

Fourth Grade Funnies

Wednesday, February 27, 1991

When seated in the classroom one had to assume that the classmate(s) seated behind were looking at your ass at all times. Bodies crammed between the wood and steel slats of the uncomfortable chairs. Yusmery assured me after school each day that my ass looked fine - or *fine* - but it did not assuage discomfort. Wednesday's dress code for girls to wear dresses and boys to wear ties was strictly enforced, and other rules like shirt-tucking were therefore more rigidly enforced. High school Science teacher Mrs. Sparod's eye saw all in the Faithland hallways, if Mr. Djalito did not catch me at it in the classroom.

Oscar Gnaz had been a Faithland student since Kindergarten, a 'Lifer,' and aside from Tristan Oky (their moms were best friends) he had never made a friend until the Third Grade. It was not me. Or Yus. Towards the end of Third Grade Oscar had become friends with Hank Swun, who also nobody liked. At Faithland people who were not liked were ignored. Not chided or mocked or goaded. It was surprisingly powerful and never discussed, this isolating behavior. Everyone thought that Hank had been transferred to Faithland at the end of Third Grade because like most transfers he was asked, or forced, to leave his previous school. Forced out for unspeakable disobedient behavior, it was believed. The mid-year transfer process never appeared easy on the student. Or perhaps these children looked harried and lost to the world of the schools for additional more persuasive reasons. After a while, everyone assumed, everyone talked to someone - and finally Oscar talked to Hank.

Hank's hair was a starburst off his scalp in 3-D.

'Life is 3-D,' Yusmery said later, changing cassettes in her ancient Walkman that did

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boast a speaker so the music could be communal.

'You know. 3-D like you're wearing glasses at the movies and-'

'Mm hmm.'

Hank wore glasses and winced often to adjust their lay. He was never violent at school but sometimes seemed as though he were about to become so, which merited as violence at Faithland. Because Hank was often disobedient - talking without permission, sloppy with his homework - many in the class were severely frightened of him, and there were several sincere expressions of wonder if perhaps his starburst hair had to do with Satan, or getting high.

Oscar wore the same style and color of glasses as Hank and was not scared of Hank.

Everyone glowed with warm satisfaction when Hank and Oscar became friends. It made absolute sense that the two children no one liked would unite and it felt good to see people we did not want to befriend befriended by others. It felt good to belong to a place that had room for and accepted everyone without having to do the accepting and making room.

Sweat ran through my hair and I scratched it away. No doubt it was pooling in my probably visible ass crack for the back row's viewing pleasure. We had returned from recess on the playground just ten minutes before.

Fourth Grade teacher Mr. Djalito - though call him Mr. D, he says - had asked Oscar before Recess if Oscar had completed his homework. Mr. D reminded Oscar and everyone else that Oscar and Oscar's parents had met with Mr. D the night before and it had been decided - remember, Oscar? Mr. D forcing Oscar to nod an eager-faced head in compliant recognition, the lout - it had been decided that Oscar would start doing his homework and stop trying to escape accountability for not having done his homework by making needless trips to the bathroom and the Nurse's Office and wandering hallways until enough time passed that he figured that the assignment had been collected and maybe his missing assignment would be

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overlooked by the rush of the day in the Fourth Grade.

Before Recess when Oscar's big jovial face had patiently looked up at Mr. D as he was being patiently spoken to and had nodded Yes he had completed his homework assignment, the overhead lights had bounced and beamed from his lenses into my eye for a moment and I knew he had not done his homework, and that Mr. D knew he had not and knew that he ought to just challenge Oscar about it on the spot, but Mr. D wanted Oscar to lie and experience the trepidatious paradise of a Recess unearned and then that thrilling moment back in the classroom when Oscar could hide from accountability no more. And even though Oscar had been lying, when he nodded I thought he looked like the most honest kid I had ever seen. The most well-meaning kid in the room.

'No bullshitting and no kidding.' Yusmery found Oscar's picture in the previous year's yearbook. 'I'd kinda forgotten. He looks like he genuinely sincerely means it. Whatever it is.'

That Oscar had not completed his homework did not, I thought, negate the sincerity in the dishonesty of having said he had.

'But you can't say why.' Yus rolled her eyes.

On a dark day such as today in the Fourth Grade Mr. D's massive body was a pursuing form so large that it was at once very far away and undefined, but humiliatingly near and with definite features.

Mr. D wore sweaters each day that looked assaulted with swirls and blocks of color over dismal dark sky background. The sweaters hung over his waist and to his thighs. When he stood in front of the classroom, their dull color filled the surveillance mirror above the chalkboard that many of us watched to relieve boredom.

'It could almost be psychedelic, watching the upside down reflections,' I said, later, searching the forest for some plants Yus needed and had described at length.

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'And something about accidental eye-contact in the mirror,' Yus said, looking almost mystically into a plant, studying it. 'It's so intimate, other-dimensional.' She sighed. 'The bayonet might not be enough for a monster like Djalito,' she said. 'That's why we need this guy.' Carefully she plucked the plant from the ground, with the roots. 'Rahab taught me: dry it, crush it, blow it in his fucking eyes.'

Most everyone I knew did not like calling him Mr. D. Something inappropriate about it, not in general but specifically with Mr. D. Except for some of the girls and Kevin Kuk, who adored him. Kevin had passed through Mr. D's class two-years before and formed a special bond with Mr. D in a relationship consisting of Kevin acting wildly in the classroom and Mr. D berating and threatening him until Kevin cowered and later Mr. D said nice things to him and comforted him. So Kevin, now two years gone from Mr. D's class, fled to Mr. D's classroom often to sit in the back and 'cool off' any time he felt his temper rising and did not think he could control himself.

'That's what we need at the back of the Fourth Grade room. A violent Sixth Grader who can only be tamed by a predator.'

'Whoa, Yus, I mean,' I stammered, 'I agree but, like - is a teacher giving a student a back rub always abuse?'

'Don't straw man argument me, Jonah. Every kid in this class has a first-person account, illustrative beyond "always."'

But if Oscar did not complete his homework assignment after a special Parent/Teacher meeting and had lied about it and gone to Recess anyway wasn't he in the deepest of darkest shit when the time came to turn in the homework assignment? For years I wondered how magnificent a Recess-

'A trepidatious paradise?' Yus asked, mocking.

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-Oscar had anticipated and then actually experienced. For one thing, it was 25 degrees outside. Hardly a Recess worth the risk. For two, the only thing to do was participate in the enormous but secret fight happening in the soccer game, or pretend like it was not happening. And Oscar did not fight. The Fifth and Sixth Grade boys were using Recess and the soccer game as a disguise to wage what became The Great Soccer Fight Over Kristy Burnino of 1991 - a series of random attacks and strikes and immediate retreats, as groups of boys pretended to play soccer - sometimes the ball did not move for minutes, not that Fifth Grade teacher Mrs. Knobb was going to notice - but in reality were fighting it out over Kristy Burnino's hand and heart. Though she barely liked Geoff Drale for the two weeks they had been dating; and barely tolerated Douglas 'Fish Face' Sammy for the two years before Geoff. As Yus and I watched it unfold, tossing the little orange Syracuse University football back and forth, she said, 'There's a whole world of intrigue and heartbreak and gossip at this place that we just aren't a part of.' She smiled. 'Which is nice.' Although only Mrs. Knobb could have missed entirely the soccer fight.

But yes, for whatever joy had been his during Recess, Oscar was now in the deepest of darkest shit.

All twenty-five of Mr. D's Fourth Graders were turning in their homework by passing the one-page assignment to the left. This meant Alice Plunk had to stand up and walk across the top of the classroom to give her paper to Chrissie Valenz, and then Chrissie would stand to return to Alice after papers were graded. A much envied relief and distraction and stretching of legs for the two desks at the two tips of the horseshoe desk arrangement.

By now it goes without saying that Abby Symonds, who sat to Oscar's left, had no homework assignment in front of her to grade after having passed her own to Amelia Elmira who incidentally hated Abby for an old Kindergarten grudge and was pretending to mark

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every answer as incorrect in advance. This would usually attract Abby's annoyed alarm that any marks indicating error would even erroneously appear on her assignment, but today being a dark day in the Fourth Grade and Oscar not having anything to pass to her she sat with an empty desktop and looked earnestly to Mr. D to attract his attention from the honey he poured into his tea while Oscar stared blankly down at Wrasmus Gerowski's assignment. Abby did not want Mr. D to see her empty desktop and mistakenly think that she had not completed her assignment. Wrasmus' eyes were wide in dawning recognition of Abby's empty desktop and he let hang limply the chewed pen in his mouth, wondering if he should push his assignment from Oscar's desk to Abby's.

Yus said, later, polishing stones that were not for skipping, 'Jeeeesus, I'd feel bad for her if she wasn't such an asshole.' This was shortly after Abby's Winter Break slumber party, the only slumber party Yus ever attended. Abby's mom knew Dr. Berry and forced Abby to invite Yus - who went because Dr. Berry insisted to Ms. Paz that Yusmery go. And of course, before midnight Abby and Jana Nichols had used intense whispering gossip to instruct everyone that Yus' new nickname was Amelia's old nickname: The Cow. Ms. Paz being without a car, and no permit to travel after curfew anyway, Yus spent the cold night wrapped in blankets in a corner behind the furniture, hoping the Walkman batteries lasted until morning, a mix tape from LJ seeing her through.

But Abby, and Wrasmus, need not have worried.

Mr. D, without having looked at Oscar since the return from the frigid Recess, had not seen exactly what he had expected to not see: Oscar handing a completed homework assignment to Abby Symonds on his left.

His voice was a teasing thunder.

'Oscar, where is your assignment?'

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Oscar stared into Wrasmus' assignment on his desktop with eyes now pinched behind lenses and he shook his head so timidly that it could have been just that he was quivering throughout his body. I quickly buried Yus' copy of *It* wrapped in the paper-bag cover of my Social Studies textbook as deep as it would go underneath my desk's contents; Stephen King was a hazardous contraband any day at Faithland, but today perhaps lethal.

'Oscar, you went out to Recess, right?'

Again Oscar shook and said nothing.

'Right?' Mr. D held his arms open in feigned bewilderment and entreated the entire classroom to corroborate his having witnessed Oscar at and returning from Recess.

Some of the students said 'Right' or even that a-hole Colleen Landon said, 'I saw him at Recess,' nodding vigorously as though she were just as incredulous about Oscar's disobedience and falsehood as a sanctified member of the Faithland Faculty like Mr. D, who held up his hands for calm, and stood, looming over the classroom.

He questioned Oscar again and again Oscar could only shake in reply.

And again Mr. D questioned Oscar and again Oscar shook.

And again.

Mr. D resembled an animal becoming its greater more terrible self. A wolf with hair and ears rising. Or an American singing 'Yankee Doodle' all along the Euphrates. The class sat rigidly in place, sensitive to the change coming over the teacher and terrified to upset him into a rage directed at their own person. Oscar shook. Abby wept, pleading in her eyes, begging Mr. D to admonish her and acknowledge her innocence. He delayed absolution and her eyes needed to know why without reproaching or insinuating a mistake on his part. The classroom was so still it might as well have been a photograph, a teacher in an ugly sweater enveloping the class in a mood of danger and approaching chaos. I did not know if I was praying or

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wishing as I repeated with voiceless lips, 'Oh please let this end O please O please let this end.' And then the doomed thought, 'I'll never get past this point. I'll never get past this point.' At least I did not need to find something to feel bad about.

I did not ask for angels to appear in the corners of the room but they did appear there. Four angels in four corners. All dressed in embarrassingly revealing and antiquated robes and halos and even awkwardly carrying harps they obviously did not know how to play.

'Fucking harps?' Yusmery cajoled. 'Jonah, they did not have harps.'

'Inexplicable harps. They didn't play them, Yus. They just hung there. And what do you know? You were as scared shitless as the rest of us.'

The harps hung around the necks of the four angels in the four corners of the classroom. Mr. D, if he had been able to see the angels, would not have given a shit.

'And probably would have compared them to the four horsemen of the apocalypse,' Yus said, 'and angels are annoyed to no end with this common mistake and if you have someplace to be in the foreseeable future do not get an angel started in on articulating the many distinct and indistinct differences between angels and apocalyptic horsemen.'

The darkness was here. This was The Doom that Oscar must have been waiting for, like the rest of us; his just arrived sooner.

'*We have Satan in our classroom!*' Mr. D roared, referring obviously to Oscar who still sat staring now bulbous-eyed straight down into Wrasmus' un fascinating homework while he quaked. I looked out the window and across Onondaga Creek and imagined grabbing Yus with one hand and Oscar with the other and fleeing out the window and over the Creek and into the far far unseeable distance elsewhere, beyond the highways to the seas with Rimbaud and throw away forever papers and pens.

His large thighs wrapped in dark cotton pants pulsed up and down as Mr. D lunged

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towards Oscar's desk. Nobody else moved. Why wasn't this a moment when another teacher appeared in the doorway to borrow chalk? Mr. D glared down his thick face at Oscar. The overhead lights were on but for a moment I could not see, as though it were dusk, all light devoured. If a poll had been taken it would have shown near-universal approval for the sacrifice of Oscar if only it would close the current crisis. Even the four angels in the corners doing jack-all to help us would have contributed to the poll's landslide consensus.

'Where is it, Oscar? Where is your homework assignment? Where is it?'

In hindsight any of us could have perceived that Mr. D was asking, 'Where, Oscar, is the piece of paper upon which is printed your incomplete homework assignment about which we are currently involved in a bit of a tussle?' But at the time in the middle of the unfolding of Mr. D's power it seemed he was taunting Oscar with another rhetorical question as though to say, 'You did not complete your homework and I am asking you to show me your completed homework which we both know you cannot do and so I am not literally asking you to produce the piece of paper upon which your incomplete homework assignment is printed but am just rhetorically displaying and announcing your inability to produce a completed homework assignment at this time.' Since Mr. D was the powerful one he was allowed to use whatever imprecise language he desired because he was the arbiter of the meaning of his language even if that meaning was only understood by him and an entirely different meaning was understood by Oscar.

Therefore it was a surprise, a shock, to all of us but certainly not to Mr. D when Mr. D bent, gripped the top of Oscar's desk and brought the lid of the desk up to reveal the contents which even with messy students was never a whole lot, the desks being small. The force of the motion was so strong that the entire desk was lifted into the air and then slammed down again onto the floor just above Oscar's lap. Abby Symonds stifled a tremendous cry of fear and wept

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into her fists. The four angels grimaced and *wished* they were apocalyptic horsemen.

Still gripping the desk's lid Mr. D hugely hulked over the entire desk and Oscar and peered inside. With both hands he rifled through the desk's contents of textbooks, papers, a sandwich in a plastic baggie and an apple damaged beyond good or evil.

The apple was hurled across the room and struck the far wall with a shuddering thud, leaving a moist dark circle on the wall when it fell to the floor, not unlike the frosting smeared above our cafeteria table. The angel nearest the spot flinched and picked their legs up to avoid the spray.

'Where is it, Oscar? Where is it?'

Mr. D clasped the desk and raised it up high, roaring, while the books and papers fell violently on Oscar who whimpered loudly in fear and perhaps pain, but did not dare to move away.

Books and papers scattered over the floor and with desk held aloft Mr. D roared again, slamming the desk back onto the floor close to Oscar's feet and above his lap.

'Now pick that up!' he shouted. Jan Sawyer hiccuped or yelped, then held her breath to stifle it. Miriam Dell, Perry 'Royal Rangers' Blawdin, and Betty Ann 'Annie' Duke had joined Abby in weeping. Freddy Clane had already been harassed for being Black that morning on his way to Faithland in Baldwinville by an old man named Tyson D. and he was not up for another old white Mr. D's shit and in the instant Mr. D turned his back on Oscar and the classroom door, Freddy glided out of his chair, crouched low, seemed to slide along the floor to the door, and exited - I hoped to ask for help, but did not know who in Faithland could be asked. Maybe Eugene? Oscar remained motionless aside from the quaking. Mr. D stalked to the front of the classroom screaming, 'You make us all cry, Oscar!'

Noticing Oscar's inactivity he bellowed, 'Pick it up!'

Oscar jolted as though struck and was instantly on his knees fumbling books and papers in his sweaty shaking hands attempting to stuff the desk with its materials in such a hurried haphazard way that the materials would never fit properly. Amelia being the only angel in the room was also on her knees helping Oscar pick up his things. I wanted to stand, to speak, to shatter Mr. D's control of the room's space. Or at least run outside and put an S.O.S. into the secret place in the Asherah Pole (for who?). But I was coward. Of course, I confirmed later with some, we all wanted to give him The Finger, and none of us did.

'Don't help him!' Mr. D thundered. It was perhaps the most brave act of disobedience I have ever witnessed that Amelia ignored this command and continued helping Oscar collect his things and then arrange those things in the desk so they could fit properly and the desk lid could close.

'*Most* brave?' Yus asked, later, intentionally playing with her hijab to more clearly display the bullet holes. She futzed with the Walkman in the misty afternoon, exchanging old batteries for newer ones that did not work and then older ones that somehow did.

Mr. D stood and breathed heavily. Amelia and Oscar sat down. One of the angels started warming up their harp fingers as though they were fooling anyone.

Mr. D again lunged at Oscar, and gripped the desk with big hairy hands, one of them displaying a large gold ring. His fury immediately drove everyone close away, breaking the careful patterned arrangement of desks. More disobedience in a crisis of disobedience, Mr. D thought. But, he shrugged, fortuitous because of what would happen next.

What happened next was that Mr. D hurled Oscar's desk across the classroom through the now disparate desks littering the classroom's furthest reaches, Oscar's desk miraculously (though the angels clearly had no hand in this) not striking any of the other desks or students hiding behind those desks, and eventually clattering against the wall.

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'That's your new seat!' Mr. D slammed Oscar's desk squarely against the wall. 'Get over here!' Before Oscar could fall on his frozen legs Mr. D had appeared by his side and hurled his seat across the room and against the desk, which it struck before falling over noisily. Mr. D picked it up, sarcastically pretended to wipe the seat clean with a butler's smile, and invited Oscar to sit. Mr. D returned to his own desk at the front of the classroom, standing over it, and us, exhaling.

Oscar sat at his desk facing the yellow wall and the apple stain, his back to the room.

'You better bring a paper bag to school if you want to go to the bathroom, boy!' This appeared to betray a humor in Mr. D since any sane person forced to choose a bag to urinate and defecate in would obviously choose a plastic bag. Unless Mr. D were going to insist that the bag Oscar brought to school to go to the bathroom in be a paper bag as additional punishment in which case who knows how the Faithland administration would have felt about it. This was the sort of conversation I would have had with Yus but we were both bullied into fear and shame of fear. It was the familiar situation of having to pretend you are not afraid so that the one making you afraid cannot use your fear against you as proof that you have something to be afraid about and that their anger is legitimate, causing you more fear that must be hidden.

'You are never going to the Nurse's Office again! You are never going to the bathroom again!'

Still we all sat quaking and shaking and some crying.

Looking straight at me, Mr. D screamed, 'Don't look at me like that, young man!' but I did not know how I was looking at him so did not know how to change my face into an expression that would placate him. 'I know all about "My name is Pedro from San Diego" you horrible boy!' I was already crying and flushed with fear, so did not know how to present a

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countenance to Mr. D that I heard his accusation, took it seriously, and surely was repentant enough that he did not need to pursue it further with punishments or citations or meetings with Principal Lina or Gramp, let alone thrown desks and paper bag toilets. But who had told? Gramp would be furious - he had already turned off the Disney movie *Can't Buy Me Love* because the high school Senior was wearing a bikini under her T-shirt; and forbidden *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* after a late season two episode portrayed Aunt Helen and her formerly impotent husband reconnecting, in the shower. Disgusted, Gramp had stormed at the television, punched the power button off, and bellowed, 'Fresh Prince is getting a little too fresh!'

Wrasmus' face shivered with tears and snot he did not dare wipe away. Sudden movements, he knew, could augment and attract Mr. D's rage. Wrasmus believed that he would never tell anyone how he knew and what he knew and what he suffered many afternoons after school, lost in the grey skies of Mr. D's enveloping sweaters. Wrasmus thought of him as the tall man dressed in black who even sometimes for gags (not funny) wore a high-crowned hat Wrasmus hated but could a hat really make it worse?, he wondered.

'The boy in the red shirt is never going to the bathroom again!' Oscar was the boy in the red shirt. Mr. D was refusing to say his name. I had played similar games with Yus when angry but not since we had matured.

Wrasmus also wore a red shirt and wished he had not. For a moment Mr. Djalito howled at the ceiling in fear. 'Who's that girl?' he screamed. I thought he had seen the angels. But then he shook his frame, like a dog just out of water, and stared at us, or through us.

Abby learned the next day from Fifth Grader Shirley Smith - who saw it on a Girls Room trip from Mrs. Knobb's Fifth Grade classroom - that Oscar's favorite excuse, Nurse Biba, *had* appeared in Mr. D's classroom doorway during The Boy In The Red Shirt Massacre,

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carrying a shopping bag, but seeing Mr. D's dark wings over the classroom had decided it was not the appropriate time to interrupt. Besides, a shooting in the New Gym had seriously injured Jake Prae and Mrs. Wurn who needed attention; and Peter 'Schmidtweed' Schmidt had already been taken to glory. Faithland Sophomore John Graham was already in police custody in Headmaster Suire's office, sipping cocoa and answering questions.

The angels finally blessedly lovingly interceded by promising Oscar, who they now called The Boy In The Red Shirt, that they would always be there to lend some toilet tissue if it were not provided and that they would ask the Lord Father to intervene by magically making the paper bag which The Boy In The Red Shirt was to urinate and defecate in by magically making that bag into a *plastic* bag at the moment of elimination and letting it remain a plastic bag for a handsome 40 seconds (for the 40 days and 40 nights the Lord protected Noah from the waters) before the bag returned to its natural paper state at which time heaven help us.

As though by consent from above all four angels lost their wings and plunged to the floor in hilarious hijinks of flying robes and ankles and harps smashing kneecaps and exploding ugly thudding notes. And Amelia Elmira did not grow wings but she floated out of her chair and above the class anyway. Mr. D stopped shouting and stared, proving that the angels could pause a beating if not end it.

Amelia's father had just returned home from Operation Desert Storm as part of a war promotion and celebration group, and he had many friends who had come home via Rhode Island in coffins, and Amelia had cried in class several times just telling us about how her dad was coming home because she was so overwhelmed with thinking about how maybe he would not come home or would only come home through Rhode Island in a coffin because some terrible thing happened to him in the desert. Gramp had said a prayer over her father the night before he was shipped out of Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome. The same prayer his great-

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great-great grandfather had recorded in the family Bible and said over Van Schaick's men before they attacked the Onondagas, more than two centuries ago.

The night Amelia's dad returned home the family celebrated, wept, took pictures. He was in our classroom the next morning in his camouflage uniform and with a smile on his haggard face. It had been the middle of the day and he was going to be honored at a service with the mayor somewhere downtown. The news on television the night before had said that 85% of people had 'high confidence' in the military. 'High confidence that what?' Yus asked. The class had been almost unanimously excited about a military uniform and service and someone started singing:

I may never march in the infantry

Ride in the cavalry

Shoot the artillery

I may never zoom o'er the enemy

But I'm in the Lord's army

Yes, sir!

But it was only Scott Skoad who started singing so everyone ignored him. Jan, the only anti-war student (of those who did not have an active war currently being waged against them) rolled her eyes at Scott; her mom's friend Carol had been arrested the day before protesting the war at Representative James Walsh's office. Oblio continued Scott Skoad's theme and began cheerfully singing 'Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition,' but no one knew it aside from Scott, and it died before the first chorus, Oblio being ashamed to sing if no one else joined by Scott.

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Amelia floated over the class with Mr. D frozen and the angels looking up with the rest of us and she told us about what she had overheard her father telling her mother the night before. Kevin Kuk poked his head into the room from the hallway, saw Amelia floating with no wings and said 'Yikes' before making a wisecrack no one remembered and retreating.

'When he was still in Iraq my dad heard on the radio station run by the Army that the Iraqis should rise up and overthrow their leader. The radio said their country would continue to be destroyed until they did this. It was very clear that if they did rise up, that the Army would help them, but they needed to act first so that we would know they wanted us to help and that they were serious. And many of them did rise up but of course the leader they were rising against was very angry and sent his soldiers to kill them and hurt them. And they said to our Army, "Hey, over here, please come help us like you said you would, we can see you down there in Basra hanging out with all the huge armies that you just used to force the leader out of Kuwait, please drive north a little ways and help us like you said you would." But we did not help them. And their leader asked if he could use helicopters he'd bought from us to go get them, and we said "Sure."'

Did anyone breathe in the Fourth Grade? Mr. D did, loudly, gasping. The rest were silent, grave.

'My dad is having dreams, he said, about the 100-hour war and about 10,000 Iraqis he helped bulldoze into the desert as they waited in their bunkers, and he sees 10,000 people standing underneath the desert without even their mothers knowing where they are, and a tall man in black that looked like the President telling him to keep going, to keep bulldozing. And he can't get the William Tell Overture out of his head. And he said he and his friends lived for days without eating so they could give their food to the people they found who had nothing, and taught them how to eat a bird alive if they had to, and my mom said he should be honored

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for that but he said he doesn't want anyone to know but her. And he can't get the William Tell Overture out of his head. And he said there had been a huge traffic jam when the Iraqis were trying to obey us and leave Kuwait, and thousands of them were stuck in a traffic jam in the desert on the only road out of Kuwait and my dad and his friends used helicopters and planes and tanks and all kinds of things to attack the retreating people on the highway, and what's to stop him from doing the same on North Salina Street?, the yellow lines on the road?, and my dad told my mom he didn't know why he had done it and why it had felt so good to do it, to attack the disobeyers even when they obeyed and totally Van Schaick them, and he wanted to run away from this lonely place and he wondered who the real bad people were, and my mom said, "Baby, we are the good guys, we won't ever be the bad guys, never, baby, and on that rock you can build your house, baby," and they both cried long and gross and snotty.'

Wrasmus finally wiped his nose on his sleeve. Yusmery said that a white man in black does not mean the same thing as a brown Iraqi in white. In fact, they mean the opposite. I thought I heard, from the far highways on the hills, a voice singing that we will come rejoicing bringing in the sheaves, but I was probably just remembering that creepy movie Yus loved with the scary man in black singing that song all over creation, and I hoped there was no one like that on those hills.

Hank's starburst hair seemed to float upwards out of his chair like a dandelion spore in space as he stood and Amelia returned to her desk with little effort and gentle floating patience, as though rehearsed. Mr. D looked up at the suddenly standing Hank, mystified with rage that anyone else would dare assume the floor. The four angels hopped a passing chariot of fire hauled by the toothless donkey and took off for the heavens, or Arctic Island. As Hank stood Freddy Clane opened the classroom door, followed not by Principal Lina or Headmaster Suire or even Big Bill, but his sister Angela, whose eyes betrayed the premeditated murder of

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Mr. D that we were all too afraid to display.

'I insist,' said Hank, not seeing Freddy or Angela, after wincing to adjust his glasses, then looking Mr. D in the eye, 'on plastic for my friend.'

END