

PERSPECTIVES ON DANE, FIRST GRADE

I.

Dane's bottom itched. Not his bottom, his anus. He was alone in the classroom, the lights switched off by the last one in line as his classmates had walked single file out the door to recess. He glanced around, then reached behind and violently dug in, his fingers pressing his brown Toughskins jeans and white Hanes briefs to rasp the irksome spot. Three seconds and the itch was gone. He raised his hand to his face: salt, decay, familiar. And then, with horror, he sensed that he was not alone. His eyes moved from his fingers and shifted focus toward the door, still open. There he saw two girls from his class, one wearing a red and white plaid skirt with thick lines and large squares woven at an angle - a recurring fall fashion in this northern Minnesota town. They had returned, he saw, to fetch a red gym ball which the shorter of the two now held in her hands. They were paused midstride near the door, looking back at him over their shoulders. They stared a moment longer, wrinkled their noses, and were gone.

"Ew, did you see?" he heard, and then laughter and the sound of feet slapping the tile floor as they ran down the hall. He stood in the gloom of the unlit classroom and rehearsed the last few moments in his head. Some minutes later a teacher passing noticed him and popped her head in.

"You need to hurry and catch up with your class. They're already on the playground."

"So, like, we went back in, me and Beth? 'Cause Mrs. Grander said. And we're just getting the ball, y' know? And then we saw him. For a second I just stared. It was a little dark, and the light from the windows was really bright, so I wasn't a hundred percent sure at first. But then Beth looked at me, and I could tell by the expression on her face. He was totally scratching his butt! It was sooo gross! And then - I think I'm going to puke - afterwards I think he smelled his fingers! Eeeww! And we just ran out of there."

I look back as I reach the door. He is still sitting in his seat, eyes straight ahead, and so I hit the three switches and turn out the lights. Last one in line, he's not in line! Sometimes he stays there, I don't know why. I try to walk faster to keep up, but they are already gone.

On the playground ten kids are picking sides for kickball, and others are planning other games, but I walk past them all and sit on a bench. Even if I wanted to play, I wouldn't get picked, but with my weight and asthma my mother says no. My doctor's note covers all physical activity and everybody knows. Between the thyroid thing and my lungs, I just can't. Just sit in the shade, and watch them run around and sweat. In my whole life I never played kickball. I've only watched.

Everybody looks ready, what are they waiting for? Oh! Here comes Sarah and Beth with the ball! Sarah joins the team up to kick. She huddles with a few of the girls, and then I hear a few of them emit a groan. Some laugh and turn to others. Meanwhile Beth has walked out to the mound. Her lips are moving as she hands the ball to the pitcher. I see him shake his head, then shudder. Then Beth jogs out to centerfield and he rolls the first pitch toward home plate.

Everybody looks like they're having fun. I kinda wish I could play too.

Mrs. Grander was a kind woman, a young 42, who favored bouffant hair-dos and long, fitted skirts that went halfway down her calves. She was attentive to all her students and devoted to her husband who, with his father, ran the town's independent grocery store. The couple had had difficulty getting, or

staying, pregnant - in their first six years of marriage she had miscarried seven times - before they had been blessed with Charles Andrew.

Little Charles, born with Down Syndrome but otherwise healthy, was the joy of her life, and she had treasured the year he had been a student in her first grade class. She thought of Charles now as she overheard snippets of gossip making their way around the playground. Charles was different from the other children - his protruding tongue, his flat, wide face, his lower mental capacity - but he was so full of joy and love. At school that year, arriving early with her each day, he had greeted his classmates as they arrived with a bear hug and "I missed you!" or, if they seemed down, "Are you OK?" His smile rarely wavered, even when children had sometimes teased him. Those children she had gently taken aside, explaining why Charles was special - an angel's kiss was all she said - and guiding their young hearts until they themselves were suggesting to her ways to include Charles in their activities.

It was different with Dane. She watched him emerge from the double doors onto the playground; the last one out, not unusual, and he was looking away. It was the same in the classroom. During crafts as the children cut and colored, he would begin to draw or shade with whatever crayon had landed on his desk, then stop when he realized he needed another color. While the other

children busily chatted and traded supplies, she would watch as he glanced at an unused marker on his neighbor's desk and then, instead of asking or just reaching to take it, it seemed he would shrink into himself. As if his shoulders were pushed or pulled downward, and his elbows were collapsing into the center of his gravity. He talked little in class, and then so softly she had to strain to hear. He was at times a bit of a mess, too; teeth not well brushed, his shirt and pants sporting yesterday's stains or wafting an accumulation of odors.

Today, as always, he kept to himself on the playground, hands in his pockets, head bowed, scuffing his shoes as he paced past the four-square game and around the boys playing king of the hill on a low mound of dirt. And yet, she thought - it was something in the way he paused his scuffing from time to time - and yet, it almost looked as if he might have joined in had someone grabbed his arm and pulled him in. She had in fact tried to nudge some of the boys to enact this very scene, as she had with Charles' classmates some years before, but her encouragements had fallen flat. For now, she would just watch, her children grouped and paired in play, and one alone, pacing the periphery.

Nelson looked up as Tommy's nostrils flared. "I'm gonna kill that snot-nosed punk! I'm gonna beat his head into the dirt until he fesses up!"

Mrs. Grander had just left the room to run some mimeographs, and Tommy was inspecting his yellow No. 2 pencil, in particular the tall, angled tip of the pink cap eraser stuck on top.

Nelson felt a sudden rush inside. He'd never seen a fight at school, not a real one. At recess Nelson played with Tommy and Stu, played army, their voices making the rat-a-tat-tat sound of machine gun fire, then the sound of the ammo's impact, the warrior's terrible groaning, the last gurgles of life. When they weren't playing war games they were reading comic books: classic Hunter's Hellcats and the brand-new Conan the Barbarian. But a real fight! Nelson thought. He wasn't about to miss this!

"You gonna tell him?" Stu asked, joining in. "Tell him 'After school, at the bike racks.' "

They followed Tommy as he walked down the aisle to Dane's desk.

"Hey, Dane," he said, pushing Dane's shoulder and not waiting for him to look up. "You touch my stuff at recess? Did you touch my pencil?" He paused now.

Dane turned toward Tommy and looked up slightly, but not directly at his face. He shook his head and held up his own

yellow pencil with original eraser half gone. He glanced into the hopeful, expectant face of Nelson, standing behind Tommy, and Stu, leaning over a desk to be near the action. Then he looked away and turned his knees back facing toward the front.

"Well, you better not touch any of my stuff, you butt picker. I know, you hear?" He gave Dane another shove and turned back to his desk.

Nelson felt the surged energy in his chest dissipate. No fight. But still he raised his right hand in salute as Tommy shoved past him and sat down.

II.

It was November, and the leaves had all fallen from the trees. There had been a few scattered snow flurries, not enough to stick but enough to set the tone for the winter. It was going to be a long, drawn out, season of things falling and being reabsorbed into their roots.

The decay, however, was not evident on the playground, where Dane stood shivering. The groundskeeper had mowed and raked and collected leaves. Behind Dane, Beth and five girls took turns jumping and spinning the rope, two girls in the middle doing their rhythmic dance and two watching and keeping time with a song:

Cinderella, dressed in yellow
Went upstairs to kiss her fellow
Made a mistake
And kissed a snake
How many doctors
Did it take?
1, 2, 3, 4, 5. . . .

When they finally misstepped and hit the rope, the two inside would jump out and take the handles and the ones watching would take a turn.

Nelson and a few other boys were playing king of the mountain using the concrete tire stop of a parking space as the summit. Rule changes were frequent and shouted out. One: "I didn't know we were playing no kicksies." Another, the current monarch: "King gets to call." And as a third topples him and balances himself: "I call knees and charlie horses."

The teacher was not by the door where Dane expected. He needed to pee, bad, and he wasn't sure what to do without a teacher to give him permission to go inside. He was doing his own small dance in thin blue sneakers, his toes curled up partly to preserve heat and partly from the effort to not urinate.

He was growing desperate. He knew he didn't have much time, but he also knew he was not allowed to open the door himself to go inside. Recess was for playing outside. He had only ever seen the teachers open the doors to signal the end of recess, and even with the cold no kids were waiting eagerly to get back inside. But Dane was in pain, his abdominal muscles clenched.

What time was it? How much time remained? Time was a mystery, the way the seconds ticked by now with elongated ticks - tiiiiiiick - and with each tick he felt his urethral sphincter give way another millimeter, the burning sensation that started in his groin working its way out through his penis to disaster. He stood beside the door, hands in his pockets, his left now pinching hard the tip. It succeeded for a moment to refocus the pain. He looked through the small window in the door, the vertical rectangle of glass, and through the thin wires inside the glass, crossed in a check pattern. No teacher, but he did see the boy's restroom. Oh!

He was bent at the waist now, no longer able to stand upright. He almost thought about going for it, but how could he? The doors might be locked from the inside. Teachers would have the key and were permitted to duck inside to warm up, but students were only to reenter in an orderly fashion at the set time. His fingers squeezed harder, but that only encouraged those muscles specialized in stanching the flow to then give up, let go. He felt the flow now come full force. Those muscles, were he to use them now, would only serve to expel what now swelled his urethra to its painful limit.

What tick or tock, what thought or moment changed his mind, he did not know - that allowed him freedom and release. But at a certain point his fears and hopes came true. He let a little

stream break free, then felt the stabbing needles as he tried to rein it in. And then another tiny squirt, the hot spray soaking his underpants, then running down his legs, into his shoes, wetting from crotch down inseam to his cuff and canvas shoes. But so exquisite, so sublime, the moment of release when finally he gave in.

The warm wet turned cooler in the winter wind, then cold. That, and his awareness that his misdeed was probably more obvious from behind led him to back up to the brick wall 15 feet to the right of the door, and to stay there, eyes averted, when recess ended and the teacher held the door and the students filed in and class began. When she finally pulled him in and saw, she sent him to the nurse's office, where he was given something to cover his legs while she popped his pants in the dryer and called his mom to pick him up. But oh, the release, when it had finally come, had been so deep, so necessary, and so sweet.

III.

You had one line in the play. You would check her pulse and say, "She's dead." Your mother had driven the 30 miles in to your school to watch with the other mothers. Where did she sit, you wonder. You're sure you did not look at her. Did she shift

uncomfortably in her seat, helpless to help you on the classroom stage? What did she take away from your performance; the way you stood stock still at the moment you were supposed to stoop and say your line, the way you froze and your face began to burn, terror and shame at your terror and shame?

You had no voice, you never had. Not among your classmates, who had known each other all their lives, and then you show up with your bright red hair, horrible freckles, your second hand clothes that you assumed some probably recognized as their own discards. Your bad teeth, and no voice. Not with the lunch lady, of whom you were terrified. If you did not finish everything on your plate and tried to return your tray to the conveyor belt - though you never tried - you knew she would call your parents.

"Yep, he tried to do it again. No, I made him sit right back down and finish, but maybe you better give him extra veggies tonight. He needs to learn."

So you sat hopelessly in the gymnasium-cum-cafeteria, a now cold, slimy American version of chicken chow mein before you. You forced a forkful into your mouth and gagged. You continued sitting as the younger grades finished and ran off to recess, and the high schoolers began filing in, filling the seats around you with their big bodies and voices and confidence. You sat there, paralyzed with fear, hunched over, staring at your plate, your cheeks burning, listening to the conversations around you,

which every now and then veer to be *about* you, but you do not allow your eyes to waver as to catch anyone's attention or acknowledge you have heard.

And no voice also with teachers or parents, pastors or strangers. They all had voices. And they knew things, how things worked, probably knew everything about you, which shamed you for you hated all you knew about yourself.

Maybe you did have a voice in Sunday School, that one place where you excelled, knowing the answers and winning the races to look up passages in your red faux leather King James Version of the Bible. You had a voice there, because Donny Berg was the teacher for the boys, and he was young and kind and he combed his black hair, shiny with oil or pomade, straight back with a perfect part on the side. It had a few waves and one or two curly cues that you imaged he made by catching a lock in his comb and twirling it. He took your class on a picnic one time, brought off-brand sodas in an ice chest, and potato chips, and sandwiches that his mom had probably made. You went to a lake and maybe you played games or swam or talked. You just remember the sodas, so rare for you, and sweet.

Mrs. Grander, your teacher, is crouched in the front, nodding at the children as they speak their lines and play their parts correctly. It's a simple play, a western. You must be the Sheriff, or a doctor. You think they saved you an easy part

since you have been in the hospital with pneumonia for two weeks and so didn't practice with the class. It's your turn, everyone is waiting. Your eyes avert downward, searching your memory for your line. You listen to your mind and hear only buzzing. Blood rushes to your ears and sets them ablaze.

How many moments must pass until you can die and be rescued from this humiliation? Your neck is tingling as the blood floods the surface. Your eyes are now fixed, no longer searching, hoping instead that the world might skip your part and continue on around you, without you. But apparently her death is too important for the plot.

Mrs. Grander is whispering, prompting you. "Dane, kneel. Say, 'She's dead.'"

You go down on one knee, put two fingers on the girl's wrist, and a soft, frightened sound comes from your lips. It is almost inaudible, and Mrs. Grander tells you, "Say it again, a little louder so everyone can hear."

Everyone is perfectly silent, waiting for you so they can go on with their parts, and the mom's can clap and tell the children what a great job they did.

You do not look at your mother afterwards, and you try to fall asleep on the drive home, pretend you are asleep, do not answer when she asks, "How are you feeling?"

In your mind you are digging the hole you needed earlier,
climbing inside, letting the moist earth tumble down on you, the
silence and the coolness and the solitude so necessary to you.

THE END