Killer

Take a course in physical restraint, the other teachers told him. Watch for dilated pupils; we don’t report but we try to keep tabs. Don’t worry about curriculum. You won’t make it through your curriculum. If you get a few of the kids to trust you, you’re ahead of the game. If you get a few through the year you’re ahead.

Lazarus collected its charges one by one as the public schools ejected them, each deemed beyond the reach of even remedial classes, not to mention disruptive. There were twelve students at Lazarus: a jury of sixteen-to-twenty year-olds whose verdict no one awaited. They were suburbanites, belligerently entitled. They were children of middle-class stability or even affluence--their family dramas or alcoholism or drug raps or violent tendencies therefore, the talk shows regularly reminded them, their own fault. The Lazarus School reinforced this moral through symbol. The school had no textbooks. It had no microscopes or gym facilities. It was located in the part of the suburb where people went to donate old clothing or retrieve their towed cars, and while waiting for service asked around for a place to buy a cup of coffee and learned there was none. In the blocks ringing the Lazarus School, successful professionals leaned against chain-link fences, eyes shuttered with willed acceptance, the day drained of momentum.

Sharing the building with the Lazarus School was a minor branch of a larger regional police academy. During simulations, the academy’s sirens sounded. Lazarus’ students layered themselves at the window and cursed the blue-clad cadets on. The cadets, scrambling to position in their fenced yard beyond the thick, scratched window, looked small and lost.

Richard had been hired to teach science and math. He’d escaped his job in finance just in time to preserve the last of his hair and illusions. (He repeated this explanation whenever an opportunity arose--he liked how it sounded, modest and resolute.) What kind of science was he to teach at Lazarus? Science. What level of math? The other teachers hooted in his face. He was a graduate of Tulane; he’d majored in philosophy and economics. Back in high school he’d known a few kids who flunked out or screwed up, but he’d lost track of them when they vanished from his classes. He looked up the telephone numbers of his high school teachers from a decade past, accepted their flattered enthusiasm and praise, followed their suggestions until he’d assembled brave notes for a survey of topics.

The first week of school he taught cell-structure. Owen, a skinny, veined seventeen-year-old who wore his pants slung so low he pivoted slightly with each step, ripped the faucet off the sink and the flood brought the class to an end. On Tuesday Karen, buxom and lacily tattooed, lay down on the radiator and would not speak. Richard taught as though she were not in the room. Choose your battles carefully, the other teachers had said. You’re being sized up. If you respond to every small provocation the students will smell fear. On Friday a beefy, silent kid named Moe unwrapped a jumbo bottle of Vitamin B. He’d heard it cleared the dope out of your system. Moe was due for a random drug test the next day—he’d been presented the typed request for his presence. Richard did not see them take the pills at lunch, gulping fistfuls of vitamins with soda as though it were a sport. By the middle of his class the students were flushed. They stared at him without a shadow of comprehension, giggling. Sweating. He stopped mid-sentence, listened to his students breathing, stepped past his charges into the hall and did not stop until he found another teacher. The students were sent home early. At the daily after-school conference the teachers made follow-up calls to the homes. They stayed late trying to contact Moe’s father, who lived in the house with Moe and his mother but had not spoken to Moe for a year and would not come to the telephone. Moe’s mother said she could not control Moe and she expected the teachers to do better. She cried. The tears slurred her speech. Richard could not make out her words and gave up asking her to repeat them. By the time Richard reached home, it was dark. He tripped on his recycling bin and crashed into the house’s aluminum siding, cutting his lip. The landlady turned on an outside light and watched him suspiciously as he climbed the stairs. Dinner was tater tots, still frozen in the center. He forced himself to eat. He forced himself to laugh. He wrote a long e-mail about the day: a poetic, ironic description of his job. He couldn’t think who to send it to.

The second week he taught weather patterns and single-variable equations. Karen’s probation officer said she’d be absent from school Wednesday for a court appearance. Scott got off his drug charges and his father gave him a hundred dollars, celebration money. Theresa read the article about superconductors that Richard had photocopied for the class and she greeted him the next morning with “You’re a crazy man, Mr. N.” The article was the hardest shit she ever read and she didn’t know who gave him the idea Lazarus morons could handle it. She told her boyfriend about superconductors. Her boyfriend wanted to know when he could get one for his car engine. He wanted to know could Theresa’s science teacher hook him up. The other teachers said Richard was doing fine.

In November he proposed a mini-class in philosophy. The students might not have the capacity to decipher Descartes, he told the other teachers, but they had souls and surely wondered, in their own way, about the questions posed by philosophers. They deserved to know other human beings in the world had pondered these same questions.

He stood before them, hands clasped at the base of his spine. “I’m deaf,” he said. “I’m blind. I have no sensation in my skin. Prove to me that you exist. Prove to me that there is another soul in the universe other than me.”

“I’ll punch you in the head,” Timothy offered. Timothy liked to say “I’ll punch you in the head.” As far as Richard knew, Timothy had never punched anyone, in the head or otherwise. Nonetheless Timothy said this several times a day to various classmates, none of whom could abide him--a fact they made known frequently and at considerable volume. This only encouraged Timothy. Sometimes Richard wondered whether Timothy understood the others meant what they said about him, and were not merely bantering back to his swagger.

“I have no feelings,” Richard reminded Timothy.

He had their attention. Karen and Theresa stopped talking and leaned forward.

Jemal spoke up. “I’ll put a tube into your brain and send a snapshot of me.”

“I’ll think you’re just a dream,” said Richard.

“A *nightmare*,” said Timothy. No one laughed.

“I’ll find some cunt to break your heart,” said Scott. “Then you’ll know there are women, because you’ll hate them.”

“You wouldn’t want someone to refer to your mother that way, so watch your language in this class,” Richard said. “Now, I respect your line of thinking. I do. Because loss is among the most powerful human emotions.” He paused for breath, and saw, to his surprise, that they were waiting to hear what he was going to say next. “So one could *imagine* it leaping physical boundaries. But how can a woman break my heart if I can’t hear or see or feel her? I’m still alone in the universe. Prove to me I’m not.”

“Fuck you,” said Scott, which settled the matter. Richard deducted ten points from Scott’s weekly conduct-score, disqualifying him from Friday’s outing. The class period ended. The students looked relieved.

Richard’s students—he liked to think of them as his--cursed for emphasis, for punctuation, for sheer rhythm of speech. If a word was too long a curse was inserted in its center. Edu-fucking-cation. Pro-fucking-bation. Their stories were populated with hos and bitches and dickwads. It wasn’t until late winter that Richard stumbled across the one thing that silenced this stream of profanity. During break the students milled in the yard with hats askew, shoving, rapping, tossing dirty snowballs from a small remaining drift. A woman pushing a stroller—a rare sight in this part of town—slowly looped the parking lot. “Shush!” Theresa smacked Scott’s neck, and when he spun and saw where Theresa was pointing, he swallowed his retort and turned to Jemal. “Watch your language,” he told Jemal. “There’s a kid.” Abruptly the yard was curse-free. Some of the girls smiled and waved until the woman wheeled the carriage past. The boys watched too, looking—so Richard thought-- younger. No one resumed cursing until the bell had rung and they’d shuffled together, sneakers trailing water, back into the building.

Jemal punched Timothy in the head. He’d just lost Friday-outing privileges for graffitiing DO ME MELANIE on an outside wall and wasn’t in a mood for Timothy’s empty threats. Timothy cowered on the floor, cradling his skull, before blindly rushing Jemal. Pulling them apart was easy; Timothy flailed impotently and Jemal, compact and muscled, was laughing. On his break Richard brought the two into his classroom. He gave them twenty minutes to have it out. Verbal only. “Tell each other everything you think,” he instructed them. He’d read this in a book about conflict resolution with inmates. “Don’t hold back, and don’t get up from your seats.” Of course, in the book there had been prison guards to back up the mediators. Richard’s physical restraint course had lasted one hour and left him with only one reliable move: he could handle himself if a student jumped him from behind.

They’d been at it for ten minutes.

“You think you’re so bad, but you don’t know the boys I got on my side,” said Timothy. Timothy was five foot five and his acne-riddled skin gave him a perpetual blush.

Jemal answered lazily, his threats long and looping counterpoint to Timothy’s staccato bursts. “*My* boys are going to fuck you so bad you won’t even remember to cry for your pussy boys.” Jemal did not normally fight unless provoked. His demon was not drugs or temper, but the worst case of ADD the teachers had ever seen. Richard was concerned that Jemal had let Timothy so easily goad him into violence. He lost track of the conversation, speculating about arranging a private heart-to-heart with Jemal.

“My boys are going to take your boys,” Timothy was saying when Richard re-focused. “They’re going to make your boys eat shit, understand? I hang at the mall with my boys and all I have to do is say the word.”

Jemal glanced at the clock. “My boys are tougher than that, they don’t even need to be told what to do.”

“My boys’ll whup your boys’ asses.”

“My boys can’t be whupped,” countered Jemal, “because my boys don’t even care if they die.”

“Yeah, fuck that,” said Timothy, “I’ve got boys who don’t even care if they die because they’re already dead.”

Jemal blinked. He opened his mouth, then shut it. “I guess we both got a lot of boys,” he said.

They turned to Richard.

The students did not like to graduate. Sometimes they failed in the last term just to guarantee another few months’ enrollment. A few did this until they were twenty and were dropped from the rolls by the state. The students who had graduated often visited Lazarus. They accepted invitations to the teachers’ lounge and drank proffered sodas without sitting. They said Lazarus was family, but left quickly after they said this. Lazarus had changed behind their backs. After a couple years no one except the teachers knew them, and even the teachers changed over at a brisk rate. The graduates, those who were not in jail or in the army, had jobs at gas stations or convenience stores or community service organizations. They walked through the halls of Lazarus like ghosts.

He brought a mouse to class. He’d caught it home-style – a shoebox propped on a pencil, a piece of cheese. Very Encyclopedia Brown—a series these kids would not have read. While he was baiting the trap, his ex-girlfriend Beth called. She was going to have a baby. He listened to Beth’s voice, breathy and rich. Beth had dumped Richard for a job in Texas, four years ago. That was when he was still finishing business school in Manhattan and things like rent-controlled apartments and tantalizing job interviews seemed important. He and Beth were too sophisticated, too wise-beyond-their-years, to turn down life opportunities when they were both so young. The future was a vast horizon. They’d pursue their goals now, find a way to be together in a year or two.

She’d dumped him for the job: that’s how he’d chosen to think of it. But it wasn’t honest, not precisely. The truth was more complicated. The truth was, he’d let something slip his grasp and even now he couldn’t say exactly how it had happened. For the year after she’d moved, he and Beth had stayed together in name, long-distance. He’d shared his news with her over the phone every day: his new job, the way he’d impressed his boss. If her own phone reports had grown more terse, he hadn’t noticed, so full was he of the heady life he’d entered, a life in which he shaped and challenged himself every day amid the toughest in the field, and--day by day, test by nerve-wracking test--carved an identity that met with the approval of all around him.

When she’d phoned to say she’d met a guy she wanted a fling with, Richard gave her her freedom in a conversation that he knew, even as he hung up the receiver, was too short. He told the woman he’d loved to have her fling and rushed her off the telephone. He buried any confusion he might have felt in his new responsibilities at work—responsibilities that were, he didn’t need to be told, an honor.

He was climbing the ladder in his firm when she met Ted. He knew about her relationship with Ted from its beginnings; Beth had asked if it was all right to confide in him, and he had said yes. By then they had been just friends for nearly a year. It wouldn’t have worked out anyway, Beth said. Richard was too ambitious to settle down. He didn’t want what she wanted. What she wanted, it turned out, was simpler than what she’d once thought. What she wanted was a house. A family. What she wanted was Ted.

They named the mouse Killer. The girls fed it Cap’n Crunch. The boys tried to train it to turn circles on its hind legs; when it would not be trained, they sat back and speculated about its sexual prowess. Killer was small and brown with a darker speck of a nose, and a curiosity that did not wane even when the same stunt—a finger dangled overhead and withdrawn just as the mouse reached for it--was performed for the thirtieth time. Over and over, the students ringing the table took turns dipping their fingers into the air of the cracked glass fish-tank that was the mouse’s home. The mouse raised itself as far as it could, its small body rising hopefully like a puppet pulled by an invisible string. Whiskers atremble, tiny forepaws reaching. Richard cajoled the students into studying Killer, charting his sleeping patterns and eating habits.

Scott charged Owen with an exhaust-pipe from the car they were working on in the lot after school. He said he forgot the pipe was in his hand. Another suspension. Moe was spirited away in the middle of the night by an organization hired by his mother and father. Three beefy attendants woke him at 4AM, wrestled him out of bed, stood over him while he gathered a change of clothing. They put him in their van and whisked him away to a wilderness survival course for troubled youth. He called from a pay phone, en route somewhere west, his curses strangled. “The fuckers wouldn’t even let me say goodbye,” he kept saying. He would not return for the duration of the school year; the teachers doubted he would return at all.

Killer calmed them. Richard observed this, and adapted. He made Killer’s tank the centerpiece of his classroom. Killer whirred on his wheel. Between short spurts of attention to the blackboard, the students watched the mouse’s endless static sprints. “The lad runs for the sheer joy of running,” Richard intoned in a mock British accent. The students stared at him. None of them had seen *Chariots of Fire.*

He tried introducing multiple-variable equations but Karen and Jemal refused to solve two math problems at once. He gave the students a break and called Theresa to the board to solve a simpler problem. Theresa said she couldn’t because she was pregnant. Fractions made her barf. The teachers called a conference, Theresa in the seat of honor at the head of the table. None of the teachers knew the father, a student at a regular high school. They were hesitant in their questions. Theresa laughed at this sudden protectiveness. Theresa, plump and downy-cheeked, curled her hair around a pencil and waited to be dismissed. She had no interest in hearing what lay ahead of her as a single mother. She wasn’t going to be a single mother. He was going to propose, probably this week. He was a maniac but he had a cute ass.

Killer was gone. It was April; the trees were blooming and students sneezed without cease. They blinked at Richard and waited like children for him to explain, perhaps to produce Killer from the pocket of his jeans. It was Monday morning. No one knew who might have broken into the classroom over the weekend. No one knew who might have wanted to hurt Killer. Someone had chalked YOU ARE AN ASSHOL on the blackboard and Jemal thought it might be a clue, but Scott admitted he’d done it before leaving Friday afternoon.

“We’re gonna get those sons of a bitches once we find them,” said Jemal.

Theresa rubbed her rounded belly and said, “It’s not right.”

Timothy stood. “I’m going to send my boys,” he said. “They’re going to get Killer back and do damage to the ones who stole him.”

“You’re an asswipe,” said Scott. “Nobody wants to steal a mouse. They probably just killed him. They probably ate him.”

“Fuck you,” said Timothy.

“Fuck *you*.”

“Maybe he escaped,” Karen suggested.

“Escaped how?” said Richard. He kept his voice rational.

“He clawed his way up the glass and balanced on top, and then fell.” Karen glared at the others, daring them to disagree. The room turned hot with trapped morning sunlight. The students looked at Richard. For once, he understood, they were demanding the distraction of a lesson. He had planned to teach animal behavior. He paged through his notebook instead and talked to them for forty minutes about Mendel’s pea plants.

Killer did not return. By the end of the day Richard felt nauseous from tension.

“Maybe someone set him free,” said Theresa.

May arrived. Owen got a summer job in carpentry. He gave Richard a Jay-Z CD as thanks for the extra help in geometry. “This might make you more hip,” he said to Richard when he handed it to him. “But I don’t think so.”

The maniac with the cute ass did not propose, but joined the army. Theresa led the class in cursing the deadbeat scumbag. Everyone joined in, male and female. Their profanity took life, soared to the speckled foam ceiling tiles that looked, improbably, coffee-stained. Theresa’s cheeks were bright red. She laughed so hard she started peeing and had to run to the bathroom.

Richard signed on for another year.

Jemal graduated early. The teachers bought a cake for his celebration. He’d found a job as a bank teller, more than he’d hoped for. It was a half-hour commute and he didn’t know anyone in the town. The other tellers were married or boring or didn’t have time for new acquaintances. Jemal visited Lazarus sometimes on his way to work. Richard came into his classroom early one morning and found Jemal standing inside, tapping a folder bearing the bank’s insignia on a desktop. He tapped with the delicate motions of a lock-picker listening for the release of some inner catch. “Loneliness,” Jemal said. His hands went still. After a moment he resumed tapping. “Loneliness is the most powerful human emotion.”

Timothy walked into the classroom.

“Except for stupidity,” said Jemal. “Stupidity is more powerful.”

Timothy’s rubble-strewn complexion darkened. He stopped in the middle of the room. “I’m going to cut you up,” he said.

“Aren’t you going to punch me in the head?” Jemal left without waiting for a retort.

Theresa gave birth to a boy. The teachers took up a contribution and bought a stroller. The other students gave Theresa a party at her house. They made her promise to visit.

Beth, Richard’s ex-girlfriend, also had a boy. She named the baby Theo. A name Richard hated and would not have been persuaded to give to a son of his.

Timothy was turning sixteen. He was leaving Lazarus—his mother said as soon as he hit sixteen he was going to get out there and earn some money. Timothy applied for a job as a clerk in a 7-11. He was silent in class, then explosive. He lost his outing privileges four weeks in a row, once for trying to shove Killer’s empty tank, stored at the side of the room, off the table. Scott and Owen tackled him in time to prevent the crash. Smothered on the floor beneath two heavy bodies, Timothy threw punch after punch, a single choked sob escaping him as Scott and Owen cursed him into submission.

“You can stay in school, you know,” Richard told him during lunch the next day. “I can talk with your mother.”

“I’ll be cool,” said Timothy. He took a long sip of soda. “Why would I want to stay?”

Richard took his time posing the next question; he had an odd intuition that Timothy trusted him more than the other, older teachers. “You want to leave Lazarus?” he asked.

Timothy bit down on his straw, then worked it with his teeth, flattening it. He drew a long breath, then exhaled, the straw hissing, then whistling. He did it again, watching Richard, brown eyes serious. Karen and Scott walked past, glancing curiously from Richard to Timothy.

Timothy spat the straw from his mouth. “Lazarus is a pisshole,” he said.

That was early June.

The last week of the school year Richard left the teachers’ meeting and walked toward his car. “Yo,” called Timothy from across the lot. He pushed off the fence and strode toward Richard. The other students were long gone. Timothy came to a halt in front of him. “Yo,” he said again. “Asshole,” he said. From the pocket of his baggy pants he pulled a long knife with wicked serrations: a knife designed for no benevolent purpose. Richard did not find it credible for Timothy to have such a knife.

“You’re a fucker,” said Timothy. His eyes, dull brown pebbles set in a mask of volcanic rock, were dilated not with drugs but with dread.

The knife caught Richard in the arm. The slash was short and deep and the burning freezing pain riveted him. Blood welled thickly from the cut. *Stitches*, thought Richard dumbly, and then, just as dumbly, he heard his own mind keening for someone—he could not fathom quite who—to know where he was at this instant.

Timothy stepped back, panting. Now he would not meet Richard’s eyes. “See, Mr. N,” he said. “See. Now I’m gonna match. Only better.” And he lifted the knife and drew it reverently over his own wrist. This time Richard was rooted. The blood shot from Timothy’s arm. It made a soft patter falling to the pavement. Timothy looked frightened. He switched hands, but his left palm would not hold the knife. He looked down at the spattering blood, doubting. Then he dropped the knife at Richard’s feet: an offering to appease judgement. He ran.

The cadets did what they never did in movies: they caught Timothy. They sprinted from the academy’s entryway, two Lazarus teachers shouting for them to hurry while another raced toward Richard, and they caught Timothy cleanly and escorted him to an ambulance that appeared from nowhere. Timothy disappeared, sliding into the ambulance’s maw strapped to a stretcher, his face smoothed into an expression Richard recognized even from this distance as relief. The cadets slapped each other’s backs and gave great painful-sounding hi-fives. By then Richard was in the arms of co-workers, toward whom he could feel only a vague revulsion.

The nurses teased Richard and released him in time for dinner. The teachers ordered Chinese food delivered to his apartment. One after another they phoned. They asked if he needed help. Richard said, “I’ll be fine.” They asked if he wanted to sit out the rest of the week--they would gladly cover for him. Richard refused. When they asked, voices frayed and irony-burdened, whether he knew of any fathomable motive for Timothy to attack him, Richard hesitated and then said no. He was, suddenly, too fatigued to endeavor to explain: Timothy had chosen him because he knew Richard would forgive him.

Timothy was sentenced for assault. The judge weighed the totality of his crime and issued him three more years’ captivity: rules of conduct; an ill-fitting uniform; a new address within the close, protective walls of juvie lockup.

Richard heard about the trial but did not read about it until Beth—Beth who was home with an infant and had time to browse newspapers on the web--sent him clippings, gleaned from the local paper to which Richard had directed her. Richard read the mention of his own travail, the brief report on arraignment and sentencing. He scoured the faint printout, atop which Beth had penned “Feel better Rich!” for signs of his own heroism. Then, improbably, for signs of her longing.

The students wrote a stack of get-well cards. They stood poised to launch into summer with frisky jokes and tears, flaring tempers and awed glances at his bandage. They lingered at the door. “Scat,” said Richard when three o’clock had passed. “See you in September.” He himself would take a well-earned vacation. A rafting trip, or canoeing, once his arm was healed. He’d stop by over the summer to clean up his classroom and submit another futile requisition for math textbooks for the coming year.

He found him there in July, a paltry mat of fur and bone wedged at the back of an empty cabinet. By then the wound on Richard’s arm was a raised pink seam. He crouched stiffly, then lowered himself to the floor beside the cabinet. Killer: set loose by some unknown hand into the void. He saw Killer casting about in cavernous freedom--a world of scored black tables, scattered chalk and faucet-less sinks, his tiny heart wilding as he sniffed the air for bearings, for crumbs. Life pumped, agonizing, through his meager body, more than his frame could contain in the vast emptied classroom. How small a sound he must have made in his sharpest hunger.

The matted body disintegrated when Richard lifted it. The bones fanned in his palm; he could hardly feel their weight.