

The Last Great American Novel
By Rudy L.b.

Jequan Nolan-Cabind is the kinda kid that will fuck you up.

Jequan was tall- maybe six foot five- he was broad; he had a white middle name with tar black skin; his tattoos wrapped around his arms, along his giant sized biceps, like labels wrapped on aluminum cans of vegetables. He was “thick”. He never really fit through doorways, nor did he fit in a standard-sized student desk. He looked like a weight lifter at a gymnastics meet, an exclamation point at the beginning of a sentence or like a bulldog in a pound with only poodles. His BEATS© headphones looked normal on him, and then when he’d let other students wear them, the headphones hung over their ears like adult ear muffs on a child.

Jequan was the biggest shark in the smallest pond of adolescence.

He was ripped -sure- but it was his behavior and his attitude that concerned me. He swore, he always seemed off-task and he always seemed restless. While this was all heard from reputable teachers I trusted, I never had him in class, I could just picture the scene. He’d get up, grab a tissue, sharpen his pencil, sit back down, look at his work and grab another tissue. Work avoidance. With a kid like Jequan, you always wondered if he misbehaved because he couldn’t read or if he couldn’t read because he misbehaved.

For weeks, Jequan was the number one topic in the teacher’s lounge: A seemingly topical aberration. Veteran teachers used to hush each other when his name was mentioned for fear that he might hear. There were plenty of staff who would make deals with him just to get him to do something because most of the time, he never wanted to do anything but text on his phone or play on snapchat. Look at girls. I asked Quan one day how many texts he sent a day, he said, “I dunno. Maybe 1,000?” I don’t know why I asked him that; it was a stupid, nervous question. That was my defense mechanism around students I felt afraid around: ask them dumb questions.

Plenty of teachers just let him sit on his iPhone, hoping above all hope that the material they were teaching will reach his brain through some type of weird osmosis contained in some methodology somewhere, a best practice in a pedagogical handbook that is yet to be written. Those teachers are the ones who post colorful signs on their walls or lay carpet on the floor, creating a learning environment that is pleasant for them... Maybe hang a potted rubber plant... Talk about differentiation like it’s a friend.

But Quan was an industrial kid, a factory kid in a factory system. He’d look better standing on a concrete floor next to a boiler than he ever would in those types of classrooms where teachers create a pleasant environment designed to please the eyes of incoming parents. He would have looked better holding a pipe than a book, welding some piece of steel to a beam than he would look sitting and holding a bright blue literature book with blocked out sections on text features and romantic poetry.

His level of physicality... I don’t think anyone cared to really figure how strong he was, save maybe a coach somewhere with dreams of a state title... was something to be admired in itself. When he sauntered down the hallways, his pants hung next to his knees so that you could see his boxer shorts – sagging, that habit starting in prisons and ending up in schools- always made you wonder if he’d trip and fall when you weren’t looking. His strength made it seem like Quan would be invincible.

That's why it was hard to be there when he died; the way he died was never something I would have ever expected or even imagined. But in life, there is just a new normal type of strength.

Early one Wednesday morning I saw Jequan in the library, I didn't know whether to run or just try to make some casual conversation. I thought running was the best choice but I was sorta tired. It was early. I froze. So I said, "Hello."

"What's up?" he replied.

"Waiting for someone?"

"Yeah, I gotta new tutor. She gonna help me get these credits."

We stood awkwardly and I asked, "So how many texts do you send a day?"

And then she walked in, saving him from having to answer such a dumb question and me from having to think of another dumb one to ask.

This is my first and one of my best memories of Collette, or what most students called her, Claire. I never knew, but heard, that Collette was simply misnamed by her peers and that Claire was simply understood to be her natural name. And as I reflect back on it, that happened a bunch at our school. It happened to other students like Tyler (everybody called him Tommy) or Skyler (everyone called him Stevie.) What's in a name I guess?

Collete is the kinda kid that will make you stay in teaching. She is responsible, hard-working, listens (not just hears but listens) and is everything you could hope for in a young-thinker. She is compliant in her behavior, will read a book of interest to her when she is done with her work, and she understands how to write in a list like fashion so the five paragraph essay format seemed to be invented for her.

As Collete entered and sat down next to JeQuan Nolan-Cabind, I decided I'd sit and watch, like I was on an extreme Safari, wondering if the lion would devour the gazelle or simply play with it, knowing it could kill it whenever it wanted.

With a few minutes before the first hour bell rang, Quan stood up, smiled, mumbled something about how "I'm getting it" and then left. My jaw dropped to the floor.

A student who learns tends to keep learning, with momentum on their side and with that thought, Collette walked over to me and addressed me, already knowing who I was.

"Hey Mr. J. I'm just helping out Jequan. He is not doing so well in Algebra, so I offered. Plus, with the K.N.O.W© coming up, he needs some help."

"Oh," I said. "Letters with numbers: seems like a bad couple to me." I chuckled. She politely followed along.

"Yeah, he needs to get better than an F. Obviously, duh. I think he's going to go into the Army or Marines. He said his recruiter really wants him. He's going to get like twenty thousand dollars, just for signing up! Either way, I think he can do it." She paused, collected her thoughts, "He seems to think it's some kind of weird classified piece of information, him wanting to go into the military and all, but I just want to help him out since no one else will." Claire has gathered more information on Jequan than many of his teachers had garnered in an entire school year.

"Well, that's great! Best of luck in class today!"

"Yeah, I have a speech in English. Plus a history essay I have to revise."

At the time, I did not know Collette. So, I had to decide whether it was best to try and slyly talk around her to figure out why she was doing something so dangerous and insane in tutoring Quan or just directly come out and ask her. It was clear she had tons going on; I was impressed by the way she spoke and the way she held herself upright, with a very adult-like nature and sensibility.

“Well, can I write you a pass to class?”

“Sure, that might help because I have to stop at my locker and get my stuff? With orchestra practice today right after school, I have to carry this instrument, switch it out for my books, and go back and forth from AP Psych to AP Lit.” I smiled: A student in motion tends to stay in motion.

I pulled out my white pass slips, “Your name?”

“I’m Claire- Mr. J. Sorry, Collette. I guess I never introduced myself. I guess not many students ever really introduce themselves.”

And that was how I officially met Collette.

Claire. She must have been a freshman- maybe a sophomore- it didn’t matter at the time. I was trying to slug through, making every effort to keep kids from stealing books, finishing my tattle tape project, and taking a grad school class in Modern U.S. history for no other reason, other than I was bored. Other teachers were always using the library when they weren’t signed up and not coming in when they were. My girlfriend and I were thinking about getting married. I thought about leaving the library and maybe teaching again.

My “can I write you a pass?” trick was always good to get a name out of a student. That’s another dumb question but at least I got what I wanted.

Our school, its chimney constantly blowing out smoke like a factory, was filled with so many students it was hard for me to keep track.

The K.N.O.W.ledge and achievement test© always does a great job of putting everyone on edge. The little things that excite you about coming to school at the start of the year start to wear you down. For example, driving up the school is annoying, mostly because it takes a few extra minutes because of a larger nature preserve. Fifty years ago, someone wanted to take over this wetland/nature preserve/excuse and tried to put a housing subdivision in its place. That all seemed to make sense, given that it was land that our town had annexed and it would have really fit well in the “newtown” limits. But, like all publicly run things, someone objected who had a way out there agenda. Teddy Roosevelt quotes were thrown around quite a bit- if I remember- things like, “For our nature is a reflection of what man does with his time.” Crap like that.

So, the proposal to develop was struck down; that was until a few years later, when a school or a church was an acceptable alternative to the profit generating housing idea.

Again, getting to school takes an extra minute. And that’s what makes it appealing-possibly- to the Jequan’s of the world. It seems and feels like a boarding school, no poor people looking for handouts, no gun stores, no liquor stores. It’s got the makings of a good environment. The nature preserve shields it from the lower income housing that the proposed housing development seemed destined to become.

Our school also does slightly better than other schools on the K.N.O.W.ledge and achievement test©. And occasionally, we have a kid who'll get a perfect score and that makes the paper and that looks good. The score results are rolled up into a "report card" and that report card generally is looked at by community and civic leaders as our grade. A big part of my job is to help administer the K.N.O.W. We want to make sure we get a good looking grade.

As the librarian, I spend most of my day multitasking, inventorying books, and collecting laptops and chrome books. I also handle other testing concerns, which sounds like more work than it is. How the K.N.O.W. "test day" goes is how I might be measured through the year.

It blows me away how dumb people are, how little they know what they are doing sometimes. This caught my attention because it was about Quan; really, this bordered on confidential information. I hate getting e-mails like this:

From: Brown-Hornuck, Darol Sent: Wed 3/21/2011 3:46 PM
To: [DistrictStaff](#)
Cc:
Subject: Background check
Attachments:

Who sent me a background check request for JeQuan Nolan Cabin? No Criminal History. Tickets for disorderly. Parents not contacted.

Darol Hornuck-Brown
Human Resources, Secretary
West Principle School District
1205 S. 70th Street

With the K.N.O.W © test looming, you could sense that all the teachers were just burned out. Another student, a friend of Jequan's- Michaih Jones- was assigned to me for make-up testing. The odd thing was, testing hadn't even started. When I e-mailed our district testing coordinator why he was being placed with me in a make-up testing scenario, so early, the response was simply 'with his attendance being so poor, we are anticipating a need.' That idea that an important test would just simply be skipped outright by a kid always confused me. When I was in school, I went every day, pen in hand, pretty much ready to hang out with my friends and do what my teachers told me to do. But for the Michaih Jones's of the world, his attendance was so poor, the district would be the one fronting the blame. For Michaih, he simply would avoid the test by not being present. And someone was going to let him. That blew me away!

It is situations like this that always reaffirm my understanding of why people leave this profession outright.

I had seriously considered leaving teaching. A buddy of mine was trying to start an online portal that basically, if I understood him correctly, re-directed people to free stuff. He always told me, 'the library of the future will be online and be free!' I agree, I do think that books being online- and free- will be the next big thing so philosophically, I could see doing work like that.

But, other than it taking a few extra minutes to get on campus, and the students being a little tougher around the edges, I generally enjoyed manning the library. And the staff at work was generally well-intentioned. The paycheck was decent. And other than odd external pressures, like the K.N.O.W© test, I enjoyed my work. The student contact was minimal (but just enough) and I was in and out of classrooms enough that I did feel like I was helping make a difference.

In looking at all the data it was clear to me that the test generally told us everything we already knew: our students were behind other schools in reading ability, socio-economic status was the main factor, and that our school was an abstraction in a landscape that generally needed something. The data reminded me that we had a lot of work to do, that the people in our building were heroes in a sense; the heroic sensibility about us was that we all tried to change the lives of our students. Being a hero didn't mean we had super powers, it just meant that we took what society gave us, like a reflection in a mirror, and made it better. The challenge for everyone was to simply do the best we could, even if the students themselves didn't live up to that same ideal. And who had time to run around and blame everyone: I was tired from working so hard.

The coordinator was right. I never saw Michaih, except for the day of the big fight.

The day before spring break, Jequan was in the library, all by himself, struggling to stay awake. As I unlocked the door to enter, I jumped back, unsure of how he got in.

"Uh, hey," he said.

"Hi. Good morning!" I looked around, only to realize we were alone. I stood up tall. "You're here early."

"Uh, yeah, I need to meet Claire. We're studying some stuff. I need to ask her some questions." He looked down, seemingly afraid to look me in the eyes.

"Yeah, Collete. She's amazing isn't she?"

"Yeah- she explains stuff so I can understand. She's good like that." Quan's tattoos bulged through his shirt.

Just like when I first meet her, Collete simply came in, sat down, and got right to work with Quan. At that point in our relationship, I know knew Collete was in three different orchestras, played soccer, tutored her younger brother and sister, and was the daughter of two hard-working parents. She was a voracious reader and I generally found myself recommending books to her at least once a week.

For Collete, the world was hers for the reading.

On a Thursday in April, with Spring break well in our rearview mirror, I walked into school to a large crowd standing around. Crowds, in a school by rule are generally bad. They usually are a sign of trouble and so, in my infinite wisdom, I thought I better check out what was going on with the crowds of kids that were starting to appear, anxiously awaiting something.

Before I could discern what was happening, in my gut, I knew there was going to be a big fight. And then I saw him- Jequan Nolan-Cabind. I knew.

In a moment of weakness, I watched. In retrospect, I should have tried to stop what was about to happen. I should have at least have stood in his way; but a fighter in motion tends to stay in motion.

And then Michaih appeared, probably late, and moved into the circle that had formed in the crowd. I hardly recognized him because, well, I had only seen his student profile picture in our e-Campus system.

Michaih ran at Jequan, raised his arms like he was going to box, leaned to his left, and swung. He struck Jequan in the left shoulder. The students around them roared; the girls held their cell phones tight, collecting videos and images to share later.

Jequan shook off the blow, and stood back. By now I had noticed that Collete had wiggled herself into the front of the crowd. She yelled, "Jequan, no! Stop! Don't do this!" The crowd was getting so loud now, I doubted he heard her. Collete had dropped her backpack and I thought to pick it up for her.

She yelled, "Walk away!"

Jequan struck Michaih so hard in the face I thought the blow would kill him. Michaih stood, stumbled, and fell flat on his face. His head bounced off the hard, concrete floor. Jequan stood over him and smiled. When two students fight, a fist in motion tends to stay in motion. A true fight always starts and ends so fast.

Collete yelled again, "No!" Jequan looked at Collete and hung his head. Within seconds, school security descended upon him, pushing Collete out of the way as Michaih laid cold on the floor. 9-1-1 was called and two EMT's showed up minutes later as Quan stood quietly in the corner of the hallway, next to lockers covered with chipped paint. No one moved, as if to preserve the evidence from the scene of the crime. Collete stood next to him, holding him back from moving and sobbed quietly. The crowd slowly dispersed and students who took cell phone videos raced to upload them, looking to be the first to get credit for witnessing Jequan's massive, knockout blow.

I stood over Michaih's body, looking to do something to help. He swashed back and forth, unconscious. There was nothing really to do. Collete was gently crying now, her hope gone, her real tears visible. I thought to hug her but, well, didn't.

When the paramedics finally arrived, the EMT turned to me, "Hey, can you hold his arms down for me? What do you do here?"

"I'm the librarian," I said.

As the EMT pulled out a long rubber hose, he turned to me and asked inquisitively, "Hey you're a librarian, what is a good book I can read when I'm sitting around, waiting for calls? You know, summer reading?"

"Uh, well," I stuttered, shocked that in the moment, he didn't even concern himself with the identity of this student, what was happening or if Michaih would even be ok. His nonchalant attitude, as if he had seen and helped other like Michaih a thousand times before both comforted me and surprised me, making me long for a job where I would never have to witness things like this.

"A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. I've always thought that was the last great American novel."

"Cool. I'll have to check it out. Who is the author?"

“Betty Smith- she is considered a one-hit wonder. In a way she is, but it’s an amazing book. She was an amazing person. I consider it the great American novel. Hey, is he going to be ok?”

“Cool, thanks! You teacher-types always know good books.” He lifted Michah up onto a pieced together, plastic gurney and the other EMT placed his limp body on the roller. Michah still didn’t seem to have any sense of consciousness.

The EMT turned to Jequan, a small cut above his eye, and said, “Young man come here. Let me take care of that! Even you, the aggressor I’m sure, needs care. Your name”

Quan walked over to him and grunted as the EMT slapped his latex rubber gloves above his hairy forearms. The Quan said, “Man, he shouldn’t uh been talking. He needs to get my name out his mouth.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Kid, just let me help you.” Collete stood aside as if to acknowledge that was what needed to happen next. Jequan stepped over to the EMT. He gloves reeked of latex and iodine. “Now, I’m going to apply this gauze above your eye and I want you to hold it when I tell you too. Hey Freddy, hold up with that kid, I’ll help you lift him out to the deck.”

Freddy, the other EMT responded, “yeah, sure.”

The EMT turned his attention to Quan, “ Now, you can hold this against your cut. It might sting, tickle even, but that’s just the medicine cleaning the germs from the cut, ok big boy.”

Quan did as he was told. The EMT walked back over to Michah. He lifted the gurney with Freddy when suddenly, Claire yelled, “Oh my God! Quan, what is happening?”

Quan’s face was a bright reddish purple. He jawbone looked swollen. He was leaning against Claire now, his strong arms flimsily trying to hold onto her. His skin was blotchy; his eyes had rolled into the back of his head.

The EMT and Freddy dropped Michah on the ground- he bounced again against the concrete floor- and ran to Quan. Quan tried to get up to walk away, stumbled, and fell against the grey floor. Both the EMT’s descended upon him as Freddy immediately jumped on his radio, “We need another truck, now, stat, here base. Immediate need. We’ve got multiple injured and are in need of immediate assistance.” Two school security staffers had finally arrived and hovered over Michah.

The EMT continued, “Kid, kid, stay with me. Stay with me. Breathe. Breathe. In. Out. Do you have any allergies? Do you know if you have any medicines you are currently taking?” Our school Principal, looking on yelled, “What the hell is going on!” as if he had now arrived at a moment when he realized all of this was going to be on the evening news.

And with that, the other EMT crew arrived. It took them a moment to quickly discern what was going on as the hallway now looked like a battlefield. They quickly took over, working on Quan and administering chest compressions. The two new EMT’s whisked him away and before we knew it, they were gone in an ambulance. The orange, faded stripes on the vehicle looked painted over, a new neon orange “safety orange” present for better visibility.

Claire walked over to me. She wasn’t crying but was excited and troubled, “Mr. J, will they be ok?”

“I hope so,” I replied. “I hope so. I just can’t...”

“Can’t what Mr. J?”

“I guess. I... what’z up with that?” My word vomit was pathetic.

Agitated and troubled were the two words that came to mind. Somber, as a word, was better.