

“Is it possible to O.D. on writing?”

Hannah’s legs had been swinging from the desk, but as the reality of her predicament - as she saw it, at least - began to sink in, her legs had turned leaden. Hannah looked down at her fingernails as she asked the question, but when Miss Smart laughed, her head snapped back up.

“Oh yes,” Miss Smart said. “Very possible.”

Hannah groaned. She clutched her stomach as though she had eaten a plate of spicy food. On everything she touched - the desk, the notebook, her face - little pinpricks of blood rubbed off. That was because Hannah had bitten the skin off her nails. When she let out a dull and guttural moan, a sound she associated with a dying animal, Miss Smart sat down.

“Oh, come on now.”

Miss Smart rubbed Hannah’s back in tight, fast circles. The effect was that Hannah sat up straight, though her attention remained downcast, toward the linoleum floor streaked with sneaker marks.

“Hannah, it is not so bad as that.”

Miss Smart stared at her. The intensity of Miss Smart’s stare was enough to jolt Hannah out of her own misery, if only momentarily, and even as she sat there still in the midst of hopelessness, Hannah felt herself reaching for a metaphor for Miss Smart’s warm and bright eyes. Open doorways, Hannah decided. Presently, her teacher’s eyes were like open doorways. With her eyes, Miss Smart offered the possibility of relief. Hannah then tried to imagine how her own eyes must appear. ‘Damp, terrified, in shock, reticent’ all came to mind, judging from the intensity with which Miss Smart stared.

“What do you think would help, at this stage in the game?”

Miss Smart’s hand went to her forehead. Her question seemed to be rhetorical, because as soon as she asked it, she began to glance around the classroom, as though the answer might lie not within Hannah, but in the wiped-down chalkboard, or the powered-off overhead projector.

Meanwhile, Hannah was still sorting something out. In Miss Smart’s eyes, Hannah had recognized the same possibility of relief that she had seen countless times before - in the eyes of her mother, before her mother passed away. How many evenings Hannah’s mother had listened patiently as Hannah agonized over an impending exam, or worked through complicated feelings for a boy. After Hannah had talked and cried to her heart’s content, her mom would wrap Hannah in her arms, and thus fulfill the promise of relief. But still - Hannah knew now better than she ever had before - there were days when relief never came, when its promise was only a tantalizing flash of light. Like now. The relief Miss Smart’s eyes suggested was both incredibly tempting and impossibly distant. Like a fictional world that exists beyond a wardrobe or at the bottom of a slide or through the looking glass. Hannah was simultaneously close enough to taste the snowflakes and yet damned by the laws of the physical universe.

Miss Smart patted her knee.

“At its best, the practice of writing is the funnest thing in the world, and if you are physically ill over it, something is not right.” Miss Smart started pacing again, and was no longer looking at Hannah. Hannah watched her zigzag back and forth across the floor.

“You can’t-” Miss Smart began. Then she stopped herself and moved her hand to her head.

“I mean, you mustn’t -” again Miss Smart stopped. Hannah saw that Miss Smart was in anguish, had perhaps for a moment even forgotten about Hannah sitting there. Hannah recognized this anguish. It was derived from the risk that happens when a thought - fully formed in one’s brain - leaps across the threshold of one’s mouth. It was the possibility that, once rendered in the physical world, the thought would be less than whole. Wanting to encourage Miss Smart, Hannah sat up straighter.

“What is it?”

Miss Smart looked at her then, and the brilliance in her eyes told Hannah that the thought was arriving.

“Go outside Hannah,” Miss Smart said. As she spoke her lip trembled. “Go outside and leave your notebook here.”

Hannah laughed, her shoulders slinking back. She glanced at the notebook, which sat on the desk. The book was fat with ink that crinkled its pages. Narrow sticky notes protruded from it, like meat thermometers in a roasting turkey.

“But Miss Smart, my story’s due at five o’clock today. I need to work on it. I can’t do anything else. The story’s not going to just... *grow* an ending.”

While Hannah spoke, Miss Smart began to shake her head.

“The story will be here waiting for you when you return. But you will return only when you’re ready.”

Before she could think, Hannah felt her eyes roll.

“Come on Miss Smart.” She reached for the notebook, her fingers resting on its worn edges. “Let’s be realistic. The deadline is at five. And I’m never going to be ready. I’d just be fooling myself if I went for a stroll.” Hannah shook her head. “I’m sorry, but that ship has sailed. Now is the time to work.”

Miss Smart was sitting back down again; her pacing had ceased, her face was once again composed. All around, the classroom, empty as it was save for Hannah and Miss Smart, seemed to hum with raw attention, like it was a sea that Miss Smart was charting.

“Ultimately, you must make the decision for yourself, what you do now,” said Miss Smart, who was once again perfectly in control of the alignment of her thoughts and speech. “You have my professional opinion.” Hannah’s hands rested on her knees. As Miss Smart spoke, Hannah searched for a new metaphor to describe the light in Miss Smart’s face. And then she reached it: Miss Smart was like a locomotive that had reached the end of its line.

Hannah looked again at the notebook that lay on the desk between them, and her stomach somersaulted. When she spoke, her voice sounded distant and heavy, as though weighted by salt and from another shore.

“Anywhere in particular I am to go?”

Miss Smart’s face fastened into satisfaction.

“Start with the marshes behind the school, and keep an open mind. Don’t come back here until you are ready. Remember, your goal is to have fun-”

“My goal is to finish the story.”

The remark buoyed Miss Smart, whose calmness only seemed to increase.

“Take a notebook with you - a blank one. Here, I have something.” As Miss Smart rummaged in her desk, Hannah turned back to the desk that contained her notebook, her story. One last time, she thumbed through its plot, through the portion where the action thickened and the main character ripened. With a finger she traced the backbone of the story - those themes that sailed from point A to point B, those motifs that pinned the tale to the page. But before the final, unsoiled pages of the book, Hannah stopped. She required no reminder for what lay beyond: the unresolved ending, the purpose of her impending, solitary jaunt.

“One of my favorite pens,” Miss Smart said, and tucked both the pen and the pad of paper into Hannah’s hand. “Only if you need it. Just in case.”

Miss Smart moved with the determination of professionalism, and before Hannah knew it they had exited the classroom, walked down the equally deserted hallway, and were standing at the heavy door of the school’s side exit. Beyond the door, rays of light reflected off a freshly fallen blanket of snow. Hannah gulped.

“Begin with the marshes, you say?”

Smiling, Miss Smart nodded and squeezed Hannah’s fingers.

“It’s the only way.”

Then she pulled open the door, and dazzling sunlight poured into the empty, gray hallway. “Remember your mission, Hannah,” Miss Smart whispered into her pupil’s ear.

Hannah took one breath, shaky and deep, and then she walked outside into the bright and snowy morning.