the hallway and this story. Perry never saw her again.

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When Perry entered room #209 for the second time, Mr. Clark was in the same chair. He was still facing the window. Perry thought about whether he should say hello this time. "Um, hi." Mr. Clark did not respond. He did not even look at Perry. He said nothing. Perry was surprised. But Perry was not unhappy about it. No talking meant no conversations. No conversations meant no worries about how to end the conversations.

Perry had been told to stay for thirty minutes. Perry and Mr. Clark spent that half-hour mostly in silence. Perry watched the clock change every minute between 11:30 and 11:59. Mr. Clark stared out the window the whole time. Perry was glad to be in a room with no one staring at or talking to him. At noon, Perry got up to leave. He was not sure if he should say anything or just go. As he walked out the door, he mumbled "Okay, um, bye." He did not wait for a reply. He was already out in the hallway. What he heard from inside the room was very unexpected. It was some kind of animal noise. Like a grunt mixed with a roar. "Urrrng!"

This is a good place in the story to take a break. If you need one. Like if it is your bedtime. Or if you need to pee.

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I am skipping ahead a few weeks. If this were a movie, you might already know that. Perry's hair is different. It is not purple anymore. I will tell you why.

Perry was in his homeroom class one day. He was still the "new" kid. But that label was starting to wear off. Kids were goofing around. Perry was sitting quietly, mostly. All the usual stuff was happening. An announcement came over the speaker. It was the school principal. It was the first time Perry had ever heard the principal's voice. His words were strange. "This is a code three! Urgent code three! All students out of the hallways! Teachers, please secure your rooms immediately!" That is all he said.

It was common for Perry to be surprised or confused by things like that. But this time was very unusual. *Everyone* was surprised and confused. "Code three? What is an urgent code three?" All the goofing stopped. The homeroom teacher ran to the classroom door. She closed it. She locked it. She told everyone to be silent. The whole school seemed to hold its breath. Everyone waited for further instructions. The bell was supposed to ring at 8:45. It did not. At 8:53, there was another announcement. The principal's voice echoed through the school again. "Thank you everyone. When the bell rings, please report to your first period class. Code three is over."

The bell rang. Everyone got up. They all went about their business. Perry did not give much thought to "code three" for the rest of the school day.

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Perry headed home at 3:00 that afternoon. Outside of school, there was a Channel 4 news van. It was parked right along the sidewalk. There was a news lady and a cameraman standing *on* the sidewalk. Perry noticed them just as they crossed his path. "Young man, do you mind if I ask you some questions for the evening news? Do you know any students who bring dangerous weapons into your school? Have you ever experienced violence or danger at your school?"

Perry tried to keep walking. He tried to pretend that he did not realize the news lady was talking to him. "Um, excuse me, I need to get somewhere."

Perry was worried that he would be on the news now. He wondered why the news lady had picked him out of the crowd to ask her dumb questions. He decided it must be his purple hair. He got mad at himself for that. He changed his hairstyle the next day.

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Other than that, not much else had changed since the beginning of this story. Perry still had the same seven classes every day at school. He still understood nothing about Geometry and French. He still sort of liked History. (February is Black History Month, did you know that?) He still enjoyed the time he spent in Creative Writing the best. Oh, and Mr. Sheldon was still Perry's worst teacher.

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Perry did not end up on the Channel 4 news, by the way. The whole "code three" incident turned out to be some kind of false alarm. The biggest thing that came out of it was a long weird talk from – of all people – the Creative Writing teacher. She usually just let the class write in silence. But apparently "code three" gave her something important to say.

"Class, I want to clarify something I have told you in the past. I have said that you should fill your notebook with whatever comes into your mind. Let your imagination run free. Well, unfortunately, that is not exactly true. Some kinds of writing are not okay. For instance, stories that threaten other people are not okay. Descriptions of hurting people are not okay. These are the rules from now on. If you are not sure if the story you have in mind is okay to write, please ask me."

Perry thought to himself: "I am glad I do not have to worry about whether my story is okay or not. I do not write stories. I just write down the thoughts that pop into my head."

When the Creative Writing teacher was done talking, Perry wrote this in his notebook: "Boy, I am glad I do not have to worry about whether my story is okay or not. I do not write stories. I just write down the thoughts that pop into my head."

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"It is time to hear about some of the amazing places and people you have been serving in the community. Who wants to go first? Perry? How about you? Please come to the front of the class."

This was the sort of thing that gave Perry nightmares. Come to the front of the class!? *And talk!*? It was not a dream. It was actually happening. Perry considered his options. He could run away. He could pretend that he was dead. He thought about it. He thought about it some more. He opted to walk to the front of the class.

"Perry, tell us about your experience volunteering at the Greenstone Center for the Aged. How has it been so far?"

"Um... It has been good."

Mr. Sheldon did not seem satisfied with Perry's answer. He kept pressing. "Tell us more, Perry. What do they do at the Greenstone Center? With whom have you been meeting? What have you learned?"

"Ummmmmm..."

"Perry, you *have* been volunteering regularly at the Greenstone Center, have you not?"

Okay, here is the thing. Actually, yes, Perry *had* been going to the Greenstone Center as required. Actually, yes, he *had* been visiting Mr. Clark in room #209 two or three times per week. In fact, he even kind of liked the visits. There was no pressure to talk. But Perry did not know that he was supposed to *learn* stuff while he was there.

"So, um, okay, the Greenstone Center for the Aged is a world-class, um... geriatric facility with like 132 residents. They have a bunch of things for old people to do there. Like sleeping and, um... looking out windows." The class laughed. Perry wished he had chosen either the "run away" or "pretend to die" option earlier.

"Perry, please remain after class."

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Mr. Sheldon spoke to Perry from 3:00 to 3:02. "Perry, I understand you are becoming the regular companion of one of the Greenstone Center residents. I think that is wonderful. I think you both have a great deal to gain from this relationship. To nurture the experience, I have written some questions for you."

Mr. Sheldon placed a piece of paper in Perry's hand. Perry did not look at it. Except to notice that it was blue. Nobody has blue writing paper except Mr. Sheldon. "Please give these the attention they deserve, Perry. I would like a full write-up by the end of the school year. Make sure you include ample detail."

When it was clear that Mr. Sheldon had nothing more to say, Perry left.

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Perry exited the school building. He walked about a mile. At 3:28 he arrived at the Greenstone Center for the Aged. He walked in. He passed the front desk. He nodded at a familiar face. He headed to room #209. He knocked on the door. He let himself in. Mr. Clark was looking out the window. Perry said "hi" and took his usual seat across the room. Perry was not unhappy to be there.

Perry and Mr. Clark sat in silence. Mr. Clark looked out the window. Perry looked at the floor. When he needed a change of pace, Perry glanced up at the pictures on the wall. There were two. One was a picture of Mr. Clark when he was younger. He was with a woman and a boy. The other picture was black and white. It showed a man dressed in a U.S. military uniform kissing his wife. Perry wondered about the pictures. Who were the people that Perry did not recognize? Who took the pictures? Who decided to hang them there?

Perry was reminded of the questions that Mr. Sheldon had written. Perry fished the blue paper out of his pocket. He looked at the words on the page for the first time. Perry's heart sank. How would he ever answer these questions? How would he ever be able to include ample detail? Perry had no idea.

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Did you know that all stories have something called a *voice*? It is true. When you are learning to write stories, *voice* is a word that the teacher sometimes uses to describe your writing style. She might say: "I love your voice." She means that she likes the personality that comes through in the words.

So, weirdly, you do not actually need a voice to have a *voice*.

I am reminded of this by Mr. Clark. Mr. Clark did not talk. Ever. This is not an exaggeration. Perry learned this over the course of many visits. Mr. Clark, in fact, *could* not speak. He could only grunt or growl. Or point. He sometimes pointed at things he needed. Always with his left hand.

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One time Perry arrived at room #209 just as another person was leaving. It was an old man with white hair. "Oh, you must be that boy I have been hearing about. What is your name? Percy is it?"

"No. Perry."

"Yes, that is right. Perry. Ira is mighty happy to have a regular visitor like you. Mighty happy. I am glad to meet you too." Perry could not believe the man was telling the truth. The "mighty happy" part, anyway. That was impossible to believe. Mr. Clark seemed sad or angry all the time. Perry assumed the man was lying. Some adults do that. They do not want to hurt people's feelings.

The white-haired man shook Perry's hand. He said: "Have a nice visit. Maybe I will see you again when I make it back into town." He was nearly out of sight when Perry called out to him. This surprised both Perry and the man.

"Wait. Can I ask you a question about Mr. Clark? ...Did he *ever* have a voice?"

The man walked back to Perry. "Oh my, yes. Ira had a golden voice. A magnificent voice. A voice for the ages!"

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Later, Perry wished he had thought to ask the white-haired man more questions. Specifically: Mr. Sheldon's questions. Now it was too late. Perry had no way to get the information he needed. The one person who might be able to tell him the answers was gone and far away. The other person with the answers could not talk.

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"Mr. Clark, um, do you think you could somehow, um, answer these questions for me?" Perry was holding up the blue piece of paper that Mr. Sheldon had given him.

Mr. Clark was staring at Perry. Perry hated when he did that. Mr. Clark had a way of speaking only with his eyes. Usually (like now) his eyes said: "You are annoying me." But Mr. Clark did not ignore Perry's question. So that was promising. Mr. Clark took the paper in his left hand. He held it close to his face. He seemed to read it to himself. He grunted. Then he dropped the paper. It fell under his chair. "Urgggh."

Perry was not sure if Mr. Clark had dropped the paper on purpose. It did not matter. Perry's situation was hopeless.

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The school year was moving quickly. Ordinarily that is a good thing. But in Perry's case, the end of the school year meant an impossible deadline. Perry counted the days on a calendar. There were 57 of them until Mr. Sheldon's writing assignment was due. Fifty-seven days sounded like sort of a lot. Perry tried to look on the bright side. There was still time for something good to happen. Perry was due for some good news. Maybe Perry's mom would get a new job and move him to a new school again. Or his dad could do it this time. Or Mr. Sheldon could get amnesia.

Perry decided to focus on hoping for those types of things to happen. He decided to give it a month. If one of those things did not happen, he would panic about his writing assignment then.

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One month later, none of those things had happened.

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When you are backed into a corner, sometimes you make crazy decisions. Perry was now backed into a corner. He needed to answer Mr. Sheldon's questions. But he had no way of knowing the actual answers. In his state of panic, a clear thought somehow occurred to Perry. The voice in his head said: "I have two choices. I will either fail Mr. Sheldon's class or I will have to write the assignment creatively."

That led Perry to another thought. The voice in his head said: "Hey, wait a minute. I am in a place every day where writing creatively is the whole reason for being there."

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Perry stopped writing random thoughts in his notebook during his Creative Writing class. For the first time, he had something important to write instead.

Perry thought for a long time about Mr. Sheldon's questions. He was glad he had memorized them. He suddenly felt better about them than ever before. There were only five questions. Perry just had to imagine what the answers might be and then write them down.

The writing came very slow.

The writing sped up a bit when Perry began to think of Mr. Clark as a character in a story. Perry had never written a real story before. It was actually kind of fun. To get started, Perry made a list of everything he knew about Mr. Clark. It was a very short list. Next, Perry made a list of everything he could guess about Mr. Clark. That list was a little longer.

Perry looked at the lists. The words he had written were sort of like the plot of a story. All Perry had to do was make up stuff to connect everything together. Perry worked on this every day in Creative Writing. When it became clear that he needed more time, he continued writing after class. And between classes. And even in the bathroom. Sometimes the words spilled out of Perry's head and into his notebook very quickly. Sometimes he got a little stuck. But he always forced himself to keep going.

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The night before the assignment was due, Perry stayed up late to finish writing it. He was done at 2am. Perry took a deep breath. He re-read the whole thing from top to bottom. He thought it was good. But he had a fleeting worry. "Oh no, did I answer the last question?" Perry had definitely answered the first four questions. The last one was the hardest. Perry had no idea how to address it as a storyteller. At 2:30am he decided not to worry about it. He decided to go to sleep.

Perry was proud of himself. He had found a way to complete Mr. Sheldon's impossible assignment. He was relieved to know that he would not fail the class. As he was falling asleep, Perry thought about the grade he would get from Mr. Sheldon. He figured it would be pretty good. Probably something like a *B*. Maybe a little worse. Maybe a little better. But whatever. Any of those grades would be fine with Perry. He decided he had nothing more to worry about. He slept soundly that night.

The next day, Perry dropped the finished pages on Mr. Sheldon's desk. Perry soon found out that he was correct about the grade he expected. He got a good one. He was wrong about having nothing more to worry about, though.

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Okay, I want to give you one last glimpse inside room #209. Ira Clark is there, but he is not sitting in his usual chair. He is getting dressed. He is putting on his nicest clothes. He does not have many opportunities to wear these clothes any more. With his left hand, Mr. Clark opens a drawer next to his bed. He pulls out a black ballpoint pen. He puts the pen in his jacket pocket.

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On the last day of the school year, there was an assembly at Perry's school. The principal gave a speech. Some of the teachers spoke too. A few kids got awards. The school band played a song. One student had to read something. Maybe you can guess who that student was. He was introduced by two of his teachers at once. They said something about how this student had done a remarkable job of blending what he had learned in both of their classes. When they were done talking, they called Perry up.

Slowly, Perry walked to the stage. He could feel the eyes of every person in school burning into him like lasers. Perry felt like he was going to throw up. That was just before he noticed that his audience was not just students and teachers. For some reason, Mr. Clark and his white-haired out-of-town friend were also watching him from the front row. They were both wearing suits and ties.

Perry stared down at the papers on the podium. His heart raced. His hands shook. There was no way out. "Um, hi, okay..." Perry took a deep breath. "This is something I wrote..."

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Perry read the following...

I would like to tell you about a special person named Ira Clark. He is African-American. He was born in the American South at a time when people with dark skin were not treated as well as white people. When he was a baby, his mother knew that he would grow up to do extraordinary things. She was right.

Ira Clark was born during World War Two. His father was a soldier in the US Navy. He was killed in the war nine days after Ira was born. It was the second-saddest day in Ira Clark's life. Ira Clark's mother was heartbroken. She would never be able to fall in love again. From that day on, she focused all of her love and attention on her son.

Ira Clark understood his mother's sadness. Even as a newborn baby. When Ira Clark saw his mother cry, he knew he needed to be strong for her. That is why Ira Clark did not cry. Not once. Not ever. In fact, he seldom made any sound at all. He learned how to communicate with his eyes. He had no time to waste on meaningless chatter. His brain could run laps around every other child in the neighborhood. Other babies cried. Other toddlers babbled. Other kids whined and gossiped. Ira Clark did not. He saved up his words.

At the age of eleven, Ira Clark spoke for the first time. He had been listening to the radio when a voice came on. It was a preacher in Montgomery, Alabama. Ira Clark heard the voice and said: "I know what I need to do." Ira Clark's mother had never heard her son speak before. She was astonished. She dropped a glass. It broke into a million pieces on the kitchen floor.

Ira Clark's voice was magnificent. It was incredible. I do not mean it was powerful and authoritative like Martin Luther King's. I do not mean it was sweet and supple like a musical instrument. I do not mean it was magnetic and mesmerizing like a torch that draws moths out of darkness. I mean that Ira Clark's voice had all of those qualities and many more.

Naturally, Ira Clark began his career in radio. His first job was at a tiny AM station. Ira Clark read the news and introduced music. The audience was small. But thanks to Ira Clark and his Golden Voice, it soon became the most popular radio station in the town where he lived. Ira Clark's bosses wanted him to work longer and longer hours. Because whenever Ira Clark was on the air, the ratings were high. When he was off the air, people stopped listening.

When the owners of radio stations in other cities heard about Ira Clark, they wanted him too. A station in Los Angeles offered him \$100,000 to move and work there. A station in New York City offered him \$200,000. Ira Clark told all the stations to combine all their money into one offer and he would work for all of them. That is exactly what happened. Ira Clark was soon simulcast on 816 radio stations. He became the richest and most famous voice in America.

Ira Clark was known by hundreds of millions of people. He liked being famous. He also liked that he could maintain his privacy. After all, no one knew what he looked like. They only knew his voice. So he could go anywhere he wanted without being bothered by photographers or autograph-seekers. Or women who wanted to kiss him.

One of the places that Ira Clark liked to go was schools. He liked to help children who were misfits like me. He taught them how to find ways to fit in. He never made them feel bad for being different. He accepted them as unique and special. He helped them to find their own talents, their own voice. He never told them how famous he was.

As soon as Ira Clark became the most successful radio man in the world, he looked for new ways to share his talents. He decided to record books for everyone to enjoy. He realized that people do not always have time to read, but they often have time to listen. He wanted to bring the joy of stories to as many people as he could. Ira Clark was soon the voice of more books than anyone else in the world. Kids were soon devouring more books than ever before. Adults too. The story writers loved that Ira Clark was making books so popular. They were all getting rich because of him.

Every day, Ira Clark was on the radio for ten hours. Then he recorded books for another ten hours. There were not enough hours in the day to read and record all the books that he wanted

to share with the world. He made a list of the stories that he wanted to share. Soon there were 800,000 books on the list. Ira Clark needed to work faster. He figured out a way, of course. Instead of reading books the way that most people have to do it...

**See how she leans her cheek upon her hand
O that I were a glove upon that hand
That I might touch that cheek**

...Ira Clark and his incredible voice could read the words much quicker.

SehowshleanserchkuponrndOthlregluponatanatImytchatchk

He knew how to adjust the pitch of his voice just right. Even with different characters and accents.

Ospkgnbrtglfrthourtsglrstothsntbngmhedasisawngdmsgrvhvn

ORmeOrmeowrfrarthRmeo

So when he slowed down the recording, the words were crystal clear

**O, speak again, bright angel, for thou art
As glorious to this night, being o'er my head
As is a winged messenger of heaven**

**O Romeo, Romeo!
Wherefore art thou Romeo?**

Ira Clark recorded all 800,000 books on his list. He was now famous worldwide. He had accomplished many of the extraordinary things his mother had predicted. The world had changed a lot since he was born. But in many ways it had not gotten better. Ira Clark had been reading the radio news for forty years. People were still fighting with other people. There was violence. There were wars. There seemed to be no solution to all of it.

Ira Clark wanted to try anyway. He asked the leaders of all the countries on the globe to let him speak to their citizens, all at once. The leaders of the countries agreed. Ira Clark gave a speech that was simulcast to every radio on the planet. It was a beautiful speech. It ended like this...

**I have used up all my words. I now give my voice to others who need it. To those who suffer.
To those who are shy. To those who are scared. To those who dream of a better life. My
voice is now yours.**

Those were the last words that Ira Clark ever spoke. Today he is the same caring, private man that he always was. His mind is still sharp. His eyes are still easy to read. His name may not be as famous anymore. But his voice will live on forever.

* * *

Some people clapped when Perry finished reading his story. Perry had no idea who or how many. His eyes were focused downward. His mind was focused elsewhere too. He was desperate to leave the room quickly. If he could make his exit without being seen by Mr. Clark, he felt he would be okay. Perry tried to blend in with a crowd of kids all heading for the exit.

"Perry, please come with me." It was Mr. Sheldon out of nowhere. He guided Perry in a different direction than all the other kids. They left the assembly room. They headed down a long hallway. Then another. It felt like one of the longest walks of Perry's life. Perry and Mr. Sheldon finally arrived at a closed door. It said: "Staff Only." Mr. Sheldon gestured for Perry to go in alone.

* * *

During the long walk with Mr. Sheldon, Perry had felt his mind drifting. Perry had thought about the journey he was on. Not just the long walk with Mr. Sheldon. The whole journey. The one that began when he started at his new school. On that Friday. Perry's mind floated back to a discussion from History class. A random moment from weeks earlier. The discussion that day was about how History is full of people making long journeys. Explorers journeyed from Europe to America. Slaves journeyed from Africa to America. Pioneers journeyed to the frontier. Jews went to concentration camps. Native Americans went to reservations. Astronauts went to the moon. All those people on all those journeys. They never knew what waited for them at their destination. History knows. But the people did not know until they got there. And even then. There is not always a door at the end like the one that marked the end of Perry's journey.

* * *

So, yeah, Perry went through the "Staff Only" door. He found himself entering a room called the teachers' lounge. It had couches. On one of the couches sat Mr. Clark and his friend. Perry could feel them both staring at him.

"Hoo boy, that was quite a story you wrote there, Perry. Quite a story. You sure read the heck out of it too!" Perry did not know how to respond. He thought about blurting out: "I am so, so, so sorry I wrote all those lies about you, Mr. Clark." But what Perry actually said was nothing. The white-haired man continued. "Ira really wants to share something with you."

Perry noticed that Mr. Clark had a stack of papers on his lap. One of the papers looked familiar. It was blue. It was the paper with Mr. Sheldon's questions written on it. It was the same paper that Mr. Clark had dropped on the floor a few months before.

With his left hand, Mr. Clark now pointed to the first question on that paper. **Who is your special friend and where is he from?** Mr. Clark fumbled for another paper from his stack. He handed that paper to Perry. He gestured for Perry to read it. The words on that page were written in black pen. The handwriting was super messy with big shaky letters. Perry was able to make out the words. He read them out loud: "Ira Clark – Youngstown, Ohio."

Perry said: "Oh. That is not in the American South, is it?"

Mr. Clark grunted. With his left hand, Mr. Clark pointed to the second of Mr. Sheldon's questions. **What was it like for him growing up?** Mr. Clark found another paper he wanted Perry to read. It had the same terrible handwriting as before. Perry again read the words out loud: "My childhood was wonderful. My parents and I loved each other very much."

Before Perry could think of anything to say, Mr. Clark pointed to the third question on Mr. Sheldon's list. **What was his career?** Mr. Clark found the next paper he wanted Perry to read. It said: "I was an accountant and the choir director at my church."

Mr. Clark next pointed to the fourth question on Mr. Sheldon's list. **Describe a defining moment in his life.** Mr. Clark handed Perry the paper with his handwritten answer. Perry read the words: "When my wife died. When my son died. When I had my second stroke. When I got angry with God. When I stopped being angry with God." Perry and Mr. Clark looked at each other silently.

Then, Mr. Clark pointed to the last question on Mr. Sheldon's list. **Who has inspired him the most?** There were no other papers in Mr. Clark's stack. Perry had read them all.

Mr. Clark took a black pen out of his suit pocket. He started to write something directly under the last question. Perry could not see what Mr. Clark was writing. He could only see how difficult the task was. Mr. Clark dropped the pen twice. He growled a lot at his own clumsiness. It took him about five minutes to finish writing. Mr. Clark handed the paper to Perry to read. It said: "You."