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The Little Liar

by Sam Swope

THE DAY AFTER THE JURY FOUND O. J. SIMPSON not guilty of the murder of Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman, I made my way to an elementary school in Queens, looking for a story. It was the first day of a year-long creative writing workshop I would conduct with a class of 27 third graders from 21 countries and five continents, and it was my hope that these children would give me a novel perspective on America's obsession with the Simpson trial, one that I could turn into an article, adding yet more words to the millions already scrawled about that tragic story.

As anyone who has spent time with children knows, they are capable of telling chastening truths. The year before, when teaching a similarly multicultural class, I described Newt Gingrich's plan to give a dollar to each child for every book they read, and two boys immediately whooped their approval and started scheming how they could get rich quick by faking having read a million books. But the rest of that class surprised me by agreeing with a Korean girl who, although poor, was outraged and insulted by the Gingrich's proposal. "It's wrong to give money to children for doing something that's good for them," she declared. "And it's wrong to take money for doing something you love and would do for free anyway." "That's

right," said another child. "He should give his money to the homeless instead. Or to people with cancer."

My new students were taught by Mrs. Howard, who had been teaching in the school for 26 years. "This class is special," she had told me earlier. "Every one of them is smart, well adjusted, and sweet. Every single one! That doesn't happen anymore." They were also poor, sharing one-bedroom apartments with as many as eleven family members, but they all had at least one parent who took an active interest in their education. Almost half of the class spoke Spanish and were immigrants or the children of recent immigrants from the Caribbean or Central and South America. The rest were innocent ambassadors anywhere from Croatia to points East, including Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. Several children were the only ones in their

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families who spoke English, which meant they had to interpret for their parents, translating what the lawyer was saying about their immigration status, what the landlord was saying about the rent increase, and what the doctor was saying about their mothers' test results.

After we had all gathered on the carpet at the back of the room, the children sitting cross-legged at my feet, eagerly looking up at me, I smiled and said, "So: What do third graders think about O. J.?"

Jessica, a round-faced Hispanic girl, didn't hesitate: "I think third graders like apple juice better."

"No, I mean O. J. *Simpson*, the football player," I said. "The one accused of murdering his wife and her friend. There was a big trial that's been all over the news. I'm sure your families have talked about it."

A few of the children said, "Oh, yeah..." as if they'd vaguely heard of such a thing, but the rest looked puzzled, their brows furrowed, their heads at a slight tilt.

"He had a black glove, I think?" said a Cuban boy, hoping to be helpful.

"Yes, the glove was part of the evidence," I said. "What else?"

"Didn't he have a dog?" said a Chinese girl.

"Oooh-oooh-oooh, that's right!" cried a Dominican, so excited she shook both her hands as if trying to dry them. "My mom said the dog was the only one who saw the whole thing!"

Then Alex, the child who would prove to have the most playful imagination, said in his quiet voice, "So if they got a computer to translate what the dog said, the dog could tell who was saying truth and who was saying lies."

I was surprised by how unaware these children were, especially because the story had been covered so relentlessly on the TVs they all watched, and I was reminded of an old cartoon in which a ball gets away from a diapered baby with a curl in the middle of her forehead. She gurgles and coos as she crawls after the ball, which leads her across busy streets, over opening drawbridges, and finally onto a battlefield. Trucks roar over her, bullets whiz past her head, bombs explode nearby, but the baby keeps on crawling, oblivious and unharmed, protected by her innocence. Yet I kept the O. J. discussion going for some time, waiting to hear the searing, innocent indictment of America I was hoping for, but it never happened.

After the children headed home, Mrs. Howard, their teacher, looked me in the eye and shamed me by asking, "What were you doing there? Why on earth on your first day would you bring that man and that ugly story to these children—especially these children? What was the point? What was that going to give them?"

* * *

Madeleine Howard lives in the Queens home she grew up in, sharing it with her golden retriever and her husband, who is also a teacher. She arrives at school each morning long before the children, to get ready for the day. Every lesson is carefully thought out, every movement of the class choreographed. Her

students hang their coats in an orderly fashion, line up for lunch according to height, and know when it's their turn to wash the board or sweep the floor. Mrs. Howard expects her students to be in school every day on time with their homework done, prepared to give their very best: "Do I make myself clear? Everybody got that?" Complaining, talking out of turn, and cruelty are not allowed—end of story. "Excuses? I don't even want to hear about it." When you behave well, she'll smile and give you a sticker, and when you're out of line, she'll summon you to the hallway, read you the riot act, and lecture you on your responsibilities and your duty to treat your fellow human beings decently. ("Sometimes I feel like such a nag," she'd say.) She is famous for giving homework every single night of the year, but that means she has homework, too, and after school she heads to her old station wagon with a bag stuffed with more work than she could possibly get to. She gets results from her students, her principal calls her "the best of the best," and parents plead with her to transfer to the next grade and teach their children again. But as far as the kids are concerned, the most important thing about Mrs. Howard is that she's a lot of fun.

Every inch of Mrs. Howard's classroom was spoken for. Sunshine yellow signs of different sizes were suspended from the ceiling, giving the room a playful mobile effect, and they bore bold blue words that announced MATH AND SCIENCE, ART AND LITERATURE, and COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD, or highlighted concepts like THINKING SKILLS and COOPERATION and COURAGE. The ART CENTER was a corner neatly arranged with carts and boxes of paints, glue, and paper. The LIBRARY was a small bookcase on which selected titles were prominently displayed, including William Bennet's *Children's Book of Virtues*. The class' three out-dated computers constituted THE WRITING CENTER, and over them hung a giant blue pencil and yet another sign that declared EVERYBODY'S WRITING. Student artwork was displayed on the walls, an alphabet stretched across the top of the blackboard, there were several globes, a pull-down world map, and an American flag. The children's desks were grouped into six islands, around each of which a team of four or five students sat. Each team was a mix of boys and girls of varying abilities and needs, the idea being that the smarter ones would help the slower ones, and the industrious ones would set an example for the chatterboxes and the daydreamers. Because Mrs. Howard's world is so highly structured, she is able to give her students a lot of freedom. More than once when the children were working on their own, alone or in groups, and over all there was a happy, productive hum—the sound of learning—an expression of wonder would cross her face and she would say, "I love this."

* * *

When I returned to her classroom for my second visit, I behaved, first reading the students one of my children's stories, and then asking them to write a story of their own. In order to see where these eight-year-olds were with their writing, I simply said, "Write a story, any story you want. Don't worry about spelling, just sound the words out as best you can."

Given such freedom, some children freeze out of fear or self-doubt or a lack of ideas, but not Alex, the Ecuadoran who had suggested that a computer translate what Nicole Simpson's dog had said. Alex grabbed his pencil and scrawled with determination, his face so close to the paper it seemed as if he were trying to merge with his story. Before long he came up for air, handed me his paper, and said, "I'm done."

The page was a mess: horrible handwriting, no punctuation, verbs in mixed tenses, and words only partly spelled, but when I applied myself to his hieroglyphics, I was rewarded with this story:

The Summer Santa

Once upon a time not so long ago, one winter there was a mighty heat. And it was so hot there was not a drop of snow. All the kids shouted, "Santa isn't going to come!" But suddenly a light came. Somebody was skateboarding with incredible skill. It was Santa! "Go, Santa! Go, Santa!" He gave a present to each kid. So the elves were spreading rainbows everywhere. All the people were happy that Santa came. Then he made some snow fall down from the air.

I ran and pulled his beard down. "I'll get you, kid!" he said. And he wasn't Santa! Hah! It isn't Santa?!

So now nobody else believes in Santa, but I still do. I wish Santa was here.

That Alex had written a Christmas story was surprising, for it was still October, a time when the other kids' minds were on witches and ghosts. Moreover, the weather that day was muggy hot, more like August than December, which may account for the story's weather, but it could also be that Alex was inspired by the tropical Christmases his parents had known in Ecuador.

Alex was a tiny kid, the shortest in the class. (His stories were often populated by little creatures who were lonely, in danger, or overwhelmed, but in the end were usually rewarded with a friend.) He had two plaid shirts, one red, one blue, and it seemed he always had on one or the other, sometimes over a turtleneck that he'd pull up over his face so that only his brown eyes were peeking out. It was still early in the year, but already Mrs. Howard was encouraged. "Alex is very bright," she told me, "and he transfers skills from one subject area to another, which is something not all kids can do."

I read "The Summer Santa" aloud to the class, saying, "Surprises are always good in a story, and this one has lots of them—the heat wave at Christmas, the skateboarding Santa, the elves throwing rainbows in the snow. Notice how Alex uses words to paint a picture? Can't you see his story in your mind?"

I suggested we perform it, right then and there. We would act out a lot of stories over the course of the year. The technique was pioneered by Vivian Paley, who taught at the laboratory school of the University of Chicago, and in her eloquent books she describes how story-acting draws strength from our deep human need to perform, to see our fantasies enacted and acknowledged by our friends. It's also a great carrot: The prospect of seeing stories performed by classmates is so exciting and so much fun it's enough to make even the most reluctant students pick up their pencils.

"Here's the way it works," I told them. "Because Alex wrote the story, he gets to choose the actors. Then to save time, I'll read the story out loud while the actors act it out. We won't use any props, just our imaginations. Okay, Alex, who's going to play the narrator, the 'I' character in your story?"

"Me."

"And who's going to play Santa?"

Several hands went up, but no one stretched his or her arm further from its socket or "ooh-ooh-me-me"d more urgently than Salvador, a Pentecostal whose religion outlawed not only Halloween witches and ghosts and trick-or-treats, but Santa Claus and Christmas, too. When Alex chose Chris, who had a smiley disposition better suited to his Santa than serious Salvador, Salvador slumped, his face dark with disappointment.

"Don't be upset if you're not chosen," I said. "Anyone who wants to will have his or her story acted out, and when it's your turn you can always chose yourself to play the starring role."

Salvador smiled, gave a victory salute with his right fist, and said, "Yes!"

Alex chose a bubbly Chinese girl and a dark-skinned Guyanese with soft cow eyes to play his elves, and to represent the children in the story, he chose two boys, a Cuban and an Egyptian.

"All right!" I said. "We're ready to go."

"Hey, what about the reindeer?" said Salvador, still hoping for the chance to play something, anything. "Who's gonna play the reindeer?"

"Alex's Santa doesn't have any reindeer."

"But Santa *always* has reindeer," said Jessica, another stage-struck child who loved the limelight.

"Alex's Santa travels by skateboard," I said. "In stories, anything can happen. You, the writer, are the boss! And this is Alex's story, so we'll act it the way he wrote it." As we pushed desks out of the way, I said, "This will be our stage. Actors, you stand off to the side until it's time to make your entrances, okay?"

The world premier of "The Summer Santa" lasted three minutes, tops, but it was memorable. Skinny Chris made a brilliant Santa. He simulated skateboarding by disco dancing onto stage, a pointed finger raised above his head for balance. When the girls turned in lackluster performances as elves, Mrs. Howard cried, "Come on, girls! Really *throw* those rainbows around, get them way up in the sky, be *happy!*" At which Annie and Maya hurled rainbows in the air like confetti. Chris jiggled as he handed out presents, the boys shivered when it started to snow, and the whole class laughed. In the middle of the joyful commotion stood Alex, nodding his head and looking at the world he had created as if to say, "Perfect, this is perfect."

When Alex, playing his narrator, pulled down Santa's beard, revealing him to be a fake, Chris turned his little boy voice into a threatening growl and said his line: "I'll get you, kid." The moment Santa is unmasked, Alex's story fizzles out; we never see Santa make good his threat. Perhaps Alex was afraid to take the story in that direction, or maybe he just got lazy. But the important point is that when the other characters

stop believing in Santa, the narrator—that is, Alex—can't, or won't, let Santa go. He alone still believes, his imagination triumphant but a little lonely: I wish Santa was here.

The fantasy of the fat, jolly man in the bright red suit who comes at night like a dream is a powerful myth, and I think I knew how Alex felt. When I was a child in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, I was a true believer, my faith so strong I screamed when placed on Santa's lap—the touch of his hand, the sound of his laugh, the fact of his flesh made belief impossible. I understood Santa wasn't real in the way humans are real, he was real in the way God is real, only better, because Santa proved his love on Christmas morning, while God, aloof and invisible, refused to give me even the teeniest sign of his existence, much as I begged him to in my prayers: "Please, God, show me you hear me—make it thunder!"

My older brothers did their best to shake my belief, peppering me with facts aimed at proving the logical impossibility of Santa Claus, but my faith proved stronger than their logic until one Sunday at the Presbyterian church our minister asked the congregation to bring in gifts so that poor children would have something to open on Christmas morning. This was something that didn't compute, a problem that magical thinking couldn't solve: Santa forget the poor?

Even for adults, reality is a fragile construct, only partly real. Lovers betray us, stock markets crash, illness strikes, or a tornado hits, turning our world upside down, and suddenly we find we're on the run from a wicked witch. I had learned about Santa from my father, who became a child again each Christmas. We climbed inside that fantasy together, hanging boughs and stringing colored lights. The problem of Santa gnawed at my peace, and although I told myself Dad would explain all, I put off asking him until I could stand it no longer, and my fear and doubt were evident in the offhand way I asked, "Dad, how come Santa doesn't go to poor kids' houses?" Father gave me a look that said he was sad to see me growing up, and although he let me down as gently as he could, I wept and wept, my first death, my first betrayal, and worst of all, with Daddy out of the game, I now was on my own—like Alex.

* * *

Winter came to Queens that December, bringing lots of snow that buried the cars parked on the streets. The plows left behind mountains twice the height of my students. I hadn't seen this much snow since my childhood, and the magic of the white world and the presence of so many children in my life cast a Christmas spell on me.

Because the children were Muslims, Hindus, Taoists, Buddhists, Pentecostals, and Bahais, as well as Catholics and mainstream Protestants, Mrs. Howard couldn't celebrate Christmas with trees and Santa Claus. But ignoring Christmas altogether would have been absurd—the holiday is everywhere and inescapable, its cultural importance marked by a major school vacation. So Mrs. Howard presented Christmas to her students as a time when we show love for family and friends by giving simple gifts. The children wrote poems to their parents and made cards, Mrs. Howard and I gave each student a gift,

some gave presents to us, and there was a grab bag into which each child had placed an inexpensive gift. There were a lot of excited faces as the children reached into the bag and pulled out wrapped coloring books, stickers, and plastic magnifying glasses. Alex wound up with a grab bag gift I had brought, but it was clear from the look on his face that he didn't know what it was.

"It's an alphabet stencil," I explained, showing him how to trace a B. "It's neater than it looks. See, you can use it to write out your name, or make signs."

Alex listened politely but his eyes were on a Taiwanese boy who had just pulled forth a large present wrapped in shiny blue paper.

"That's my present," Alex told me.

We watched the boy rip away the paper and smile as he held up a futuristic black plastic car that in a neat trick of design transformed into a superhero. As several children raced over for a closer look, Alex told me, "That transformer was supposed to be mine, but my mother said we were too poor to buy a grab bag gift, so I had to bring in my only Christmas present."

Later, when I told Mrs. Howard what Alex had said, she also got upset, and we both wondered if doing the grab bag had been a mistake. "But the kids enjoy it so much," she said. "I don't think you can always deny everyone for the sake of one..." her voice trailing off in self-doubt. After the Christmas break, Mrs. Howard and I noticed how Alex's holiday writing assignment seemed sad and negative. When I asked him how his vacation had gone, Alex told me the family had gotten a VCR but had returned it for reasons he didn't understand. Then, as if things weren't bad enough, KaWing, Alex's best friend, came in one January day with the startling news that he was withdrawing from school, tomorrow. The family apparently had found a larger apartment elsewhere in Queens, and had to move immediately. Such wrenching upheavals are not uncommon in the school, but that didn't help Alex. He and KaWing collaborated on a last story together, huddled side by side, writing with their arms around each other.

* * *

Some children are gifted physically, some are gifted academically, some artistically. Alex was gifted with a narrative imagination. When we sat down to do our first collaboration, I asked him, "Who's going to be our main character?"

"A shark."

"No way," I told him. "I've collaborated on three shark stories already, and I'm sick of them. If we're going to have sharks, they have to be alien sharks on some faraway planet or something."

"The planet Zoid."

"Oooh, I like that," I said. "Tell me how the ocean on planet Zoid is different from the earth's oceans."

"It's hot like lava and it's pink like bubble gum. It even tastes like bubble gum."

"Excellent," I said as I started to write. "So what's our creature going to look like?"

"Exactly like a shark but it has a light bulb at the end of his tongue."

"Good," I said. "What's the light bulb for?"

"That's how it catches its dinner."

"Explain."

Alex tucked his hands under his legs and rocked back and forth. "He buries himself under the sand with only the light bulb sticking up and then when a fish comes to see what is the light, he snatches the fish up in his mouth."

"Brilliant," I said, smiling with pleasure, but Alex wouldn't let himself smile back. Each time he saw that I bought into his idea, that the fiction was working, he'd put on his best poker face, sensing, like a born storyteller, that a smile would break the spell. But he could never hide the twinkle that would light up his eyes, and mine would twinkle back, like we were sharing a secret joke.

"What's this fish called?"

"Um, he's a puppalik."

Alex went on to describe how, when the puppalik was attacked by a creature called a merm, the puppalik got so mad she laid two eggs out of which hatched baby puppaliks reading books.

"Books?" I said, expressing surprise and doubt.

"Yep, books," said Alex, looking at me as if to say he knew it sounded strange, but that's the way it really happened.

"Okay," I said. "Books it is. What then?"

"Then the puppalik shouts, 'Stop reading those damn books and help me catch that merm!'"

I don't know if Alex consciously apprehended the power and the danger of the imagination, how easy it is to get lost in the world of words while angry merms are circling, but an ambivalence toward language and imagination occurs again and again in his stories. Take his short tale "Who Am I?," for instance, in which a tiny crab's saying the word *funky* starts a series of terrifying events and ends with the promise never to say the word *funky* again. Or consider "The Magic Eraser," in which four brothers, dying of a cancer caused from eating too much meat, find a treasure chest that holds an eraser, the writer's tool, which proceeds to erase not only the brothers, but the bathtub, the house, the neighborhood, the city, and finally the entire earth.

"Alex, have you ever known anybody who died?"

"Two persons: my grandfather and my friend."

"What did your friend die of?"

"Cancer. His face was white."

"How old was he?"

"Six."

"You must have been sad when he died."

"That's why I didn't go to his funeral."

"What was his name?"

"I don't remember. George."

"And how did your grandfather die?"

"He died of cancer, too, because on television they say if you eat too much meat and not enough plants you get cancer."

* * *

As imaginative as Alex was when talking, his written stories were usually perfunctory, not much more than a series of scrawled grunts. Of course he was only eight, new to writing, and handicapped by the confusion that comes from speaking one language at home and another at school. But that was the case with most of his classmates, and Alex's basic writing skills continued to lag behind, and the fact that his mind went so much faster than his pencil must have been frustrating for him. Part of his problem was laziness—when I was standing over him, he added the details he knew I liked and he was usually able to figure out where to put his periods and capitals. But part of his problem was physical—he had a bad habit of writing with his hand twisted into a crook so that he had to draw each letter backwards and if he wrote for long his hand cramped. "Don't bend your wrist, Alex," we'd tell him over and over again. "Don't clutch your pencil. Hold it gently, like it's an extension of your index finger. Sit up straight."

Alex had a raw, native talent; it was my hope that I could help him use language to communicate it. I thought of the writers who had imagined their way out of poverty, and hoped that Alex might one day be one of them. "If you work hard," I'd tell him, "you could some day make a living using your imagination. You could write stories or movies or cartoons or TV shows. I don't care if your early drafts are a mess, but you've got to be able to hand in a neat and correct final draft. Because if you hand a publisher or a producer writing like this, they'll never take the trouble to read it."

One day, we made up myths. Alex's first draft was typically dashed off, a garden-variety battle between two gods, but it did have one interesting detail. "You write here that the scorpion god kidnaps the dog god's lady love and hides her," I said.

"Yep."

"But then you never talk about that again. Why is that?"

"I don't know."

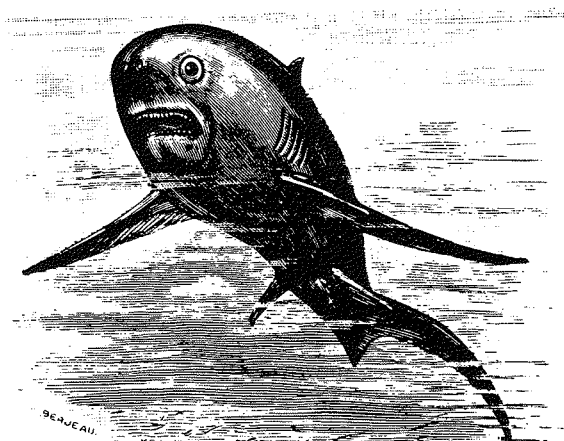
"Well, do you know where the scorpion hides her?"

"Yep."

"Where?"

"In the dog god's brain."

This wonderful idea probably just popped into his head at that moment, and I said, "That's fantastic! Why didn't you put that down? Be sure to put it in your next draft, and I bet you'll



find the story goes off in a more interesting direction than all this bang-bang stuff you've got now. I want you to take time with this, Alex. You've got to get these amazing details out of your head and down on paper. Don't be lazy, okay?"

"When I write my next draft, Mr. Swope, it's going to be five whole pages long."

When Alex's next draft came in, my heart sank. He'd changed only the spelling and the punctuation, and the only addition was an awkward insertion stating that the scorpion hid the dog's lady love in the dog's own brain. Otherwise, it was word for word the same story.

"I'm very disappointed, Alex," I told him, using my sternest voice. "You promised me five pages. And you still never tell what happens to the lady love after she's been put in the dog's brain. Does she stay there forever, or does she get out, or what?"

"She gets out."

"Do you know how?"

"Yep, she—"

"I don't want to hear it. I want to read it. Now, I want you to write this one more time, and I want you to promise me you'll write the best story you've ever written."

Alex's final draft was neatly written, full of adjectives, fairly well punctuated, and more than five pages long. When he handed it to me he said proudly, "I've never written a story this long in my whole life!" I was delighted. In this version, the two gods make a truce, and the scorpion god agrees to return to the dog god his hidden lady love. But when the sly scorpion removes the lady love from the dog's head, he also snatches the dog's brain and sticks it in his pocket. In this "Twilight Zone" twist, the dog gets his lady love back, but he is unable to recognize her.

Is the scorpion a figuration of Alex himself? Isn't that what writers do, pocket brains?

* * *

The best nonfiction writers use the tools of fiction, a confusing distinction to children who have a hard time sorting out the real from the imaginary in the first place. When Alex was working on a newspaper article about his father's life in Ecuador, he wrote that his father's father had been killed in an earthquake.

"Did a building crush him?"

"No," said Alex. "He fell right in the crack of the earthquake."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yep."

"So, this is a different grandfather than the one who died of cancer, right?"

"No, it's the same one. He died of the earthquake and he died of cancer at the exact same moment."

What was going on in Alex's brain? Was he doing what all of us do, using his imagination to fill in the blanks as he searched for a plausible answer that reconciled conflicting facts? Or did he know he was making a wild guess that, with a

little luck and a lot of chutzpah, he might get away with? If he could convince me, did that make it real?

"You're sure that's the way it happened, Alex?"

"Yep, I am."

* * *

In the spring, Mrs. Howard brought live chameleons into the classroom as part of a science project. When the supply of crickets that fed them dwindled, she asked the children where they thought more crickets could be found, and Alex raised his hand. "My grandmother has crickets in the fields behind her house on Long Island," he said. "I'll get some when we visit her this weekend." On Monday morning Mrs. Howard asked Alex how the cricket hunt had gone, and he said, "We caught one hundred crickets, but one died so now there's only ninety-nine."

"That'll be plenty," said Mrs. Howard. "Make a note to yourself in your homework pad to bring the crickets in tomorrow, because we're almost out, and the chameleons are going to need more food."



On Tuesday Alex came in empty-handed, and when Mrs. Howard asked for an explanation, he said, "We all overslept and were rushing around like crazy and Mom forgot to give me the crickets."

"Your mother didn't promise to bring in the crickets, you did," said Mrs. Howard. "This is your responsibility, Alex. The chameleons are hungry. They are *counting* on you, the whole class is counting on you. Don't forget again tomorrow."

Mrs. Howard wasn't surprised when Alex showed up cricketless on Wednesday, and when she said, "Alex, these crickets don't exist anywhere but in your mind, do they?" Alex didn't answer.

Mrs. Howard sighed, knowing she now had to take Alex to task for lying as well as starving the chameleons. But I, who wasn't responsible for Alex's moral development, could be amused by his story, delighted by its detail of the single dead cricket, and amazed by the confidence he had in the power of his mind to remake the world.

Sometimes children's lies are calculated, but sometimes lies just pop out, and for no particular advantage. It's as if their imaginations suddenly decide to turn on the kids in order to get them into trouble. When I was nine and traveling with my family by train, I insisted on sitting by myself several rows back. After we made a stop, a woman boarded the train and sat down next to me. I had been warned never to talk to strangers, and having one so close was both thrilling and a little scary. I watched her every move from out of the corner of my eye. As she settled in, she took out a book and put on a pair of half-glasses. I had just started wearing glasses myself, but had never seen so strange a pair as hers, and I stared at them shamelessly, unaware of my audacity. Feeling my gaze, the woman looked down at me from over the top of those glasses. I froze.

"Hello," she said. "Who are you?"

"I'm the prince of Czechoslovakia," I announced, shocking both of us.

"That's a long way from here," she said. "What brings you to America?"

Astonished that she believed me, my heart began to pound and my body tingled, excited by my power. Without thinking, I told her, "My whole family was killed. I had to flee for my life."

"You poor dear."

I nodded sadly and looked out the window.

"Tell me," she said. "Where in Czechoslovakia are you from?"

"Düsseldorf," I said.

"Strange. I thought Düsseldorf was in Germany."

"It used to be, but last year they moved it."

"Ah, I see," she said. Then she closed her book, took off her glasses, and asked me to tell her all about my life. As I spun my tale, I half knew she knew I was making it up, but she was an attentive listener, and having her mind in my pocket was thrill enough for me.

When I told a friend this story, she said, "You stole that from *Catcher in the Rye*. Holden lies to a woman on the train, telling her he's got a brain tumor." I looked up the passage, and sure enough, Holden lies brazenly, outrageously, to a stranger on a train. I began to doubt my memory. Had it really happened? Or was I in Salinger's pocket and didn't even know it?

When I arrived at school one day, the children were working independently. As I passed Patriz, a dreamy Turkish boy who was always thinking about airplanes, he told me he felt sad.

"What makes you sad?" I asked.

"I feel sad because Alex got mugged this morning."

I gasped and looked over at Alex, who was hard at work on his multiplication problems, his red turtleneck pulled way up over his nose, like he was trying to crawl into a shell and hide. He was so tiny and defenseless, and it made me angry that anyone would have harmed him.

When I asked Mrs. Howard what had happened, she told me Alex had come in that morning and announced that he'd been mugged, they'd stolen his backpack, and his mother had called the police.

"Is he all right?"

"He seems okay, but who knows what's going on inside his head? Still, I'm not sure what to do about it before I talk to his mother, because it just so happens that his backpack had all of his overdue homework in it."

Hispanic culture has an apocalyptic version of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" called "The Little Liar," which we'd read in class. In this telling, a boy twice pretends a flood is coming, causing the villagers to panic and run to higher ground. When a flood really does come and the boy tries to warn his village, no one believes him, and the rushing waters end up killing everyone, including the little liar.

Mrs. Howard continued, "In spite of my doubts, I have to take Alex's story seriously. These things happen, kids do sometimes get mugged, and that's a traumatic event for a child. I'm very upset."

Wanting to help and curious to hear what he'd say, I took Alex off for a collaboration. Before we started I asked him if he'd tell me what had happened to him that morning.

"Well," he said, "I was walking down the street."

"What street?"

"I think, oh, yeah: near my neighborhood."

"Uh-huh, and then what happened?"

"Like somebody just grabbed me from the back and put a gun in my cheek and they said, 'Give me your school bag.'"

"And what did you do?"

"I told them, 'I'd rather give you the school bag than waste my life,' and I gave them the school bag."

"That was the smart thing to do," I said. "So what did this guy look like?"

"Um, I couldn't see."

"Why not?"

"Because he was wearing a black mask."

"Um-hmmmm. Did he have a knife, too, maybe?"

"Yeah," said Alex, wearing his poker face. "He had a knife and a gun. He put the gun on my cheek and put the knife across my throat."

"Did he have an accent?"

"He sounded kind of German, I think."

"I would have been terrified."

"It was the scariest thing that ever happened in my life, Mr. Swope."

"What did you do after you gave him your bag?"

"I ran back home and my mother called the police and I told them what happened."

"Did they catch him?"

"No."

"Well, I'm glad you're okay," I said.

I don't know whether Alex sensed my disbelief, or whether he knew his lie was spinning out of control and certain to catch up with him, but I didn't feel it was my place to call his bluff, so I changed the subject and asked him if he'd like to do a collaboration.

"Okay."

"What would you like this story to be about?"

"My life."

Alex invented a story about a boy named Eric who goes to Mars, climbs into a floating castle, and finds an old, old man. When Eric touches him, the man crumbles to dust, but his eyeballs come after Eric and try to "munch" him up. To escape, Eric leaps out the window, surfs through space, and crashes into Earth, breaking it apart.

"Then what happens to Eric?"

"He lands on the tip of the moon. He yells, 'Help!' and then he got control of the whole universe, only he didn't get control of the universe alphabet."

"What's the universe alphabet?"

"There's 26 planets, and each one is named by a letter, and if he doesn't get control of the universe alphabet, the letters will come and get him."

"What will they do to him?"

"They'll make him into a letter so they can climb on him. That's why they want our galaxy, so there will be more letters."

"And what happens then?"

"When they get control of all the planets, God will become a letter tree, and then Eric will try and climb it because if he climbs it he'll be up in heaven and then he won't need to be a letter anymore."

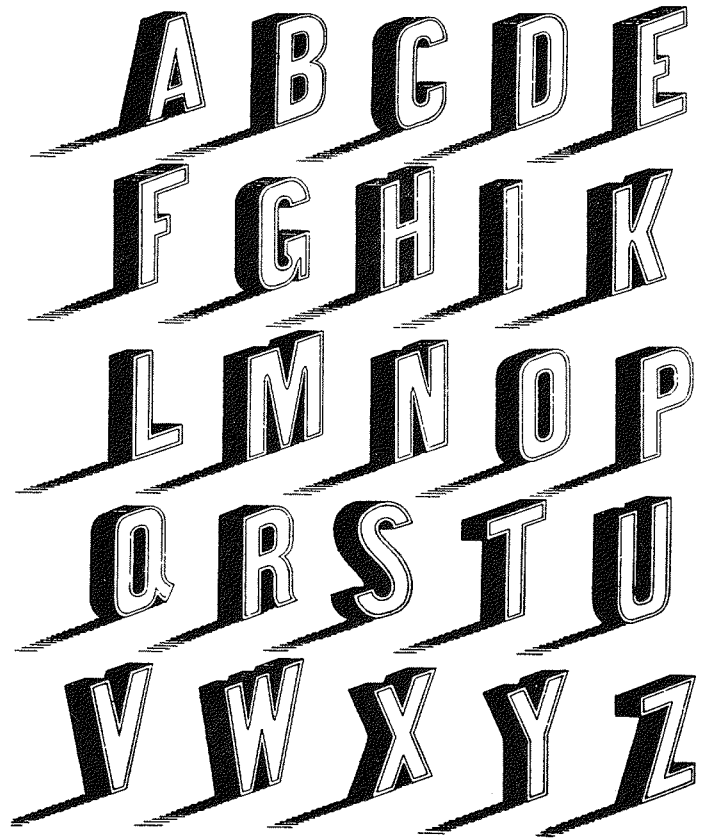
"And what a relief that will be," I said.

"Yeah," said Alex.

The next day, Mrs. Howard told me that Alex's mother had told her that Alex had come home without his backpack a couple of days before, having lost it—or tossed it—at the playground. When Alex's mother heard that her little boy had said he'd been mugged, she was as amused as I was, and had given her son a smile that showed how adorably incorrigible she thought he was. Mrs. Howard alone was upset.

"At least his story proves has a strong imagination," I said.

"It shows he lied," said Mrs. Howard. "Now I wonder if he even made up that story about his grab bag present so we'd feel sorry for him. I feel manipulated and lied to, and because Alex



told me he got mugged, I had to worry. The children got worried. It's not okay to make up stories if other people are going to get hurt or upset."

I could see her point. "But aren't you just a little pleased that he tried to get out of his homework by telling such a daring lie?" I asked.

"Not at all."

"Isn't part of growing up learning to manipulate the system?" I said. "Sometimes con men are admirable."

Mrs. Howard was shocked I could even think such a thing. "When are con men *ever* admirable?" she said.

"What about 'The Emperor's New Clothes'? Those tailors con everyone, and we love it that they lie."

Mrs. Howard looked at me like I was out of my mind. "But that's a story," she said. "This is real life."

[*Editor's note:* The names in this article have been changed.]



The Little Girl Who Would Not Listen

by MaryJo Mahoney

COURTNEY IS A THIRD GRADE GIRL WHO WEARS her unruly blond hair straight down her back. I could never tell if her hair is vigorously brushed before school, nor could I tell if it had been recently cut, because thin hair looks perpetually overgrown. But despite her unkempt look, I suspect she has enough nurture and love because she is confident in a way that borders on indignation, and this is slightly unnerving to her classroom teacher and me, the visiting poetry teacher.

One day, Courtney handed me a poem on a piece of lined paper as limp as a thin slice of deli ham. Using orange and yellow markers, she had made the paper wet and tissue-soft, its edges torn into scallop shapes. Her messy handwriting included numerous ink blots and cross-outs. She had colored over some of the cross-outs with such intensity that she had torn holes in the paper. I could not read her poem with any certainty that I was accurately deciphering the words she had written. When I asked her why she did this to her writing, she closed her eyes, pushed her paper farther into the pile I had in my hands, and said with disgust, "Here!" as if having been unjustly criticized for her efforts.

Because Courtney is a child who commands extra attention, the progress of her classmates is slowed every day. They are learning to be patient, but sometimes Patrick and Beth snatch her papers from her hands and impatiently write her name and headings on them. Sometimes Avery and Greg chastise her because she shows no particular desire to please her teachers.

Assertive and willful, she is without concern for the fact that she does not follow instructions. After all, she is a child of privilege who attends one of the most respected private schools in the city. And unlike the other children in her class, she is aware that rules are standards that she can renegotiate for herself.

In many ways, Courtney is an ordinary little girl who has many secrets. Courtney's secrets are demonstrated best by how she looks, how she holds herself, and how she contains the energy in her body. For instance, Courtney's hair is a synecdoche for who she seems to be: an unmanageable, entangled, and flyaway child. As irksome as it seems, at times, her hair stands for the whole of her.

Courtney does not wear the baby blue culottes or the yellow jumper dresses that the other girls wear. She wears the navy blue work pants that the boys favor. Come springtime, her pantlegs had become inches too short. Her worn leather sneakers show the wear from her awkward gait. And in

between the short hems of her pantlegs and the tops of her sneakers, a secret to her vulnerability is revealed: Courtney has frail ankles whose circumferences are those of a much younger child. To me, all this is evidence, nearly metaphoric at times, that she is both too big and too small for her britches.

When Courtney writes, she kneels in her chair and leans over her pencils and colored markers. Most of the time, she rounds her thin shoulders and rolls her back over her desk. She uses her body to conceal her use of colored markers instead of a pencil. One day when I walked toward her desk during a writing exercise, I noticed that it was as if she were condensed into the oblique triangle that she created with her shoulders. She looked like a pterodactyl hovering over her nest, contained in the cape and hood of her shoulder blades. I thought I had found the locus of all of her frenetic energy as I looked at her carefully. I felt this energy when I came closer to her domain. But when I observed her carefully, I saw that she moved exactly as little or as much as the other children sitting near her.

Courtney is a below-average student, but she likes to write. Of course, she writes a very long poem when she is supposed to write a short story; she writes her own version of a children's story when she is supposed to write a poem. She writes quickly, furiously decorating her pages and carelessly using colored markers and glitter that casts a monotonous scattering of tiny square mirrors all over the words. She draws thick lines around the perimeter of her creations. She adds spirals between each word, along with a jagged maze of glue. And then, when the glue is gummy, she smudges it with her fingers in order to disrupt the line's color. Sometimes, she gives the page an extra dose of glitter.

Each week, I hope that underneath this visual extravaganza I will find at least the remnants of words that show a genuine effort at writing. But most often this is not the case. Her finished pages have such an intensity that even when I am back home reading with ease what her classmates have written, I pause before Courtney's papers. I remember one day when I was sitting at my kitchen table sipping iced tea. It was a day when I was feeling particularly unencumbered and easy with the joy and spirit of reading children's writing. When I turned over one student's page of writing and saw Courtney's, a light sweat broke out across the nape of my neck.

I think that my frustration with and subsequent interest in Courtney lies in our differences. If Courtney is a synecdoche, best represented by her hair or back, I was a nine-year-old child of metonymy, best represented by an object that became my disassociated self. Her self is the secret revealed by the study of her parts, while I was without secrets but was replaced by the characteristics of adjunct interests. At nine years old, I was my brown and white speckled dachshund, my left-handed first baseman's mitt, or, one summer in particular, my flaming red nylon pajamas.

MARYJO MAHONEY wrote this essay while working as a writer-in-residence for Writers in the Schools in Houston, Texas. Currently, she is a writer-in-residence for Teachers & Writers Collaborative and on the faculty at Hofstra University in the Department of Literacy Studies.

Now that my teaching residency at Courtney's school is over, I find that she challenges me much the same way that, when I was her age, I attempted to endure a summer of disco slumber parties. A mirrored disco ball hung in my friend's basement and spun above our sleeping bags all night long. I could see the flashing reflections of the disco ball through the sleeve of my red nylon pajamas. The flashing kept me from hearing the rhythms of the folk music that I sang in my head to help me fall asleep. I wanted so badly to fall asleep that I remember finally giving in to the rhythm of the lights and the disco lyrics as they reverberated with acoustic abomination in the brown paneled room with a cement floor.

Reflecting on this past year of teaching Courtney, I see now the similarities between the way I tried to be open to disco music and the way I tried to be open to Courtney's writing. I had to force myself to give in to Courtney in order to give her poetry a fair reading. There must have been substance to the music of her poetry because at times it seemed that she could hear it. The day I sat in sweat at my kitchen table with her writing before me, I muted all the flash and glitter of her papers with the red filter of my pajama sleeve, and listened for the lyrics. I read Courtney's poem over and over again and watched its flash of lights spin in concentric circles. I traced the words over and over in an attempt to find narrative or lyric sense in them. I wanted to celebrate even one brief moment of abstract fragmentation, one image or metaphor that opened to a surreal disco dream space. And that was when I found it.

What I found in Courtney's two-page poem titled "Blue Jay" was a brief moment of rhyme, rhythm, and word play:

It started all over again with Sandy Grandy,
Fhy and Derek and maybe Zap Zip Shane and Dayne.
It started all over again with them so blue and gray.
They fly away, and make a nest far away.

In these four lines, I found evidence of Courtney's deeper self, a self of sincere effort. I was so happy and relieved that I wrote positive comments across three post-it notes and stuck them to her poem. Then I sat back and remembered something new about my fear of people who could not hear the music I could hear.

For the rest of that summer when I was nine, I still went to the disco slumber parties, but I never stayed over. I ran out of my friend's basement at ten o'clock with my sneakers untied, in my red nylon pajamas, squeezing my patchwork bag against my ribs tightly so as not to lose it in the starlight that seemed to reach for me like flashes from a disco ball as I ran down the asphalt driveway. I ran as fast as I could to the gold station wagon burning its oil in the street, where my mother sat patiently behind the wheel waving to me amidst the pink chenille of her bathrobe.

I'm not sure of the meaning of this repressed memory. When I read Courtney's poem, my need to flee the disco party flash and glitter partially eased away! Could it be that she had untied a little red knot of fear that was still part of my unconscious self? I did not want to believe that my interactions with

this child were good for me. And if this benefit was the result of my own need to extend her a certain grace, I still did not want to believe that my problems with Courtney were partly my fault.

To this day, Courtney remains a determined and oppositional child who opts for the path of easiest achievement. Despite the efforts of adults who work with her, her accomplishments are minimal compared to those of her classmates. Courtney feels she has no reason to believe that the adult world might be a difficult place. Teaching her is so frustrating because her resistance to adult expectations is so aggressive. It also exasperates me that she takes for granted the wonderful opportunities her school offers. I have met so many public school children who would thrive if they could have Courtney's place at her private school. Here again, I find that I am writing mostly about myself.

Although I would have denied this earlier in the year, there are ways in which Courtney and I are similar. We both have strong personal definitions of fairness, and we have strong reactions to others who do not see our efforts beneath the designs of how we choose to present them. But Courtney's childhood is so foreign to my own. I am sure that I do not understand the obstacles she faces from the position of class privilege. I can only hope that at times, she found some value in the ideas that I brought into her classroom even if she chose not to use them. It is more likely, though, that I got more out of our relationship than she did. I listened.



PLUG

Charles Scribner's Reference has just issued a three-volume, 1500-page set entitled *World Poets: An Encyclopedia for Students*, edited by Ron Padgett. Aimed at high school students, this book includes biographical and critical essays by poets who teach and by scholars, covering 110 poets from around the world and from all times, as well as general articles on the history of poetry and on how to write poetry. The hard-cover set sells for \$225. For more information or to order, phone 1-800-8767-4253, or write to Gale Group, P.O. Box 9187, Farmington Hills, Mich. 48333-9187. The Gale web site is at www.galegroup.com.

Q & A: Working with Special Ed. Writers

by Rhonda Zangwill
with Nicole Hefner & Daniel Paley Ellison

QUESTION: How, if at all, do your expectations differ when working with special ed. students?

DANIEL PALEY ELLISON: I try to ignore the false ideas about what special ed. students can or can't do. If you have no expectations, of course nothing will happen. Sometimes I will hear that this or that student is "the worst," and always, always these students turn out to be my best.

NICOLE HEFNER: My expectations are not lower, they are just different. It's not useful to set up something like "They must write ten poems." Instead you let the kids know that poetry is a safe place where nothing is right or wrong, where anything is possible. Because with poetry anything *is* possible. Poetry lets you create your own world.

QUESTION: Do you have specific writing exercises that work well in the classroom? Any poets in particular?

NH: Identity issues are especially important for these students. I have a writing exercise called "11:17." This refers to an exact time which, obviously, will change. I ask the students to respond to a series of questions: "Who I am at this moment, and then again fifteen minutes from now? Who do I want to be? Who do other people think I am?" I also read a lot from other students' work. Kids love this, and it inspires them by setting up an "I can do that too" dynamic. Dictation is also useful, especially at the beginning. Working one-on-one, I can sit with a student and encourage him or her to tell me a poem, which I write down and read back. This lets students know that they can write like they speak.

DPE: We do an exercise based on the Federico García Lorca poem, "The Boy Who Lost His Voice." I ask students: "Where would your voice go? Where *wouldn't* it go? What would—or wouldn't—your voice be doing?" Lorca also has a great poem for children, "Song of the Cricket." Anything by Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson works well, and I also use a wonderful poem, "The Wanting-Creature" by Kabir, the 14th-century Indian writer. Its first line, "I said to the wanting-creature inside me, what is this river you want to cross?" lets the students combine an imaginative journey with the idea of a creature. What's even better is that the poet answers his own

question ("Kabir says...") in the poem. Students love the idea of putting themselves into their poems.

NH: Almost anything by Langston Hughes—students can write about their dreams, or what happens when a dream is deferred—or Gwendolyn Brooks. Her poem "We Real Cool" can get kids writing about their specific experiences of hanging out with friends.

DPE: Teachers should also teach as examples any poem or poet that *they* love. They shouldn't worry about what it "means" or talk about it too much. Read it twice, and ask students to find things in it they like—certain words. Think of these poems as springboards, not as blueprints for students' work.

QUESTION: Maintaining focus and control, as well as engaging unengaged students, can be difficult. Do you have any special strategies?

DPE: I use what I call "humidity and discipline." It's important to create a clear structure of what belongs and what doesn't in the classroom. What belongs is respect, writing, ideas, joy, emotions. This creates an environment that's fertile and moist—that's the humidity—where anything (poetically speaking) can happen. What we're doing is watering seeds. What doesn't belong? Throwing things, inappropriate behavior. I will ask someone to leave the room if he or she is acting out, but in a positive affirming way. I always say first, "I want you to be here, I want you to come back and be here with us."

NH: Poetry should always be the most special time of the day or week. It should be something to look forward to, and not part of something else, like English class. I let my students know that these 30 or 60 minutes are the time when we're really thinking and feeling. Throughout it all, I try to maintain a welcoming, affirming environment in the classroom.

DPE: Yes, the students should know that you are really there with them, and for them.

[*Editor's note:* If you have a question you'd like to see discussed in these pages, send it to *Teachers & Writers* magazine, 5 Union Sq. W., New York, NY 10003-3306. Or email it to cedgar@panix.com.]

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