

Ren Jones

LLED 3461S

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“And back at the Wilshire, Pedro sits there dreaming he's found a book on magic in a garbage can. He looks at the pictures and stares at the cracked ceiling. At the count of 3, he says,

‘I hope I can disappear.’”

- “Dirty Blvd.” by Lou Reed

Articles of the Lost and Found

I stare blankly at the boy as he shoves a fourth microwave donut into his mouth. Before he finishes chewing, he takes a swig of root beer from a sweating plastic bottle. Spit and chunks of food fly from his lips as he attempts to recount all the flaws he finds in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem “Sonnet 43.”

“Oh—How I love thee! I love thee this much! You know what? I think I’ll love you more than I love God. Then, I’ll talk about how much I’m gonna keep lovin’ you in Heaven because God’s slick cool with me loving some guy more than Him. My grandma took me to church. I know that isn’t how it works.”

Anger flashes behind his dark eyes. His nostrils flair. He proceeds.

“It’s all crap. I mean, come on people! You know he’s gone cheat on her. You know they’re gone divorced. He’s gone be wishing he signed one of them old fashioned prenups. It’s all lies, so tell me why I still have to learn this stuff. It’s barely even in English! I don’t have time to be learning this. I need to be making sure I don’t get shot by a cop for wearing a hoody at

night!”

I continue to stare wide-eyed at the boy.

“Oh? So you got nothing to say to me? You don’t have any answers, Miss Teacher? I thought you were in school so you could learn how to tell us all exactly what we needed to learn—what’s important for keeping us alive. You know what keeps me alive? My job. It’s not you, white lady.”

“White lady.” The pair of words is delivered venomously. I feel gutted and dirty as I look about the classroom. There are no other white faces in a sea of students. There is no one to disagree because they all know the boy is right. I can’t understand.

He rises from his seat abruptly. The soda bottle falls from his hand as he slings it back in frustration. The sticky liquid splashes across the table in front of us. The pool spreads until it reaches the edge. Helpless to stop it, I watch as the root beer spills over onto my lap like a carbonated waterfall. With one last triumphant breath, the boy makes his exit. He slams the door on his way out but it only bounces back open.

Mr. Siegmund strolls over to me. He has this casual way of carrying himself. It’s really more of a leisurely sway than an authoritative walk. Hands in pockets, head cocked slightly to the left, feet dragging lightly over the stiff gray carpet—I assure myself I, too, would adopt this gait after I gain some experience. I laugh involuntarily. It’s not a full out, hardy chuckle. It’s more of a sarcastic whimper. The idea that I might one day be wise enough to transcend these classroom outbursts without irreparable damage seems implausible as I sit with a puddle of soda on my lap and tears welling up in my eyes. God. I am lost. What am I doing? This is the future I picked for myself. It is supposed to be my calling. I am supposed to reach the scores of kids that come through my classroom each year. I am supposed to gain their trust like some new age

Hilary Swank in my own less cheesy version of *Freedom Writers*. Yet, here I sit gazing up at my mentor teacher with spit-dampened breakfast crumbs nesting in my hair and a brown stain all over the front of my skirt.

“Honestly, I was expecting this sooner out of Jordan. He has always had difficulty managing his anger in an appropriate way. It isn’t you. You two actually seemed to get along very well with each other,” says Mr. Siegmund.

He is right. Jordan and I had been on friendly terms from the minute I was assigned to mentor him. I think back to the first day we met. I remember walking nervously into the classroom with my eyes trained on the floor. I had been warned not to expect a warm welcome, so I had mentally prepared for some form of heckling upon entering the room. What I found, however, was not the savage greeting I had anticipated. Rather than acknowledging my presence, not one student turned their eyes from their computer screens. I was introduced as a resource, but no one appeared to care. I would come to understand this was because these students are autonomous. Alone in the world, they need guidance from no one—not even the writers whose works are necessary to answer the questions on a test.

Mr. Siegmund sat at his desk unhurriedly replying to an email. At this point in time, I was not yet aware this type of relaxed patience was a facet of Mr. Siegmund’s personality. As I tugged on my sweater sleeves anxiously awaiting instruction, I glanced around the classroom in which I would be spending the next few months. Posters of James Brown, Marvin Gaye, B.B. King, and Bob Marley (along with a random cardboard cutout of Napoleon Dynamite) adorned the walls. Stacks of music and sports magazines were strewn haphazardly about the room. One painfully small pile of textbooks laid gathering dust while tucked away in the far corner. I noticed battered paperback copies of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear*

and Loathing in Las Vegas, and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* peeping out from within the disappointing pile. These authors pioneered the Beat Generation. They breathed love and self-fulfillment into the hordes of hippies lining the streets of Haight-Ashbury. They were alcoholics. They were junkies. They somehow still managed to be activists of the modern pariahdom. Yet, their exhausted works were now sandwiched between undisturbed British Literature anthologies. The placement of these books within the pile did not particularly bother me. I was, however, confused as to what place they held in the room I had just entered. Rows of computers atop long tables filled the space. Students sat absent mindedly clicking away at five or six, but the rest of the seats remained unoccupied. The quiet sound of rap music leaking out from headphones served as the soundtrack for the scene. There was no communication between the students. They just sat fixated on the pale light emitted by the screens in front of them. The presence of these pivotal, controversial novels was almost taunting in such a setting. It created this eerie sort of allegory I couldn't quite put my finger on, but that didn't keep it from continuing to bounce around in my mind as I wondered how this could be any real way to learn.

It was at this moment, before even speaking to my mentor teacher, that I began to understand teaching would be nothing like the occupation outlined in the books I had painstakingly read for the past two years. The words of Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings seemed to mock me as I surveyed the dismal setting. She preached community as a cornerstone of culturally relevant teaching. She preached interaction. She advocated for involvement in the political and personal lives of each individual student in the classroom. In this room, however, no one spoke. I scrapped all I'd learned. This was the real world, and it was much colder than the idealistic classrooms outlined in my textbooks. These students were not enthusiastic elementary schoolers. Their eagerness had all but vanished after years of hardship. I knew I would have

great difficulty making the works of long dead poets pertinent to the lives of these kids my own age. I did not take this as a call for defeat. I would just be more creative. No person is completely passionless about everything. We all have interests that reside close to our hearts. Surely, there would be means to make English matter. Probably.

Mr. Siegmund finally turned away from his email.

“Oh! Hi. I didn’t even realize you were there,” he said politely.

“Yeah. I should’ve introduced myself or something but you looked busy.”

“Well, I’m Dana Siegmund. And you are?”

“I’m Ren Jones. It’s very nice to meet you. Thank you for letting me into your classroom.”

“It’s really not like that. I’m glad you’re here. Most of my classes aren’t like this,” he gestured around at the scene I’ve just described. “This is just a lab. The students usually keep to themselves unless they have a question.”

I felt relieved to know not every classroom in the school differed so greatly from all I had learned.

He continued, “Nice Strokes t-shirt. I always wanted to see them. Too bad they don’t do very much touring these days. I am proud to say I went to a White Stripes show back when I was about your age though.”

Up until this point, I found Mr. Siegmund’s age to be indeterminable. His hair was a strange mix between sandy blonde and gray. It reminded me of how the sky sometimes looks blue just before a thunderstorm. His kind, bright eyes showed no signs of the typical luster loss that accompanies years as they pass. Faint lines radiated from their corners, but it was difficult to tell whether the ridges in his skin were a hallmark of smiling regularly or a collagen deficiency.

A clean shaven face added to his youthful appearance. The White Stripes split up while I was still in middle school. Mr. Siegmund had to be at least forty. Judging by the book selection in his classroom and the shrine to Bob Marley behind his desk, it was clear this was a man weary of growing up, and this is why he knew the exact student with which to pair me. He valued his students' adolescent views of the world. They in turn respected him enough to reveal pieces of their personal identities outside of the school setting. He understood that being an adult didn't necessarily mean abandoning all the beliefs he held twenty years ago.

“Hey, Jordan! Do you need some company over there? Ren's cool. I promise she doesn't bite. I mean, look at her t-shirt. Y'all are going to get along.”

Jordan shrugged.

Mr. Siegmund led me over to where the boy was seated. I pulled a rolling chair over to the computer before taking my place at the table.

“Let me know if y'all have any problems.”

And just like that I was on my own with a seemingly annoyed teenage boy.

“Are you answering multiple choice questions about a T.S. Eliot poem?”

He replied flippantly, “Yeah. What's it to you?”

“Well... I think that's stupid. Nobody knows what T.S. Eliot was trying to say, like not even T.S. Eliot I'm pretty sure.”

“So?”

“I just think it's pointless that somebody wrote questions with right answers for a T.S. Eliot poem. He's just about as abstract as they come. There's probably more ways to analyze his poems than whoever made that question can count. Want to know a fact about T.S. Eliot?”

He pursed his lips before answering, “I guess.”

“He was born in St. Louis, but he thought it would be cool to move to England. So he did. Then, he started talking in a British accent for the heck of it. Opened a newspaper. Made bank. Locked his wife up to have an affair.”

“And they expect me to know what a guy who did all that crazy shit was thinking when he wrote some poem a hundred years ago?”

I shook my head yes.

“T.S. Eliot was a confusing man but a brilliant poet. I suppose you can’t have one without the other.”

“Do you like him?”

I answer, “Very much. I like analyzing vague poets. It means there’s more room to come up with your own theory as long as you provide evidence to back it up. Has anybody ever told you anything in English is fair game as long as you can use some quotes to prove it?”

He points at my shirt. “I like the Strokes. They have a wicked guitar player. He’s not my favorite though.”

“Who is then?”

“Dimebag Darrell.”

“Pantera?”

Jordan smiled. It was then that I knew we were friends.

“So is Pantera your favorite band?”

“Yeah. When I’m angry, and I’m angry a lot of the time.”

“Me too. It’s mostly a vague anger though. I guess defeated is more of an accurate description,” I reply.

“Who do you listen to when you’re mad at everything?”

“Lou Reed. He has this song called “Coney Island Baby.” You should listen to it sometime.”

Instead of waiting to search for the song until he got home, Jordan began playing it aloud immediately.

After the song was over, he inquired, “Why?”

“It reminds me of good memories I didn’t appreciate while they were happening.”

This first day started a tradition. Each time I visited Mr. Siegmund’s room, Jordan and I would listen to music as we worked. We took turns deciding what to play. He chose from a wide range of metal songs, while I mostly stuck to 60s folk rock. I decided it would be more constructive if the songs we played matched the reading assignments. So, I began to appreciate Metallica and Motorhead more than I ever originally anticipated as we read excerpts from *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, a novel centered around contemporary rock culture. I chose songs like Bob Dylan’s “Hurricane” to follow along with our analysis of poems by Alan Ginsberg and other selected excerpts from the authors of the Beat Generation. Sometimes Jordan would take a break from his studies to show me the guitar he wanted some day or a magazine article he read about one of his favorite rock icons, but other than that we didn’t talk to each other much. However, the gaps created by our silence were filled in by our alternating musical selections. Jordan and I continued like this for approximately two months until one day he said,

“Hey, remember that time you were talking about memories you didn’t think about much while you were living them?”

I didn’t remember, but I told him I did.

“Well, I was thinkin’ of one the other day.”

He pauses and looks into my eyes as if to check that I am at all interested in what he has

to say.

“It’s about my sister. She’s grown now. She has a couple of daughters. I was just thinking about the times when we were still little though. My sister didn’t like to bake cakes, but she always ate the batter with a spoon anyway. I just remember leaning against the refrigerator eating cake batter with a spoon. It seemed so normal back then. Now I miss those little things.”

He shrugged and shook his head with a smile. I played “Walking the Cow” by Daniel Johnston. Aside from the story we were reading at the time, we didn’t discuss anything for the rest of the period.

Jordan began to tell me stories like these during each of my visits. They usually lacked a plot, but this gave them a genuine impression of raw memories. One was about the first guitar he ever knew he wanted to play. It had broken strings and a cracked neck, but he didn’t mind. Another was about his grandmother’s record player and dancing with her in his living room. I cherished these stories because I felt privileged to have gained the trust of a boy who was once reluctant to acknowledge my existence. I started to feel that maybe I would be the inspirational teacher I had always hoped to be, but I thought too soon.

Flash-forward to the crying, donut-covered me of today. Overwhelmed with a sense of failure, I sit wondering if I should follow Jordan out the door.

After a long pause, Mr. Siegmund says, “You should just let him go. He’ll work it out.”

I don’t understand. If I potentially sparked this mental breakdown, it is my obligation to comfort Jordan, right? It would be easier to let him walk. I know Jordan feels like this often, but this rage has never been directed at me before.

I ask hesitantly, “Would it be wrong for me to go talk to him?”

“Well, you run the risk of making it worse, but then again you could make it better.”

Not to sound disrespectful, but wow—what a constructive bit of wisdom.

“I think I’m going to go find him. I don’t know what I’ll say to him, but I won’t ever be able to come back here if I leave things like this today.”

Mr. Siegmund gives me a warm smile. I can tell he thinks I’m naïve, but he respects my commitment to a bigger picture I can’t possibly understand at nineteen.

I find Jordan sitting on the floor underneath a poster for some futile anti-drinking campaign. He’s tracing the lines between the linoleum tiles with his index finger.

“Hi. I know you don’t particularly want to see me right now, but I’d appreciate it if you would let me sit down.”

“On the ground?”

“Yeah... it’s not like I’m allergic to germs. Hand sanitizer is a thing.”

I laugh awkwardly. Why did I say that?

Jordan shrugs as a sign of compliance with my request.

“What’s actually going on? I promise I might understand it. There’s kind of a lot you don’t know about me.”

Jordan gives me a snarl accompanied by a heavily sarcastic, “Oh really?”

“Are you angry today because you’re sad about something, or are you just mad in general?”

He glances towards his feet. He remains silent for a solid couple of minutes. I watch as he draws his knees close to his chest.

“You don’t have to make it sound so damn sissy.”

“I wasn’t trying to.”

“Those love poems just make me feel like I missed out on something because my life

isn't all happy like that. My parents didn't love each other like that. I don't even know my dad. My grandma took care of me while me mom worked when I was a kid, but she has cancer now. I don't like reading lies. They make me feel worse.”

I thought of this book I read for a class in college. It was called *Zero Degrees of Empathy*. Oddly enough, Borat's cousin wrote it. The book has this theory about how a lack of empathy can either make or break us. The following quote pretty much explains this:

When a person is solely focused on the pursuit of their own interests they have all the potential to be unempathetic. At best, in this state, they are in a world of their own and their behaviour will have little negative impact on others. They might end up in this state of mind because of years of resentment and hurt (often the result of conflict) or, as we shall see, for more enduring, neurological reasons. (Interestingly, in this state of single-minded pursuit of one's goals, one's project might even have a positive focus: helping people, for example. But even if a person's project is positive, worthy and valuable, if it is singleminded, it is by definition unempathetic.) (Baron-Cohen 6)

Jordan is unempathetic because he has suffered so much in life. I cannot blame him for being angry at the world around him. I hadn't asked why he was so angry up until this point because I, too, tend to be largely unempathetic. Driven by my goal to be a productive educator, I sometimes lose sight of the components that might entail. Jordan and I aren't at all different when it comes to singlemindedness. Both of our childhoods have made our main focus to stay afloat. Each of us treading water, Jordan wants to give up, and I want to benefit the lives of

others so I don't have time to think about giving up.

I sigh and reply, "Yeah."

I decide to withhold my thoughts on empathy.

"And we read all this stuff from poets strung out on opium, and we, like, respect it. I'm supposed to write an essay about something some dead white guy wrote while tripping? I ain't never seen a junkie get so much attention. They just leave then they die. I don't like thinkin' that worked for people," Jordan says calmly.

"I get that. My dad left and overdosed when I was a little younger than you."

He looks at me with disbelief.

"On what?"

He asks this skeptically.

"Heroin I think. I'm not sure honestly. He did so much."

"And it doesn't make you angry to see stuff written by junkies after that happened to you?"

"No. It just reminds me there was a person with feelings similar to my own somewhere under all that fog. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wasn't on drugs though. She was just glad somebody loved her because she'd been stuck in a wheelchair for most of her life."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

We sit there in silence for a few more seconds.

"They stayed together, you know?"

"Who?"

"Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning."

Works Cited

Baron-Cohen, Simon. *Zero Degrees of Empathy*. London: Penguin Group, 2011. Print.