

Testing Day

From a troubled night's sleep, Connie wakes at daybreak. Rising from her creaky bed, she listens as Phillip, her only son, snores in cranking waves. Connie takes three deep breaths as she syncs herself with his breathing. She wills herself not to cry.

Half-an-hour later, dressed for testing in her village garb, Connie boils rolled oats into a mushy paste. When finished, she leaves the kitchen to wake Phillip. Connie peers through the cracked bedroom door at her sleeping giant.

“Rise and shine, baby boy,” Connie says, smiling with false hope.

Phillip yawns and rubs his eyes with massive fists, his forearms bundled chords of muscle. He mumbles something in his daze, yet Connie can't make out his words. When Phillip moans louder and asks his mother to leave him be, Connie lets him snooze.

Twenty minutes later, Phillip joins Connie for breakfast. He stoops beneath the kitchen doorframe. Only sixteen, Phillip is twice the size of his mother, weighing as much as a yearling calf and standing seven feet tall.

Phillip pats Connie's head, his hand swallowing her skull. His dull blue eyes, unfocused in their usual way, struggle to make meaning of the world before them. Seated in their only chair, the rickety wood objects to the weight of the boy.

“Why am I up so early mamma?” asks Phillip. “Did I do something wrong?”

Phillip is so sincere, so innocent in his desire to find the truth, that Connie feels her heart tremor. He looks at her and she knows he would believe anything she says. Maybe I should lie, Connie wonders. Maybe I should let chance have its way and pray for the best. But she can't. Maternal instinct makes her break down and explain things as best she can.

"We've talked about this, Phillip. You're sixteen now. The storms will be coming soon, but before they do, testing is required for all students leaving the yard. Today is testing day, and we have to get you ready."

Phillip nods as though he understands before devouring the mush before him, his hand engulfing the copper spoon. In seven bites Phillip finishes breakfast. Connie knows he's still hungry. There is nothing else to give.

"Phillip, today you're going to be tested. Some of your tests will be outside the yard, tests like pulling plow and turning roots. It will be just like when we practice out back. You know how good you are at those jobs, don't you?"

Phillip, struggling to pay attention, remembers how good he is at using his hands.

"I'm a good worker," Phillip declares, nodding his head in bobbing arcs.

"You are, baby," said Connie, "And if today came down to only to that, you'd be top of the lot. But Phillip, today you're going to have to do more than lift bales. Today, you're going to have to show how much you've learned from your readers."

As much pride as Phillip had shown in his strength, the very mention of his readers makes him shake his head in protest.

"Daddy never used no readers. Why can't I be like him?"

At the mention of Phillip's father, Connie stutters. It was true, at least partly, what Phillip said. His father Ryan never had use for readers after being chosen as a plowman. If he hadn't died in the light storms, Ryan could have lived his whole life without ever looking at another text. But that didn't mean he didn't know how.

What Phillip didn't know, the truth Connie carried ever since Phillip's daddy was brought home in a box, was that his father had been good at his readers. He'd finished second in his class in the scoring rounds, second only to his future wife. Sadly, Connie's husband's high marks paired with his massive frame had made him a liability to the Masters. As a result, Phillip's daddy was given a job in the field like any other hand.

In Connie's lapse, Phillip picks up the bowl and begins licking out the remaining oats. Connie snatches the dish from his hand.

"Phillip, your daddy might have worked outside. He might have been big and strong like you, but he was able to do his readers. And you can too, if you try. And you're going to try, if only for me. You have to promise."

Connie can feel tears breaking down her front, yet when Phillip looks into her eyes, she sees he understands.

"O.K. momma," Phillip says, "I promise I'll try for you."

"That's a good boy, Phillip. Your momma needs you to get through today."

Phillip and Connie leave home soon after. Other families, those fortunate enough to have children who've made it to sixteen, join them as they walk in silence. Even the speckled crows are respectful as they watch from branches high above.

Olivia Markson, Connie's cousin, jogs over and joins in the procession.

"Morning, Phillip. How are you feeling about the tests today?"

Olivia smiles as she takes Phillip's arm. Her head barely reaches his shoulder.

"I think I'm ready, Cousin Olivia. Momma and me have been working extra hard on my readers. I just wish I knew what all this testing was about."

Olivia smiles as she tells Phillip not to worry, instructing him to do his best as she looks at Connie with pity. Olivia's daughter Reagan is top of her class. She is beautiful and intelligent. She is at no risk of failure.

At the center of town, past the depot and the Master's compound, the yard waits in the morning sun. Clean red brick, untainted by soot or summer storms, stands as solid as any building from the time before. A silver pole sways out front.

Etched in an archway of red brick is the same message Connie read on her testing day. Before entering, she pats Phillip on the back and prods him to read. He is slow as he sounds out the letters, mumbling to himself once, twice, before trying out loud.

"Enter and be ju-ju-judged. Leave and be proven true."

Inside, Connie and Phillip claim a seat at the front of the crowd. In front of them, the waiting Masters sat elevated on the stage. Ancient men, older than they had right, the Masters are wrinkled and distorted and feeble. Only their Guardians keep them safe.

Separating the crowd from the Masters, the Guardians stand with loaded shotguns. Taken at birth and raised in the Master's compound, the Guardians are faceless brutes, cloaked in black leather with no slit save for sight. Their eyes are blood red.

"Mamma," asks Phillip as he pulls Connie's arm, "Why do they look so strange?"

Phillip leans his head against Connie's shoulder as he trembles in fear.

"I wish I could tell you. The Guardians are different, changed somehow. But don't worry, baby. They aren't going to hurt you. You have my word."

With Connie's assurance, Phillip relaxes into his chair. The steel doors bang shut at the back of the auditorium. The room falls silent as Master Jacobs takes the stage.

"Good morning," booms Master Jacobs, "Good morning to all. Today, we will test our youth, just as we have tested ourselves every day for the past ninety-four years. Strength and intelligence are key if the spring of hope will be replenished once more."

Master Jacobs continues talking about tradition and sacrifice. He speaks about heat storms, about genetic purity, about culling the herd. For thirty-six years Connie has listened to this blasphemy, yet today, she might learn what it means to give up the one she loves. Tuning in, Connie catches the end of Master Jacobs's speech.

"Today, we test for tomorrow, for it is to the future we look, taking only those who carry us on. Let the testing commence!"

The Masters stomp atop the wooden stage. Not a single resident reacts.

Round One

Phillip is taken with his class, sixteen in all, to prepare for the tests. Back outside, when Connie sees her son emerge from the yard, his dull eyes focus as he waves so fiercely that other students snicker in contempt.

Just wait, Connie thinks. Wait till you can see what my boy can do.

For round one of the testing, Philip and his classmates are led to a heaping pile of bricks. Beside the pile, sixteen metal drums with handles welded to their side sit waiting.

"Let us begin with our test of strength," Master Jacobs shouts from a litter held aloft by Guardians. "Each one of you has an empty drum and enough bricks to fill it full. Place as many bricks into the barrel as you can lift, and then carry your load to the finish

line. Remember, you aren't judged on speed, but be warned. If you drop your barrel before you cross the finish line, you will be disqualified."

At such complicated instructions, Phillip appears confused, that is until his classmates begin dropping bricks into their barrels. The bricks ring out against the hollow metal, but slowly, the sound lessens as the barrels begin to fill.

After only minutes, a couple of kids try their barrels. Fearing disqualification, they carry meager loads across the field. Connie counts each brick Philip drops, but she worries he won't know when to stop. With half the children gone, Brandon Fells, one of Phillip's classmates, whispers in Phillip's ear as they continue filling their barrels. Connie can't tell what Brandon says, but she fears the worst as Phillip picks up his pace.

Ten minutes later, with only three students remaining, Phillip has shown no sign of slowing. Connie counts each brick, fifty-two in all, but as the last two students leave, strong young men with nearly full barrels of their own, Phillip keeps going.

In panic, Connie realizes what Brandon Fells told her son.

He's told Phillip to fill the barrel to the top.

"Stop," shouts Connie, only Phillip doesn't hear. Between the sound of labor and the screams of nervous families, Phillip keeps going. Bricks rise from out his barrel.

Looking up and realizing he is the last one left, Phillip tests his load and is surprised to find it so heavy. Connie feels like fainting. It is only after trying the barrel several times that Phillip lifts it in his arms.

Seventy-eight bricks. A field as wide as a plowman's plot. Phillip's steps are slow and aching, but he starts to make his way. By the time Phillip is halfway across the field, every other student has finished. The entire village watches in amazement as

Phillip plods on. His arms bulge. Sweat pours down his brow. Yet Connie knows he'll make it, so hopeful she starts to cheer.

When the handle in Phillip's left hand snaps off, Connie shudders in agony.

Under the immense weight, the welded handle gives way as Phillip freezes, the entire bulk of the barrel shifting to his right arm. Not dropping the load, he sways and yells, veins popping in his forehead as he tries not to fall. Brandon Fells laughs out loud.

If Phillip drops his barrel, Connie promises to her soul, that boy will die this year.

But Phillip doesn't drop the barrel. Biting down so hard it looks like his teeth will break, Phillip begins stepping forward in awkward shuffles, balancing the immense weight against the right side of his body. The load is tremendous, more than any man could carry with two hands. Phillip does it with one. Ten steps to go, then five, then Phillip crosses the finish line, collapsing as the barrel of bricks spill onto the ground.

The village erupts in cheers.

After the counting, after all sixteen loads are tallied, Phillip sits in first place. Connie feels prouder than she has ever been, yet as Master Jacob's blows his horn and signals the village back toward the yard, Connie's joy dies at once.

Phillip has only made it halfway. His real test is still to come.

Round Two

After the tests of strength, the families return inside. Sixteen desks now fill the waiting stage. Taking a seat towards the rear, when Phillip searches for his mother, Connie can tell he's lost faith. Connie waves and smiles, only Phillip doesn't find her as the rows in front of him quickly fill.

Walking to the podium, Master Jacobs clears his throat and spits yellow phlegm on the wooden floor.

“We will now begin our second round of testing, judging our students not only for their ability to protect us with brute strength, but with strength of mind. After testing is finished, families may gather until scoring is complete.”

Too numb to react, too tired from worrying over how Phillip will do, Connie can only sit and watch. Thirty minutes go quick. Although many students, Reagan and Brandon and half-a-dozen others finish in half the allotted time, Phillip never lifts his head. Master Jacobs calls time, but Phillip continues writing until a Guardian snatches the pencil from his fist. When he looks up, Connie feels like dying.

Phillip makes his way down to Connie as families mill about the foot of the stage. Soon, one of them will be leaving. Connie hugs her boy as tight as she can.

“Phillip, baby, you did so good. I knew how strong you were, but eighty bricks? You made your so proud mamma.”

Connie squeezes Phillip's hands as she tries breathing life back into his eyes.

“I don't know bout my readers, Momma. They were different from what we ever did. I promise I tried, but I'm scared I didn't do so good.”

Holding her son for what might be the last time, Connie doesn't move when Master Jacobs bangs his gavel on the podium.

“Attention, the tests have been graded. We will now begin judging, and finished, cleanse ourselves of the chaff. Families, please take your seats until all scores are read.”

Connie leads Phillip over to their chairs, passing crying children and stricken parents as they wait for the results. Seated, she looks up and listens for her future.

“In a world where there is never enough,” says Master Jacobs as he looks over his people, “Leaders must be willing to separate the weak from the strong. Our village endures because we do just that. It’s why we test, why we judge. And so, after today’s testing, the following students have been proven worthy.”

Master Jacobs begins reading out names like he is bringing back the dead. Each time a child is called, screams erupt as parents are forced to contain their joy. Sixteen names, but only fifteen who get to stay. First it’s one, then two, then ten. After twelve, Connie gives up. After fourteen, she realizes Master Jacobs has stopped reading.

Visibly annoyed, Master Jacobs falls silent as he signals for the graders to come and check his list. Master Jacobs is angry at his subordinates, yet six graders point at the names and nod in unison. Clearing his throat, Master Jacobs addresses the crowd.

“Apparently, there’s been some gridlock in our scoring. Despite two rounds of testing, it appears we have a tie. Will the following students please approach the stage: Phillip Tanner and Harrison Reams. Come forth and be judged, for only one can stay.

Tiebreaker

Before Harrison Reams takes the stage, Connie struggles to remember the boy. A scrawny lad, it isn’t until Phillip’s challenger leaves his mother’s side that Connie recalls the classmate who might take her son’s place.

Watching Harrison near the podium, smudged dirt on his pale face, oily hair matted to his head, Connie turns and looks at his mother. Her name was named Regina, Regina or something very near. Regina had worked in the village laundry once, years past. After her husband, Harrison’s father, died in a reaper, Connie had heard tale that

she'd fallen for the bottle. Now, all paunch stomach and droopy eyes, it was clear the years weren't kind. Yet even in the lowest ring of village life, hope still kept its place.

Phillip, his name called once, twice, each time more menacing than the last, is summoned to the stage. Lost in her thoughts, Connie realizes she needs to let go of her son's hand. No one moves after Phillip climbs the stage, not until Master Jacobs bangs his gavel three times. Master Jacobs stares at Harrison and Phillip, licking his lips as he revels in his power.

"After testing for strength and intelligence, these two young men have been proven equal. To settle the dispute, we will turn to the basest of tests. Harrison Reams and Phillip Tanner, you will now fight to decide who stays."

Recovered from their shock, the gathered villagers protest as they recognize the sick turn in the Masters' plan. Soaking wet, Harrison doesn't weigh half of Phillip's measure. He is gangly and thin. He stands no chance.

A man behind Connie shouts in protest. When he does, Master Jacobs signals towards the Guardians. Two masked creatures shove their way forward. Reaching the man, they break his nose and shatter his kneecap with the butt of their shotguns. As the rest of the Guardians slide buckshot shells into place, the crowd falls silent again.

"There will be no discourse," Master Jacob's seethes. "Let's make this quick."

Master Jacobs retreats into a crowd of Guardians as a circle forms around the boys. Phillip, staring out over the gap of pressing bodies, has again grown confused. For his part, Harrison quivers mightily as he faces off against a giant. Harrison knows what lies at stake if he fails. As such, he drops his shoulder and charges into Phillip.

Phillip doesn't budge an inch.

Safe behind his protection, Master Jacobs laugh as Harrison punches Phillip's side. After the jab, Harrison continues circling, holding his hands in front of him like they'd protect him if Phillip ever made up his mind to fight.

Her moral fabric torn in tow, Connie doesn't want to say it, to tell her boy to hurt someone so weak, yet her love for Phillip makes her forget what's right. Running to the front of the stage, Connie yells up at Phillip as Harrison tries tackling him again.

"Phillip, you're going to have to fight that boy. Pretend it's just a game. Pretend, and it will be over so soon we'll be back home."

Phillip, wrapped at the knees by a weeping Harrison, looks at Connie like a puppy gone deaf. There isn't a mean bone in his whole body, and for a second, as he looks down at Harrison's flailing form, Connie worries Phillip won't strike back.

But she doesn't worry long. Becoming desperate, instinct makes Harrison strike Phillip where even he is weak. Punched in his groin, Phillip's face contorts as he bends over, sucking air and reaching to cover his privates. Harrison's strike is nowhere near enough to topple Phillip, but it is enough to make him angry.

Like a coiled snake, Phillip punches Harrison with all he has. The strike crack's Harrison's jaw and sends him sprawling. Blood and spit spray the circled Guardians, yet as Harrison's mother Regina moans in anguish, the circled Guardians break rank.

Testing is over. Connie's boy has made it.

Judgment

The wall stands so high its shadow engulfs the nearing crowd. It is cold in the shade, lifeless winds blowing in from the northern desert.

It took the Guardians twenty minutes to revive poor Harrison. After the fight, Harrison's mother Regina sprinted to the stage and held her bleeding son, his jaw offset, his eyes sewn shut behind concussion. As Connie watched Regina's gentle cradle, she hadn't known what to feel. She wasn't happy, yet the sight of Harrison hadn't stirred her like it ought to.

When Phillip made his way down from the stage, bowling people over in his mad retreat, Connie's relief makes her want to retch. She was so close to saying goodbye.

An hour later, standing at the base of the wall, Phillip was still lost to tears. Unsure of everything but how he felt, Phillip experienced the pain his mother couldn't recognize, the grief of Regina and every other family who'd ever said farewell.

"I'm so sorry mamma," Phillip blubbered, "I didn't want to hurt that boy."

Harrison, brought back from the brink by smelling salts and a cold bucket of water, stands at the front of the crowd, flanked on either side by armed Guardians.

"You don't need to worry about Harrison," promised Connie. "The Guardians won't hurt him. Once the gate opens, no one here will ever hurt him again."

From deep inside the wall, metal gears start turning. As they do, the massive gate gives way.

"Mamma," Phillip whispers, peaking outside for the first time in his life, "Where's he gunna go? I don't see nobody out there. I don't see nothing at all."

As the gap between the gates grows large, Connie sees that Phillip is correct. White salt flats stretched as far as the eye can see wait beyond the wall.

Every year, ninety-four cycles and counting, their community has opened the gates. Ninety-four years and ninety-four students, and never had one made it back in.

Choosing a lie over the pain, Connie pulls Phillip in tight as Regina is torn from her son.

“There are people out there Phillip, good people, like you and me. Harrison is just going to live with someone new.”

Master Jacobs walks out front of the crowd as Harrison is drug away from his sobbing mother. Pointing out towards the waste, he watches as the Guardians carry Harrison beyond the threshold.

“We do this to prove ourselves strong. Testing culls the herd. It makes us endure where so many others have failed. You students who have made it, you have proven yourselves worthy. You have earned the right to stay.”

The Guardians dragging Harrison throw him to the ground once they are beyond the confines of the wall. Harrison slides on the hard scabble, his palms scraped to blood, his face covered in dust. Harrison does not rise.

“Let us remember, “Master Jacob yells, “Let us never forget what we give.”

As the gates close on the vision, sight slipping like sand between the cracks, Connie can’t tear her eyes from Harrison.

Twenty feet, then ten, then five.

Before the last sliver of hope slams shut, Connie finally looks away.

The crowd is quiet as the metal gears stop turning. A haunting wind whistles over the wall. Connie’s hair blows in the breeze, but she does not move.

“Momma,” Phillip says, pulling on his mother’s blouse, “I wanna go home.”

Connie looks up at the metal walls before acting. Committing every detail to memory, every rusted flake and scratch and gear, Connie makes herself remember.

“You’re right, baby,” Connie says, squeezing Phillip’s arm once she’s certain she won’t forget. “Let’s go home.”

The End