

Chapter Three – Dutch Afro

Second and Third Graders murder General Douglas McArthur

I wake up at 5:00 in the morning, my ears still ringing from the after-school shooting club hosted by Uncle Jerry. A piece of left over pizza I snuck into my room the night before has fallen from my bedside table onto the dusty wood floor, cheese-and-mushroom side down. Since it's still dark, I pick up the slice, open the window screen and chuck it out into Susie's yard next door. Susie will only find out I'm using her back yard as a trash heap if her dog, Gretta, barfs up a red mass of sausage and green peppers.

I pull my head back in the window and look at the clock – 5:20 in the morning – then flop my swimming head back down on the pillow. For the next ten minutes I obsess “Should I have said anything last night?” At 5:32, I relinquish myself to the anxious tossing and turning and the anticipation of morning cartoons. To keep the creaky wood floor from snitching on me, I slide out of bed like a beaver leaving a riverbank then walk on my heels to the living room where I turn on the small black and white television. Somehow, before the Grand-Prize-Game promise of Bozo's Circus arrives on the television screen, I can always stay awake through Orin Samuleson and the droning recapitulation of numbers and hog futures he reads on the Farm Report. It is eternally confusing however that the price of corn on the show never corresponds with the price of corn in the grocery store.

Commodities trading might sit beyond my grasp but I pride myself in knowing that at 6:00 a.m., there's a whole hour of Bozo's Circus with no live audience where episodes of

the Clutch Cargo serial are played back-to-back. Otherwise, it seems to me that the live comic material between the clowns, the wizard and the fat ringmaster, whose name I forget, has been worn thin beyond the three generations of children it had raised.

I should be proud that because I wake up at the rooster's crow, before the third-shift gets out and sit through the farm report I understand what corn futures or hog futures even are. At least, if I don't understand, by time I get to school I know if corn was up or down versus hogs. Mostly, I sit through the Farm Report because I'm certain one day that the old guy with the big glasses will get yanked for an extra half-hour of cartoons.

One thing really irks me as I fiddle with the coat hanger antenna on the Admiral TV and slam the side – every one else I know sees Bozo's hair in bright red, not 256 shades of grey.

Today, my alarm clock is not electronic buzzing or a clattering bell but the anticipation of an overeager child. This is a day started not just with Rice Krispies instead of humdrum health food store cereal, this is a day started with a sense thimble-sized accomplishments achieved at grammar school will beat the golden path to conquering far-off golden kingdoms. Today that thimble is particularly monumental, big like the Oldenberg clothespin in the poster on our art room door at McArthur Elementary School. It's one of those days where a child makes a platonic date with destiny and does something so important, the shining bronze statue of this pre-pubescent triumph will, in the tiny tomes of neighborhood history, forever overshadow the accomplishments of that child's adult life, future pauper or pharmaceutical executive may he or she be. Over shadow anything

besides president of the United States, serial killer or the ex-boyfriend of the neighborhood girl who, in high school, has best looking legs in cutoff shorts.

When morning news shows start and the sun finally rises, it's orange against a good luck blue sky, (but never as bright orange as the sky around the smelting furnaces of Michigan City in the far distance). I tell myself this is the day McArthur Elementary School is being *weider*-christened Eleanor Roosevelt Elementary, a name I had chosen and argued for in an essay my freelance copy editor Uncle Jerry, calls "one of the finest examples of pipsqueak floridity he's seen in a long time."

As I wait for the first episode of Clutch Cargo to come on, I'm sure Orin Samuleson, as he commentates at his desk on the farm report, will cut in on the Clutch Cargo cartoon to reach through the static and out of the glass of the television screen to shake my hand saying in his assuring baritone "Jonah, by helping to change the name of your school to Eleanor Roosevelt you've done a great thing for humanity – and the price of soybean futures."

I choose Eleanor Roosevelt's name over her husband not because I liked her better but because Uncle Jerry insisted naming a school after FDR would be "too controversial, too goddamn divisive in this time and age and if you did that, you won't have a chance in hell of winning."

"These Reaganomics motherfuckers call him, FDR, a socialist, you know," he adds, not even looking up while he carefully goes over my list of major points I've drafted in colored

pencil. "By the way," and now he looks up, taking the filterless Camel from his mouth.

"My nephews aren't entering this? Why just you?"

I can't think of an answer for him as to why.

Most seven and eight and nine-year-olds are fascinated by football, baseball or burning plastic action figures with matches. My obsession – one might even say more of a waning obsession at the point I'm actually getting to stand up for an award - is the Great Depression. In a future beyond this present time where I prefer to write in colored pencil as a mark of distinction, if I had mentioned this fixation to my family counselor right after my parents split, she would most likely attribute it to my parents divorce. In a future far-beyond the time of what the earth knew then as family counseling, if I had mentioned this fixation with shanty-towns and stock market crashes, I would be so pumped up with anti-depressants, my body would balloon out like the official neighborhood fat kid Stanley who, I'm told by Tony, eats three boxes of White Castle French fries between lunch and dinner time everyday.

At the height of my preoccupation, to publicly announce myself as an aficionado of the hardest economic period in American history, I go off to school in institutional-paint brown hand-me-down corduroy jeans, my white front pockets turned inside out and hanging out of my pants like floppy dog ears. After two weeks of this, my mother stops pestering me to tuck my pockets back in. A week after that, I realize no one understands my out-turned pockets are not just my neglected appearance but a deliberate statement. "Mr. Jerez," I say to the principal when he reprimands me for not looking like a

gentleman, “These are Hoover flags, a symbol worn by the many unemployed during the Depression era.” He tells me there is no school policy about out-turned pockets but says I might want to take a good look at myself in the mirror.

More than the optimism of New Deal policy and a fascination with bread lines, my now-waning Great Depression obsession arises from another fixation – the 1930’s comic strip and the musical it inspired, Annie. By time I reach fifth grade I will have seen seven different ensembles of spunky girls sing "It's a hardknock life" on stage no less than five times, (I would see it nine times before hitting puberty). My interest in Annie – the orphan without eyes and all the girls with eyes who will ever play Annie from Broadway to the Babylon High School gym – does not wane. It only waxes. (I am sure the family counselors would say my attachment comes from Annie also being adopted.)

During this summer past, the last summer General Douglas MacArthur’s name would be spelled out in Art Deco letters on the side of our grey brick elementary school, I wrote a letter to Andrea McArdle, the original strawberry blonde girl to play Annie on Broadway, to tell her about the Hoover flags I was wearing everyday. As I write, I am so sure she shares my passion for Franklin Delano Roosevelt; he is a minor character in the musical after all. “Republicans too, Oliver,” he chimes in during the singing of “We’re Getting A New Deal for Christmas.”

I never get anything back in the mail and thinking about my folly, I figure that she thinks my statement is as strange as Leticia Cortez thinks my “nonsense about every-*TING*” is

crazy. Either that, or in puberty, she's trying to make career moves as far away from the red headed orphan as possible and no longer responding to letters from fans like me.

At the very least, I would have thought Andrea McArdle would be interested in the fact that I'm in a gifted program.

Gifted gifts for the garbled genius

To illustrate the weight admission to a gifted program has on a Southside child's destiny, consider this famous clockwork occurrence in one of the average person classes at McArthur Elementary. Average, mind you, not what the students called the 'retard' classes or 'sped' classes for special ed. Average: Mike McKinney and his best friend Steve Swetlic always sit in the very back of the class where they undo their zippers then sit there, grinning with their penis sticking out under the desk where the teacher in the front can't see it but students to the side of these rough jokers can. If the authority figures do see what they're doing, in a Catholic silence over an understandable sin, no administrator or teacher ever questions the sea empty desks around the two boys. I'd be too embarrassed to send some kid to the principal's office for exposing himself in a math class.

Everyone in the school – genius, idiot, young Don Giovanni or aspiring neighborhood beauty queen – we all eat lunch together while teachers leave the room for their one break in the day and lunch monitors roam the halls looking for potential detentions with a zeal only paralleled by John MacEnroe as a tennis player. One sweltering day during

lunchtime, while the teacher is out of the room, the lunchroom monitor is somewhere else and I'm making clay dinosaurs smash tiny, clay versions of unpopular teachers, Swetlic and McKinney challenge each other to a game of penis chicken, egging each other on to see who could get their tiny tip closest to the spinning blades of the plastic fan blowing humid air in the back of the room.

Again, how could teachers tell a parent, "Ms. McKinney, your son was trying to put his private parts as close as he could to the blade of a fan," without seeming like a perverted liar or at least, a little squishy in the skull themselves.

Bearing witness to one of their penis events, I learn a quiet, absurd lesson. Whether it's a suitcase that may or may not explode or something inappropriate sticking out of a little boy's pants, calling attention to the problem can end up proving more problematic than the problem itself.

In our group of certified geniuses and almost geniuses, there is no indecent exposure in the back of the classroom, fans are something that (even on sweltering days) keep us from concentrating on tests, no angry outbursts occur unless Trina Gaspardo gets a B on a test, there is rarely a burst of distracted doodling that calls for a marker being taken by a teacher, just rigor and regimentation in all shapes and forms – along with the cannon of Western literature. These works of the ages are known to us, the children absorbing them, as the Great Books. The name always makes me imagine, as I sit on the floor and listen to the teacher read them to us, that they were all originally printed in six-foot high editions, covers that needed to be opened with a crowbar, to emphasize the monumentality of the

work. We started reading them in an abridged form for children our age, then over the years, slowly advancing to the original, ponderous text. Since Great Books programs have long disappeared from other public schools in the city, the original texts which our group will start reading in the next year, in excerpts, have a rounded 1960's spine, the kind of antiquated binding that crackles like AM radio static when it's opened.

Sometimes, smashed tightly in between the stitches of the signatures, in seizure fits of my own boredom, I find archival material that speaks about the legacy of the Great Books program in our hazy, oxidized Hamms Beer hamlet, (to give proper credit, the words 'Hamms Beer hamlet' are stolen from a poem by Jeff Greenfield). Most recently, while we are silently reading something by Dickens I can never remember the title of later on in life, I find a yellow, stiffened-with-age page ripped from an old comic book. On the other side of the brightly colored panels of an Archie comic spin-off story, there's a fully filled out order form for iron-on jean patches. Jennifer Gendak evidently planned on ordering three patches for a dollar. She ordered a bird-sitting-on-guitar neck Woodstock patch exactly like the one I had on my favorite hand-me-down pants, a peace symbol patch and a patch featuring the bearded man from the Job Cigarette rolling papers who I thought, looked almost exactly like Gina Torricelli's dad, Tino Torricelli.

Discovering these distractions between the pages makes one wonder how the lofty notions of Great Books, hiding both childhood commerce and grade school fantasies about teenage life, ever landed in the laps of small geniuses born in a place where brawn still mattered more than calculus. Somebody at the University of Chicago eureka-a-ra-ed an idea stating auto mechanics should be able to understand Plato's Republic as much as

graduate school drop outs working at chain bookstores. McArthur is a remaining school from this once expansive experiment, the last bit of idealistic coke smelting residue from the original Great Books pilot program. In this program, we take tests asking fifth graders to compare Hammurabi's code with the U.S. Constitution. We have implorations for elaborations in those tests asking students to please throw in a little of the abridged John Locke you've learned a few weeks ago and in the same comparative essay, use at least ten vocabulary words from the past two days. We learn speed reading to get through more of the Great Books than our future competitors at private, North Side or North Shore schools, like the Latin School, (which in my estimation as a child, has the most girls with Good Hair and Good Jawlines, something that, by fourth grade, I will decide are important in a wife.) Great Books has languished in most other satellites but not at our school, where the program is kept alive by Mr. Jerez. "Just like the place Jerez, Mexico, Jer-EZ," as he'd say when correcting parents who called him "Mr. Jerz" on first meeting.

The star of our genius program is Trina Gaspardo, half-Mexican half-Italian and in fifth grade, already bursting out in tears about grades that might prevent her from getting into Harvard, the college her way-older, way-revered-in-the-neighborhood brother attended.

Mr. Jerez, who has already served as McArthur's principal for a generation of older brothers and sisters in the neighborhood, also sprinkled the history of Mexico, Poland and Ireland into the fourth grade Great Books curriculum and by junior high, integrated these holiday-table told family histories into the larger curriculum. "Greatness," he advised, "is something that never, ever ends with a specific date and reveals itself in many mobile definitions." Mr. Jerez speaks his fluent Principal like he has a speechwriter.

His supplements are taught using glue-bound packets reprinted by the same local printer who printed yearbooks for at least ten local schools including ours, always placing a slug of his address and phone number in 8-point type on the bottom of the page that ended each section marking a grade level and year in childhood history. There we find a tiny cross and next to it, a little oval of a union bug flanking the printer's contact information. "This is the only fuckin' guy whose uses that Union bug honestly," Mr. Pulaski announces every spring when we'd bring our signed yearbooks home for him to read and see how many of the pretty girls had left pink marker smileys in our book. Tony Greenfield has a lot at this time in his life.

The yearbook, the Great Books are all a part of Mr. Jerez larger community he oversees as a sort of mayor. "What can't get done through the school system can always get done through local advertising," I overhear Mr. Jerez say to the few parents who own storefront businesses in the neighborhood and contribute like this printer to school culture and extra school funding.

Curriculum. We know that word better than any swear or longwinded curse using the name of Jesus Christ. Mr. Jerez tells us during his lunchtime lectures that he developed this 'integrated curriculum,' as part of his master's thesis and was now "capitulating" his observations of our success into his dissertation. As he eats and tells us this and other things meant to make us fall in love with "a lifetime of education", I wonder how he could eat sprouts and refried beans on a cold flour tortilla without throwing it all back up. "That must be what people who do dissertations do," I think. Addressing smaller groups

of students in circles where he finds more promise Mr. Jerez' vocally hopes we won't turn out like Mr. Torricelli's friends. My project partner Gina Torricelli and me are let in on this secret even more because we ride to school together some days. Gina and I have been classmates since pre-school and have been riding in backseats together since about the same time. In a way, she's my first friend, before the Greenfield's or the anyone else but since she's a girl, this fact doesn't always occur to me right away.

Mr. Jerez knows the extended Torricelli clan well because his love of education is only surpassed by his enchantment with Mexican *corridos* and the three motorcycles he owns – especially the vintage Indian and chainless BMW – maintained exclusively by Gina's father.

"Why my Dad's friends' and not my Dad?" Gina asks our principal one day after another of his fair life warnings.

"Because everyone in Chicago and Indiana – even Wisconsin, Michigan – who has a chainless BMW, brings it to your father. Think about that young lady," he replies right before biting and making another one of those nasty sprout-crunching sounds. "Think about what that says about self-education and hence, education."

"Take after your dad Gina," Mr. Jerez would say, "if you can figure out how to fix a chainless and get the parts in the same afternoon, you'll be set – metaphorically and literally."

No one, even in the genius program, knows what ‘literally and metaphorically’ means at that point – even Trina Gaspardo who claims to – but Mr. Jerez uses it all the time anyway, especially around Gina and me.

Gina Torricelli is also my genius program project partner and the only person in the genius group I play with outside of class. (This is largely because Tommy Pulaski throws sand at Trina Gaspardo during recess.) The remainder of the cohorts in my program – and Mr. Jerez thinks it’s beneficial we know the word ‘cohort’ among other research-y terms he loves like his *tacos de lengua y sesos* – were kids who live in parts of the Southeast side where neighborhoods had old, painted lady Victorian homes, a coffee house near the train station, and community centers that were always buzzing with kids eating granola bars, the Saturday morning parking lot of that center filled with dilapidated foreign cars.

“I’m tellin’ you! You kids gotta talk to the parents of Emily Baher or Bernie Ciplik.” Tino Torecelli would remark almost every time he picked us up from a weekend birthday party at one of these centers. “Gina, listen.” As if his daughter is in business with him and he still doesn’t wipe her nose from time to time after a good cry. “I wanna buy those cars up. They’ll be worth a mint one day even if they look like crap now. Talk to ‘em, talk to those parents.”

Jeff Greenfield is in the same genius program, his classes are on the other side of the folding library partition. He’s a year below me so I thank God for Gina. I think I might thank God for Gina even if she wasn’t in the program. But it’s better that she’s a genius

anyway and I thank God again that she is my partner because I know her IQ is one of the highest in the whole program.

We don't call ourselves geniuses. The program got its schoolyard name from bullies who liked to beat up 'geniuses' on the playground. (From my experience you were double marked for pummeling if you were Hindu and genius.)

Our classes take place in the library but most books in that library are curiosities rather than fountains of learning, passing Scholastic Book of the Month whimsies or desperate attempts to get what Trina Gaspardo thinks are stupid people to read. "Mike McKinney actually used this book for a book report," Gina whispers me in an alarmed voice, pointing to a 36-page, pre-"Thriller" illustrated biography of the Jackson 5. "Do you think he wrote, 'this book is for niggers' in the front?" she asks.

I tell her 'that ain't Mike's handwriting. That's some dumb junior high kid's handwriting. I seen it before in other books.' Worse than spitting swears in our school is saying the word ain't or "I seen it" around a teacher or especially Mr. Jerez.

Genius program kids are often teased for winning different awards and actually entering their 300-word essays in contests held by the Hammond Times newspaper. I think that's why Hindu kids never enter those contests. Because I like to jump slowly-creeping freight trains, climb fences sneak around the yards of close factories and all the other things that most kids in the regular classes like to do, I am not a tormented outcast for entering or winning those newspaper contests. When I win Mr. Torricelli says, "If those assholes in

Indiana only knew a part-black kid won the contest, they'd probably close down the paper so they wouldn't have to face it." Then he rubs my head and tells me to grow my hair like Hendrix. "Don't be ashamed of it. My older daughter's friends talk about your hair all the time like your picture runs in Tiger Beat on a monthly basis."

I don't know if he's complementing me or calling me out for reading Tiger Beat with Gina. Does he know we started a Philip McKeon and Nancy McKeon fan club? I'm embarrassed instead of honored.

Mr. Jerez loves to hold school wide contests. "Enough competitions so anyone who shows some brains, gumption and *ganas* can win," he always says at the beginning of the school year. Historically, advanced kids usually won, not because of their superior intelligence but because of their proclivity for handling multiple projects involving crayons, shoeboxes and occasionally electronic circuit boards. Trying to increase chances for the growing population of Mexican students who spoke little English and divert accusations of favoritism, usually delivered directly to the face of the award winner with a knuckle sandwich by the equalizer of a bully not parental letters, Mr. Jerez is always expanding his battery of school wide contests. Currently, there is a competitive Mexican history pageant being planned for the spring. Winners would receive a nameplate necklace from Ortega Jewelers, donated personally by Alfanzo Ortega's father who custom makes Italian horn pendants.

Mr. Jerez' second major contest project for this year was a contest to rename the school.

Our principal is a towering figure, sharp-angled Spanish jaws with mestizo skin and piercing almond eyes. Towering enough to rename a public school without the help of a mayor or alderman. As he struts around the school, his authority and presence is sounded out on the tile floor by the wood-and-leather-bottoms of his Tony Lama cowboy boots. He always leaves his dress shirts unbuttoned with a large gold crucifix dipping into the V-neck of his T-shirt. The fact he's an adherent of something called liberation theology means little to the usually divorced or single lunch mothers who swoon in the presence of his stolid making-it-happen aura.

Parents involved in the school love his equal parts of tough and tender love. Around the school, among students, sage fifth graders pass on knowledge that, in his office he has a paddle wrapped in leather, and maybe it's even studded with spikes. It keeps even the toughest seventh graders cowering at the sound of oncoming Tony Lama boots. In reality, most of his mornings are spent carting students back and forth – students with mothers long gone to work before the dawn – to their homes to fetch forgotten homework.

On days alternate to night classes he's taking towards becoming Dr. Jerez, we know our principal is involved in organizing for various causes in Central America through a place on the Northside called Centro Guatamala. Years later, this would be the downfall of this beloved man after an editorial in the Sun Times accuses him of radicalizing third graders by inviting missionaries to the school to speak on the sins of the United Fruit Company.

“Of course it wasn't a travelogue,” my dad would say.

“Did you know the motherfucker who wrote the article for the Sun-Times didn’t even live in Chicago?” Uncle Jerry would exclaim. “Like that Robert Novak motherfucker. Never trust a man with a combover, muchless a right-wing motherfucker with a comb over. He’s like the guy who says he isn’t envious of a black guy’s penis. That’s what that journalist is. Jealous of the Jerez.”

“Mr. Jerez. He was really fucking hot when you think about it,” Gina Torecelli would say years later.

Douglas McArthur was just a boring subject of public television war documentaries to me but to Mr. Jerez, he was a ‘symbol of war in a world that needed to be striving for peace.’ “A good guy, really good stand-up guy but a symbol of the military industrial complex,” is how he puts it to the genius students. “Look it up next time you’re at the public library. Military industrial complex.”

He also thought that students should be the one’s re-name the school, to ‘show ownership of our own destiny, right here, right now – a destiny of peace embodied in the ideas of the future.’

Little does Mr. Jerez know that more than our school now representing Eleanor B. Roosevelt’s role in forging international understanding, as I note in my winning essay, I am thrilled to have won because I think it would have done Annie proud if she was real and more immediate to my orbit, like Gina Torricelli.

Gina Torricelli thinks it's gross I like Annie because 'she's a girl with poked out eyes.' My renaming of the school will make up for my crush on a cartoon girl with no pupils with Gina and maybe more.

Today is also the day of justification for my persistent two-years of junior-high level reading about the Great Depression. I am going to make a two-minute speech this afternoon. I annunciate "humanitarian" softly over and over as I fidget in front of a television populated for three minutes by Warner Brothers' frolicking animal woodland band, turned low so my mother won't be startled awake. I wonder if I should deepen my voice like the ringmaster on Bozo's circus or one of the guy on the commercials who sings the telephone number, "Hudson-three-two-seven-hun-dred."

Our principal, Mr. J. Jonah Jerez himself – named Jonah like me – and a panel of three community college students, have chosen my name out name out of the 80 entered 600 word essays explaining why our school name should be changed from General Douglas C. McArthur to whatever hero of history inspires us. Some of the other choices included: no less than 10 Walter Paytons, 1 Barry Goldwater, 1 Rod Stewart, 8 JFK's and 1 Jackie O. There is even an endorsement for Goldar Elementary, a school named for the patriarch of the Japanese train-set smashing TV show "Space Giants." Most boys are disappointed the school hasn't been named after Payton and I'm sure the weird kid in our genius group came up with the Space Giants entry.

I am told, in principal's confidence, I was in close running with the following other names: Jackie Robinson, who wouldn't have worked because he played for the Brooklyn Dodgers, a New York team, and because he was black, (something that would go over even worse in a white ethnic neighborhood than taking the name of a war hero off a school); Amilia Aherhart, whose feats had nothing to do with the objectives of education in the principal's mind, a great woman aside; and William Penn, obviously chosen by the one Quaker in the school, fifth grader Emily Baer, whose lawyer father worked as a Union rep for the United Steelworkers.

I ask Mr. Jerez why people thought Walter Payton is okay and not Jackie Robinson. "Figure that out kid and you've written your ticket to Harvard," he tells me. A train ticket to visit Harvard is lousy prize for anything in my mind.

Today I decide to wear a new blue-moon-ice-cream blue colored T-shirt with a plastic decal photo of Suzanne Sommers. Not only was the shirt my favorite color, if you looked closely at her photo, near the V of her French cut one-piece suit, you could see the razor bumps around the area that most intrigued other young boys. My father had bought me this T-shirt for coming in third place in the Cub Scout pinewood derby. This was a special occasion shirt, reserved for Friday night movies, roller skating parties, but most likely, in the minds of adults, not reserved for grade school speaking events or award ceremonies. My mother was kept in the dark about the event because if she knew the honor that was about to be bestowed upon me, she would inevitably force me into the lime green leisure suit purchased on clearance for my aunt's wedding.

Usually Mom exits the house for work long before I have to leave to school or even get up. When I am up before her and want to put on something she disapproves of as school clothes, I dress extra nice then change after she leaves. Since she's been kept in the dark about my award, she simply remarks "That shirt, humph – that shirt your father got you." Divorce can be good for getting things you want as a child but usually wouldn't convince a parent to buy.

Tuesday and Thursday mornings in September, I would walk to school with Juan Cortez. McArthur is too small of a school to have an English as a Second language program so Juan and a few other Mexican kids go early for speech therapy as a replacement. On our days together, we would make the mile trek into a mile and a quarter walk, stopping at the bakery for 25 cent deep fried sugar doughnuts.

On the other three days, I ride with Gina Torecelli. The Greenfield's car is always full, being that it was a Volkswagen bug. Riding to school with the opposite sex can end you up with an unwanted girlfriend so the size of the car your buddy's family drives is important.

Today is Wednesday and Gina's father comes to the door while I'm still in the middle of breakfast. "Hey kid, know'm early but gotta tend to something. Got fresh doughnuts in the car, eat them. Better for ya than oatmeal. Beeff ya ups." That certainly sounds better than the plain yogurt and wheat germ I am stuck with this morning by my mom, health-food-happy Marilyn DeJong.

Gina is silent and sleepy-grumpy when I crawl in the back seat. She still has her dirty baked tan skin from summer. I like to stare at the light brown hairs above her lips, the shape of her nose, her brown eyes trying to stay open, and the tiny buds of breast that are beginning to push up her yellow T-Shirt, right through the "N" and the "D" in Wisconsin Dells.

"Why do you always look at me?" she asks and always asks, knowing full well that I'm giving that mixed gaze of amazement of wanting to touch her and be as great and intelligent as her at the same time, the gawk that replaces the lack of words a child moving early towards adolescent feelings always has. "Why do you always look at me?" is her question that keeps me in her control when she asks it a second time. If Gina is really wound up she would say. "Why are you looking at me? You retarded?" and imitate me, exaggerating the gaze by letting a single strand of droll fall off her bottom lip onto the car seat. This morning, after asking in a mumble, she says nothing and turns to look out the passenger side window.

Mr. Torricelli isn't his usual talkative, hard-rock-radio self this morning, either. Because he owns his own motorcycle repair business, he usually works late into the night, plays chauffeur to Gina and me, then goes back to bed after dropping us off in the back parking lot of the school.

Today, we amble along in silence, driving almost a half-mile out of the way so Mr.

Torricelli can pick-up a cup of McDonald's coffee. He buys hash browns for us and passes them to back as his apology for the detour.

"Hey, isn't today the day that they're gonna choose the new name of the school?" Mr.

Torricelli finally asks. And it becomes those why-did-he-have-to-mention-it moments.

Talk of the big school renaming contest is something we have never gabbed about directly with Gina's dad but nonetheless, every detail of his three daughter's lives and their friends' lives and their friend's family's private soap operas is burned into his memory by the burning affection he has for his girls, so he gets total recall from the fact he remembers an announcement for an essay contest to rename the school in the first week of the new schoolyear happens to correspond with the date of the same thing which sends him into silence this morning. Being the motorcycle doctor for every single modded-up, tricked out hog and rice runner in the Southside also helps with remembering specifics about people's lives because people's private stuff is like custom parts. That's Mr. Torricelli's idea.

He has raised Gina and her older sisters, Maria and Simone, alone since Gina was three. Maria was five and Simone was eight when their mother left. Because something took a toll on her father, Simone lived with an aunt between the ages of seven and ten and I can never figure out how that fits in with the mother leaving. For Gina, her long-gone mother is a photo tucked away in a cluttered drawer. For Simoneta, (named for the model who posed for Botacelli's Venus) or Simone, the memory of her mother's hugs include the body heat.

"I asked you guys somethin' back there? Is this the day they're gonna choose a new name for the school or not?" he said snapping his fingers.

"Yeah, it is," Gina says in a yawning voice.

"Pizza puff," he called – her father affectionately calls her pizza puff, after Gina's favorite food – "Pizza puff, you're too young to be moody," he says, putting his thumb between his middle and forefinger, as if to say, 'I've got your nose.' He also calls her pizza puff because she was a "mozzarella ball of a cute Italian girl," in his opinion. I agreed except after I learned what an analogy was, I thought her father could use something better than cheese for Gina's deep soul. After all, no one needed to make an analogy for Simone. Simoneta said it all. She even slouched like the Venus after she took a drag from one of her stolen smokes.

Gina felt that she was getting too old for this nose game, so she squishes her nose like she did when her dad would bring home imported Italian meat or cheese. "Dad, I'm not *eeeemotional* I'm *lissstening* to the radio!"

"Since when did you care about the news?" he asks jokingly.

"Since I was born!"

After the weatherman announces a sunny day with high ozone levels, the repeating jingle from the Aaronson furniture ‘home of the credit connection’ commercial is the only thing we hear for the next four blocks until we arrive in front of our one story gray brick school that looks like a string of ranch homes connected together. Even if our school is better than other schools in the city, I like how the old crappy schools look better, like I prefer the way Gina’s old house looks to my newer house and how all the houses in the neighborhood look better than Juan’s apartment complex or the motels owned by the Hindu kids’ parents.

Gina points out in a huff that we're arriving so early at school, the American flag hasn't even been raised by the janitor. She looks at the sun beginning to paint the blue slate colored sky bright blue above and grumps "Now we gotta sit outside and what if it rains?" If Gina’s father was in an unhurried mood himself today, she would have let a ‘motherfucker’ slip in her complaint and it would have gone unpunished. His anxious state causes him to reel around and yell through clenched teeth, “directly home after school young missy! That’s were you’re gonna sit, rain or not!” I pray to God and thank Him for keeping Gina from saying ‘motherfucker’ this morning after that scolding. I have prayed for the little things in Gina’s life more than I have prayed to thank God for winning the contest to rename the school. Gina slams the door as I offer up my praise.

I like arriving early because it means we can play on the sixth grader’s side of the playground, where there is a jungle gym. The metal dome on our side of the playlot was torn down after a kid we didn’t know from another school climbed on it on a Saturday and had a serious accident while playing King of the World.

King of the World is a game where you scale to the top of the metal triangles that make up the geosidic dome of a jungle gym, stand up on their peak and declare “I’m King of the World!” once you get there and are standing, feet balancing on the narrow bars. Then you have to keep other players from climbing to the top and grabbing your ankles to make the temporary King of the World lose your balance. The game is part chicken, part gymnastics and punishable by losing two weeks of recess since someone once lost all of their front teeth playing the game.

A much safer version of the game could also be played at the top of sand hills at construction sites. A much more dangerous version could be played standing on top of construction equipment. To us, it was the ultimate test of balance and most kids managed to bend down and grab the bars with their hands before getting yanked by a particularly aggressive player out to cause an accident worthy of a school community meeting filled with anxious and angry parents.

“If you want to play King of the World, then play with your imaginary friend,” Gina says after her father leaves. “I don’t want to do anything.”

Is she jealous I won the school renaming contest? I can never tell with Gina. I never boasted to her dad about winning so why should she be mad? So I don’t do anything either except sit by the second and third grade door. There isn’t anyone else on the playground anyway, not even junior high kids out there cleaning up as penance for morning detention. Gina is good at sitting cross-legged in the middle of anywhere and

absorbing herself in a book. I, on the other hand, am not any good at this isolation, especially when Gina is around. So as I try to get comfortable on the asphalt, the morning becomes long and my triumph becomes compromised, especially after Gina gets up, walks over to me from fifty feet away and asks, “And why did you wear that queer shirt of yours for a formal occasion?”

Gina Torricelli and her father Tino

Advanced program students read Greek mythology for the whole two quarters of third grade English. As a residual product of the Great Books program, in our so-called genius incubator, knowing what ‘archetype’ means becomes more important than penmanship.

Built as a program to lift select brilliant sons and daughters of steelworkers out of the fate they had been born into and onto the road of self-authored destiny. Miss Betsy McMillan, our teacher, believes part of our uplift out of the neighborhood and onto college depends on understanding the symbolism in these stories, how they spoke to the Universal human condition. Our ‘absorption of the cultural vocabulary rooted in these myths’ is also important to her.

Cool. But my mind swims in Greek myths because to me, they are just the monster movies written by people who lived before movie theaters were invented. Gina on the other hand, understands archetype and all the other stuff much better than me. Perhaps because her father is a sort of Hercules, she understands how the characters and their struggles play out the same way in modern times, the way Miss McMillan says they do. I

couldn't see a Republic Steel worker in chain mail armor, fighting with a sword next to a ten headed German Shepard guarding the gates of Hades.

Miss McMillan once asked us if we thought Prometheus deserved to be punished for stealing fire. Gina Torricelli said that we wouldn't have steel or campfires if wasn't for Prometheus and that he was punished because the gods were jealous he did so many good things for us mere humans. In the spirit of these discussions afterward, we write one page essays answering whether we think Icarus is heroic or foolish for flying too close to the sun. "My father says that sometimes heroes appear foolish," is how Gina began her A-landing essay I will never forget reading.

Men who suffer for deep, complex women from the age their objects of desire wear flowered flip-flops and T-shirts from Disney World covered with strawberry ice-cream stains alternating with T-shirts from art museums with vanilla ice cream stains are doomed to a lifetime of particularly strange, wrenching heartbreak. Gina, with her perfect Roman nose, bubble-butt, short, feathered brown hair and quickly tanning skin is my first Grecian urn of perfect form and complex thoughts. I forever adore her from a distance while she, on the other hand, thinks my drawings of an upside down e with teeth, my wicked schwa, were funny and that's about it as far as her admiration seemed to go for me. Similarly, she loves it when I made clay dinosaurs and set them out on a mission to smash a two-inch clay version of Ana Domiani, the fifth grader who constantly called Gina "Gina Tortalini who likes to eat big fat wennie." But in a way, that was just my way coming to her defense so it doesn't count as admiration. I wanted her to like me for being smart and deep like she is and some of the older Hindu kids seem to be. Although, in

third grade, those are not the words I would have assigned to those feelings churning in my gut.

Between second and third grade, our cadre of friends have been fully re-formulated, largely because of the addition of Gina. Again, Jeff and Tony Greenfield, but now Juan Cortez (Cortez) and Alfanzo Ortega (Alfanzo), of course, Pulaski, as Tommy is now called, and now the first girl, Gina Torricelli. She is the girl but far tougher and faster than any of us, running with thick, muscular thighs carrying a tiny upper body. She can climb up and across the under trestle of a bridge faster, throw a rock further to hit the window of an abandoned factory more accurately and with more collateral damage than any of us. She can do all these things but she's not a tomboy. Jeff, Gina and I spend the most time together in and out of school because we are all in the advanced program and because unlike other "genius" students, we do not do after-school genius things like play violin and study more math with a tutor.

Before we are allowed to ride our bikes across major intersections or take the CTA bus by ourselves, most of our time is spent under the wild apple tree branches in the Torricelli's yard. Gina lives in a 100-year old farmhouse situated on the biggest corner lot in the neighborhood on Green Bay Street, the last street in the neighborhood and barely a road, more of an alley. A wild grass and sumac tree savanna behind the house hid the fence protecting the vast yards of the Medusa Cement Company and the eastern yard was bounded by a road dead-ending for no reason. Adjacent to the house on the west was a barn last used for candling eggs that had now been converted into Tino's Motorcycle Repair and Resale.

Every member of our group earns a different nickname around Gina's house. They are only a bit nicer than the monikers given to us by older brothers and sisters. Jeff is Bowl Cut, Tommy Pulaski is General Pulaski or Pulaski Snotway, Juan is El Gordo, and Alfonzo carries the musical taunt first given to him by me and Juan. "Ay, ay, yi-yay, Alfonzo, Alfonzo Ortega-a-a-aa', sung to the tune of *Celito Lindo*. Instead of a string of nonsensical teases following the chorus, Mr. Torricelli has written lyrics honoring Alfonzo's masculinity and his premature mustache. "I'm gonna have a beard like yours Mr. Torricelli," Alfonzo says when Gina's dad sings *ay, ay, ay yayi*.

Then there is me. I am what Mr. Torricelli calls a Dutch Afro. "A Brillo-pad haired Puerto Rican adopted by white Dutch people. That's some great crazy shit," he often exclaims out of the blue. I owned the name because the guitar playing of Carlos Santana was also some 'great crazy shit' to Gina's dad. I want to be 'crazy shit' in the eyes of people like Tino Torricelli.

Mr. Torricelli belongs to a younger set of parents who grew up, got married -- or never got married -- and stay in the neighborhood instead of moving to the suburbs or another state. They exist somewhere between the teenagers who wear black rock-band T-shirts and trade stolen prescription pills copped from neighborhood parents nearing their fifties. Older folks with the prescription pills, not the parents Mr. Torricelli's age are the hardcore haters, the ones who voted for Regan and created complex codes to maintain racial segregation now and forever through subtle conversation. These old folks are the ones who still fight Vietnam at lunch counters as much as the younger parents didn't give a

shit about it. The older parents began in the steel mills, at the Ford Plant or International Harvester, saved and created their own businesses that operated on grunt, sweat and your past connections back at the plant. Younger parents wore black rock T-shirts like the teenagers and always worked for someone far away from the neighborhood, with another Union, or they took welfare checks so they could have the time to help with school lunches. They rarely worked at any of the plants in the neighborhood unless they drove trucks or were supervisors.

Gina Torricelli told me that when some of the older guys at Warsaw Tap, the Polish bar up the street from Sugar Magnolia, exclaimed to her father "I don't understand how you can let your daughter hang out with that nigger kid." Her father responded, "He's Indian actually and I'm settin' her up in an arranged marriage. His parents are gonna pass on my shop as dowry. I have high hopes for their marriage."

This is the world between black T-Shirts and factory uniforms and the two weren't always divided by age. The younger men who also claim Warsaw Tap as their territory also live in a world changing faster than they can comprehend. Their wars don't have the nobility of their father's wars and their children's worldview is more foreign than the Japanese steel that was reshaping the destiny of people in our neighborhood. To me, the Dutch Afro, their worlds are divided only by those who liked saying the word nigger and maybe not meaning it and those who said nigger and really hated niggers like me, more than our former next door neighbor Pete hated niggers in the abstract sense as a non-Christian, non-Dutch what Mr. Jerez would call 'other.'

Nigger is a strange term to use to me because our neighborhood only has Mexicans and before third grade, the only Mexican kid who attended our school year round was Alfonzo Ortega. His father owns a jewelry store on 26th Street, a six-mile thoroughfare of Mexican bakeries, cowboy boot shops, and restaurants somewhere between our neighborhood and downtown Chicago. Alfonzo has a million uncles in other neighborhoods, in other states and in Mexico that he constantly tells us stories about, like a storyteller at the library but only a storyteller who had seen too many R-rated movies. We will eventually come to learn, as Alfonzo's friends, that there are only eleven uncles but for children, that many uncles multiplied with as many uncle stories that Alfonzo has to tell equals a million male relatives who do crazy cool things.

By the fall of third grade, when MacArthur elementary is officially Eleanor Roosevelt, our school is at least a quarter Mexican. Most still, are the children of migrant workers who attended the school in the fall and spring, then wintertime, returned to Texas and other parts of the south for another crop cycle. But every year it seems, in the sixth and seventh grades, another family living by traveling and picking crops stops picking and traveling and stays and settles.

One day, when Gina and I are watching her father fix a chainless BMW motorcycle, Mr. Torricelli asks me "how'd Dutch people like your folks end up in a neighborhood with all these Catholics? You'd think your ma 'd wanna be with her people in the suburbs or in Beverly. Beverly, that's a nice neighborhood. Expensive."

I tell him our next-door neighbor Pete lived here once and he was Dutch, like my mom.

Mr. Torricelli replies to my Pete comparison by saying, “Well, that old asshole used to work for Ford and since he was injured he hasn't had to work another day in his life. That house is long paid for. Humph, old Ford worker with a big settlement complaining about the declining morals of the world and niggers sitting on their ass – like the two are directly related.”

He continues with one of those rants adults seem to like as of late or that I just happen to notice more than before because I can pick out some of the meaning. A speech I can't understand. “Sides bein' UAW, his Dutch brothers don't shine to him too much anti-union stripe they are. So he got involved in some vending machine bullshit, only non-connected cat on the racket and hasn't done nuthin' else since but stare out his window and not mind his own goddamn business. He don't really count Dutch like your folks count.”

He turns the metric wrench while delivering a mumbling rant about something regarding ‘American crap not having any more torque’ then brings an apologetic clarification. “I mean, Jonah, Pete don't count like your adopted mom or dad counts in what I'm sayin.”

Ceremony

“Did you bring a change of clothes?” is the first question Mr. Jerez has for me when the flag gets raised and the school opens it's doors. He says this looking at the decal on my

chest. I can see him focusing in with disapproval on the hard nipples coming through Suzanne Sommer's white one-piece bathing suit.

I think about making something up about not understanding the occasion and what it means to my future. Then, after seeing Mr Jerez start to jiggle his keys hanging from his belt loop, I tell him that I don't have the key to my house today to go and fetch a change of clothes. He shakes his head as if he is expecting that answer, then motions for me to walk out to the softball field where the ceremony is about to start. A ceremony to change the name of the school, first thing in the morning; might as well get it over with.

I walk in my new happy walk. It's a walk that mimics the flopping feet of Shaggy from Scooby-Doo cartoons. Breezes from the east blow a few green-brown leaves across the damp grass. Because it's early in the fall, students who have forgotten their jackets and are already fidgeting with on the bleachers surrounding the dry sandy diamond.

On the pitcher's mound, a battered wood podium with 12 beat up folding chairs encircled behind it is set up like an altar to the mundane. Six of the chairs are already filled with stiff and bored Chicago Public School administrators, all different races but united in their hair loss patterns. One even looks drunk as he tries to hold himself up. Every time he recovers from teetering, he runs his giant hands over his head to adjust his swirling combover of hair. "Why do men who have combovers always wear brown suits?" I think to myself.

The alderman's assistant fills the seventh chair and he's also already falling asleep, too, drooling on his grey suit. Rows eight through twelve? No shows or who knows. I have seen enough meaningless neighborhood pomp and circumstance to not take the snoring from the dignitaries personally. Trina Gaspardo would take it seriously. "Look over the audience not at them," Andrea McArdle said once in an interview about her success in playing Annie. I take those words to heart as I practice my speech in my mind's movie theater.

Everything hits me when I'm finally sitting alone on the stage behind the drooling dignitaries. I'm alone, gulping, wrinkling the paper I have written my speech on, becoming self-aware the wind is blowing my curly hair out of shape, shivering and trying to maintain my dignity by keeping myself from doing kid-comfort things like pulling my arms into my shirt to keep them warm. Slightly icy nips of wind touch the bare skin of my forearms but I don't rub them. Looking out on a sea of equally bored classmates, I start to worry that if the stalling goes on too long, it will become an excuse for angry fifth graders to met out a beating on me later. A few of them point to my Suzanne Sommers shirt and laugh. Their teacher shakes her head at me and leans over to another 'teach' to point out my clothing offense. The teacher she whispers to also shakes her head but the next one in the telephone chain of disapproval laughs hysterically and brushes off my choice of attire with a wave of her hand. Strangely enough, I notice, the laughing teacher is old and the other two are young.

As I scan the crowd of unexcited schoolmates for a thrilled Gina, in the far corner of the teacher's parking lot beyond the bleachers I see the grey hats, then the fluttering

American flags held by stout wrinkled hands, then the signs being waved up and down.

Then everyone in attendance hears the bullhorn coming from across the field in a deep, South Side Polish accent. “General Douglas MacArthur was a great war hero....”

As members of the VFW being marching in the parking lot, myself and everyone else out on the baseball field lose what they’re saying to the rising force of the wind.

“Is this a nothing or a Holy shit?” I overhear one of the near-nobody neighborhood dignitaries say to the drooling aldermanic assistant.

Kids stand up as fast as teachers start to push the small heads down of the first sparks in the chain reaction of elementary school disorder in an effort to get them to resume their seats and feign attention. As the stands fluster with interest at something else besides the organized reasons we are sitting in the field for, a happy distraction to the order and what I think is the fantastic speech I’m about to give, one chubby first grader takes the opportunity to make a dash for an unauthorized bathroom break, an even fatter student teacher running behind him in a asthmatic huff.

Wondering what is about to ruin my day, I stand up on my chair and see that roughly fifteen old Warsaw Tap type men, all in crew cuts and military colored clothes, not exactly uniforms but shirts and pants in the same hues that are preferred by delivery people, steel workers or the enlisted. They are protesting the name change but only their stalwart faces say anything about their anger. Otherwise they were just tired veterans at another protest holding signs reading ‘Honor our Heroes’ on the front and sale prices for

Hostess Ho-Ho's on the backside. There they were, my ideological adversaries with slumped, tired postures, marching in small steps, if not against Eleanor Roosevelt and all that she stood for, then marching for an eggs-and-bacon life and against that new unknown that was undoing them on the radio, on the TV, downtown and now in their neighborhood, blue button-by-blue-button-by embroidered name-tag thread.

"Fuckin'-A, Mr. Jerez is gonna fuckin' kick their ass, he's gonna kick a fuckin' crusty veterans ass. man," I heard a pre-maturely husky voice yell out from the bleachers to my left.

Then as fast as a teacher's hand slaps the back of the shouting from side-of-the-boxing-ring kid's head, I hear the almost-angry authoritative slap of Mr. Jerez' cowboy boots against the asphalt, running towards the Warsaw Tap type men. As he approaches them, I can see that he has swiped a bullhorn from one of the protesters, looking at him the same way he looks at children who have done something wrong. I have good hearing and from what I could make out from what he said before the bullhorn was swiped out of his hand, the guy with the bullhorn and his friends are pissed the school is changing it's name to the name of 'not even a president but to da' name of a first lady. Unprecedented in da' history of the United States.' The guy who lost his bullhorn thinks we should remember our war heroes. He thinks what we are doing is disgusting, despicable. He wants to know 'what Eleanor Roosevelt ever did for the American people?'

One of the student teachers who has hairy legs and is not from around here is yelling 'Sexist pigs!' when she hears other men with crew cuts yelling the same thing and has to

be asked to sit down. Evidently, she didn't have the sense to realize her counter-protest wouldn't encourage the girls in the school but instead, the sixth grade boys who also begin screaming 'sexist pig, sexist pig' towards the parking lot in a cartoonish woman's voice.

Mr. Jerez has also served in the Army and I can see him making this very point with his hands, I don't need to hear his voice, I know his 'I was in the Army, too' gestures. After being driven home by Mr. Jerez in the middle of the day to retrieve homework enough times and watching him talk to Mr. Torricelli in the repair shop, I can tell the difference between his different signature gestures for 'shape up,' 'shut up,' 'fantastic job,' 'fantastic food,' and the arm movements that mean he is giving one of his 'when I was in the Army' speeches. I hope he's not delivering the same stupid stories he tells us to those Veterans. I'm sure he isn't. He's Mr. Jerez and he's probably out there telling them stories he wouldn't tell children, stories about arms and legs getting blown off, like the stories Uncle Jerry tells about 'nam or like the pictures of bodies coming back in the Hustler Magazine Tommy Pulaski's brother has hidden in his closet.

In less than five minutes, the veterans and the principal are understanding and agreeing. But as armistice is met in the parking lot, the riot in the bleachers has only started. Children are being pushed off the side of the seats, hats are being grabbed and thrown in the air, a few fourth graders have run off and started playing tag. The dignitaries have only risen for a moment to see what the commotion is all about and have all quickly returned to playing electronic football games, napping and shifting around as if they need to pee really bad.

Suddenly, quicker than the strengthening wind that is about to make me betray my budding machismo and rub my arms to quell the shiver, Mr. Jerez has bounced back on the podium announcing in his never-needs-a-microphone voice, ‘there had been a minor snafu today’ and we should ‘proceed as normal. “And I mean as normal!” he repeats with the echo of his growling voice rebounding against the back of the bungalows and garages forming the outfield wall of the softball field. He leaps off the podium, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid style, and runs back to the veterans who have now, stopped to convene about something, possibly their next step.

Old Polish-American men with pickled faces and one big callous for a hand are men who have always made me withdraw in fear. They own the neighborhood silently, ruling from coffee shop stools and by peeking from behind curtain windows. (Sometimes it’s their wives peeking, hard to tell sometimes.) Now, they’ve made a beach head on my day of glory. Maybe they even said a few ‘niggers’ or ‘nigger-spics’ even though I try to put it out of my mind that this protest has anything to do with me. Mr. Jerez turns and looks back from the parking lot towards me, winking and giving the thumbs up. At that moment, I know that when I grow up I want to wink from that far away and let someone know everything is going to be alright.

As they meet, discussing, pointing, some scowling and shaking their heads, more local dignitaries arrived in beat up Lincoln Town Cars, city vehicles wearing one of the two rumpled Bigsby and Kruthers suits they owned. Seemingly mid-sentence, the principal runs back, leaving the alderman open to the throng of his most stalwart supports.

Without breaking a sweat, Mr. Jerez is back on the field. He reassures the confused VIP gallery and spinning around fast enough for his gold crucifix to slip in and out of his open shirt, he leaps back on the podium, motioning for the festivities to start. Leaning down and looking me in the eye he says with an excited smile, “this is gonna get interesting. Let’s see where the affiliations, loyalties lie here. We don’t care, right Jonah?” Mr. Jerez, for some reason, always trusted my evaluation of a situation to be on par with adults more than he trusted my ability to dress appropriately or remember to bring my homework to school on a daily basis.

Sure enough, the alderman’s second assistant gets out and heads directly to the Veterans. They know him from calls about potholes, abandoned cars, and niggers in the neighborhood at night – “real niggers not Spanish-speaking niggers” – who crossed the line in looking at houses around the neighborhood instead of keeping their faces forward and minding their own business – so as he moved towards them, my protestors quickly drop their signs of complaint from at attention and waddle towards him, extending their stubby hands to the son of a steelworker with manicured nails he couldn’t really afford.

I watch as the assistant puts each arm over the central figures in the protest. Gestures of fury slowly turn into expressions of exasperation. As the vets and the assistant talk, pointing turns into ‘what is this all about’ open hands?

Somehow, he seems to have told them what it was all about because now some are nodding their heads in agreement.

During the mediation between nothing and a little something in the parking lot, I turn to look at Gina. My heart falls like an elevator with it's wires cut when I meet her eye and realize she's was grinning like a devilish imp at the possibility that my tiny monument in history, renaming the school, is about to be destroyed by a posse that represented my mortal enemy – the nemesis of our whole group and every teenager who just wants to smoke pot in the park – guys who are just like the old guys at Warsaw Tap.

In that smirk she is not a bitch or mean but a victor and to have the woman you love in grade school look at you with a victorious smirk at the moment that might chalk up as your number one lifetime humiliation, is to be crushed flat like a cartoon character caught under a fast-moving steamroller. Only with this humiliation, you can hear your own bones crack.

To buy time in the meantime, an unknown teacher has put on the Beatles "Love Me Do" over the loudspeaker to quell restless children, the gym teacher leading the first and second graders through some sort of choreography. I'm almost sure that some sort of childish 'get up and boogie' thing is going to completely destroy this serious and somber moment but soon the alderman's crew is heading back from the parking lot, straight for the baseball field and things are about to start.

Mr. Jerez told me later that the line the alderman's assistant used to tone down the protesters was, mimicking the alderman's voice "you'sd guys gotta realize that this

Roosevelt lady we're talkin' about the wife of da' guy whos brought us to war, lead us into 'dat thing, so 'dis ain't 'bout dishornrin no ones."

As he comes back up on the podium to start the ceremony, all I could think about was Gina. Not the speech I had to give, but Gina. I turned to look at her again. Of course she knew I would look so she is pretending to be interested in something else besides my anxious approval-needing face. I look again. She's pretending to be cranky about something else.

Mr. Jerez starts speaking but because whoever is running the sound equipment couldn't figure out the crossfader, he is now talking in and out of "Strawberry Fields Forever" recorded on part of a cassette tape that at one point, had been chewed up into the recorder. This particularly amuses the sixth and seventh graders who, at every school assembly, start giggling at anything that bears even the loosest reference to drugs in their minds.

Finally, there is no more John Lennon and it's only Mr. Jerez talking across that cold baseball field.

I start to fidget, wondering when I need to jump up and orate. The part of me that is embarrassed to stick out like a boy in a bright pink rabbit suit is quickly relieved by runners-up being called to the stage to speak before me.

As the runners up finish and are handed conciliatory certificates at the foot of the podium, enough regret for a middle-aged man wells up in my small body that has just this year, prematurely, begun to sprout pubic hair. “What did I do to deserve winning the renaming of the school?” I think. It feels like my chest might burst and I wish and pray that it would right there, like a monster movie, burst exposing my ribcage and from the bloody guts, a new Jonah would crawl out, one that didn’t try to stick out and draw attention to himself. A Jonah DeJong that was content to throw rocks at factory windows and plan for buying his first Dodge Duster, not find out how great things were somewhere else.

No more spending hours in books planning PBS specials about every state in the union, marking each page about every one of the 50 states in the World Book encyclopedia with a paper clip. No smart-ass smart kid ambition, I would just exist and enjoy the warm sense that overcomes a body when at recess time, a sixth grader with emotional problems lets you put your hand down her sweat pants to feel her newly sprouted bristle.

One of the mothers who came to serve lunch would tell me once, “your mind is too young to be questioning so many things.” Leaving the lunch line behind me Gina always whispers in my ear about the same woman who tells every child they are too young for this or that, “Bitch, you’re too young to have a sixteen-year old son.” So many times, like this moment, I did not want to feel the torque of Gina’s clenched teeth, the tightening that said, “Who got cheated? Me being in your world or you not being in mine?”

Whenever I see the red lips of Magickist sign driving back home from Lakefront bike rides and other kids are in the car, I always forget to duck. The first person who sees the sign calls out at name and if you're the last to dive under the seat, you've been kissed by that person. Usually the name screamed out in the back seat is the name of an extremely fat teacher or Leticia Cortez, (who is actually my second-in-line to Gina) or the 50 foot giant lady who owns those lips. Leticia Cortez gets it, I think, because her clothes are what Alfonzo calls, *India*, like an Indian. I'm ready to get hit by a kiss regardless of humiliation. For me, every kiss is a possible smooch from Gina and that's where the disappointment lies. I'm almost sure one day Gina will drive North or any direction pointing away from the Magickist sign and never have to worry about returning.

I'm silently pining for Gina's validation through the end of the final speech and the alderman announcing 'the winner of the contest to rename the finest school in Southeast Chicago, if not the entire City of Chicago...'

The alderman announcing that I am finally about to make the speech murders my last name, pronouncing the J like a hard English J and not a Y. His mispronunciation grabs my attention and snaps me out of daydreaming, so I'm saved the embarrassment of looking like I have stage fright when I really have Gina-shock. As I rise and remove the crumbled paper with the scrawled rewriting of my speech from my pocket, I'm greeted with cheers, obligatory school assembly boos and whoops and hollers for my Suzanne Sommers T-shirt. Catcalls to the iron-on decal are louder than the forced applause. Before I begin, I make a decision to lie to everyone for the rest of the week and say I wore the shirt to purposefully grab everyone's attention.

“Today,” I begin, “Today, when we think of America’s humanitarian efforts in the Post World War II era or the United Nations, Eleanor Roosevelt is a forgotten figure.”

Looking up from the paper in my hands, I realize no one heard my intro or is paying any attention. That’s OK. It’s derivative anyway. Too much like a standard grade school speech intro. I would improvise and move to a more gripping part of the essay. “Even though Eleanor Roosevelt passed away a long time ago, she is still someone children like us can relate to because she started out her life as an awkward child, shy and unsure of herself.”

“Did she pee in her pants?” yells a sixth grade heckler. I go on, unflustered, about Ms. Roosevelt’s awkward childhood, watching the heckler get marched through the playground by his ear. Either the crunching, ear-twisting of the sixth grader or the content of my speech finally gets everyone in the bleachers to quiet down. I go into her history as U.S. Ambassador and then talk about why I choose the name, how it fits in with the values of our school and our community. How we are the gateway to Chicago and living so close to the ports, Chicago’s welcoming arms to the world, ‘a neighborhood of internationalities if you will.’ (Yes, Gina, internationalities is a word, thank you.) I talk about how we are seeing maybe the longest time of peace the world has ever known and that even though there is a standoff between Russia and the United States and nuclear weapons are a problem, we may never see war again in our lifetime thanks to diplomacy and institutions like the United Nations. Some veterans are standing behind the fence at

home plate listening to my speech and this is the only thing they seem to disagree with in the entire spiel.

As I watch them, I'm gripped by a fever to do something else, to totally run off the course of my script. I tell everyone we should be proud of Eleanor Roosevelt, the former first lady, proud of Eleanor Roosevelt Elementary and 'most of all, we should be proud of our flag flying about our school. Eleanor Roosevelt would be proud to know every night and every morning, a Cub Scout from Troop #111 or a Girl Scout raises and lowers the flag in front of the school."

First of all, Girl Scouts never raise or lower flags on any school I know. Second, the janitor raises the flag. I've lied to the entire school, the veterans and the alderman. It must be a crime to lie to the alderman. My stomach tightens like it has a vise grip clamped on it. I wait for more commotion but instead, the Veterans erupt in applause and so does the rest of the school. I don't even bother to look at Mr. Jerez because I know he is not clapping. He's probably red faced.

God knows what I'll say next, I don't even know what lie is about to come out. That Dr. King marched down here in the neighborhood with Eleanor Roosevelt? My mouth goes cotton dry. I'm waiting for the principal to cut off my speech and tell everyone to go back to their room – 'everyone except Jonah DeJong who should stay put.' So instead of finishing my reading I do an about face, walk away from the microphone, jump off the back of the stage making a made dash for the other end of the playground where only the fifth and sixth graders are allowed to go. I'm running towards the far playground fence

with a plan to run into the other end of the school, furthest from the assembly, and find a place to hide, waiting for my punishment. Something funny is happening, as I run further away, the cheering is getting louder but I don't look back. I'm almost in tears because of my lie. I let my fingers trail across the fence as I head for the fifth and sixth grade entrance. I feel the slap of my feet hit the asphalt but I hear another running sound, the click and clack of Mr. Jerez' cowboy boots hitting the cement right behind me. Suddenly one hairy bulging arm under my left shoulder, the other between my legs and I'm running with no ground under me.

"Woah, woah!" I hear through my own sobs that have suddenly come bursting out.

"Woah," says the principal but he's not speaking in a voice of reprimand. He sets me back down on the ground with a gentle, comforting, "Woah."

"Got nervous up there? Huh? It's happened to me when I've presented at teacher's conferences," he says. Weeping turns to uncontrolled coughing and I can barely breathe.

"Did you bring your asthma inhaler?" I shake my head. I don't have asthma or at least I don't think so. "Breathe deep, deep as you can. Nervousness can trigger attacks."

I'm breathing deep already waiting for the lecture about lying. Across the field, everyone is filing inside to start the real day – at Eleanor Roosevelt Elementary, not General Douglas MacArthur. Some of the veterans are still protesting while others stand in the field with the alderman, 'shooting the shit' as Gina's dad likes to say. Davina Mulder's mother breaks away from her parent chaperoning duties to head to the parking lot. She also needs to talk to the alderman for some reason. Mr. Jerez also sees her and with his

hand on my shoulder says, “Jonah, don’t tell anyone I told you this but I think one of our lunch mothers just gave her phone number to the alderman.”

I have great eyesight and I can see she’s handing him some sort of business card. She did bring our class cookies once, from out of the blue, telling everyone to tell their parents that she was starting a catering business. Maybe that’s what she was doing. Mr. Jerez could assume the worst sometime. He always tells me when driving me home to pick up my forgotten homework, “Jonah, expect the worse from others and you’ll get the best from yourself.” My dad, who is doing his masters in psychology now, would call that pessimistic realism.

When students and teachers are finally inside and the sound of the fall wind is the only thing left, Mr. Jerez brings me around the front and inside, through the school office entrance where I don’t have to pass any classrooms with my red, tear-soaked face.

“Final hour starts in ten minutes Jonah,” he says. “Want to sit in my office before you head out?”

“Do I have to? I don’t want to get laughed at.”

“If anyone’ll be laughing, they’ll be laughing with you not at you. Your exit was a pretty bold way to deal with stagefright. Besides, that flag nonsense. I knew kids in your program were smart but I would’ve thought ‘pandering’ was only an abstract vocabulary word at your age.”

I make a mental note. “Pandering. Look it up when you get to class.”

When the bell rings and I walk out into the hall, there is neither snickering nor smile.

Boys are lining up talking about the Chicago Bears, girls are telling them to shut up so their class can win best behaved in the school for that month. I’m walking by myself back to the library and blending in as if this afternoon never happened. Only one stray, shaggy-haired sixth grader being sent to the principal’s office says to me as he passes, “Cool jumping off the stage. That was like Zeppelin in concert, man.”

Did people think I was goofing around? I mean, I ran with tricksters but in this kind of thing I wasn’t like them. Stage fright or fuck-up, I didn’t like either one. Would teachers think I didn’t appreciate the honor and hold another contest to choose another name for the school to override my goofing off that was not goofing around but real anxiety?

By time I walk through the library door, I realize I’ve been walking in slow motion because class has already started. Last period today is speed-reading, formally called reading comprehension. Everyone sits on a floor focused on a screen where a bar of light moves across passages of a giant, magnified page line for line at a set speed. Every week, the bar of light is set to move a little faster. At the end of the daily reading we take a test to see how much of the chapter we retained. At the end of each unit – which is more like horse racing with the eyes than actually reading – we meet with a reading specialist who helps those of us who aren’t perfect to identify trouble areas.

I don't care what the Bible says, there are kids in these kind of programs who are perfect, like Emily Baer or as Gina calls her, Quaker Oatmeal because she is Quaker and no one around us besides Trina Gaspardo, who went to Philadelphia last summer, really has any idea what a Quaker is. And of course, as it always goes when the flawed flail and flay themselves, as I try to come in and sit down quietly, the perfect jump up to congratulate me. Leave it to ever-enthusiastic Quaker Oatmeal to turn the knife with a very loud "Oh my God you were so great!" cutting through the silence. And what comes next? Of course it's an 'I even cried.'

I think to myself in Gina's voice, 'Quaker Oatmeal cries at every thing.' If she wasn't in the genius program she would be right below Laticia Cortez in the icky girlfriend box.

What happens next is another one of those things that should have made things better but it made things even worse. Emily Baer leaps from her crosslegged position on the floor to her feet and hugs me. She hugs and hugs me like someone died. She smells like a health food store. Actually, I am dying inside. This is already one of those days where I'm realizing I should be using deodorant already in the third grade and now Quaker Oatmeal is hugging me and hugging me and hugging me. The only time there are every interruptions from our routine in class like this is when one of the other genius kids can't shut up and the teacher thinks we're having a discussion. Quaker Oatmeal is hugging me so long the student teacher running the class today has shut off the projector for a moment. She is thinking about having one of her 'fucking discussions about feelings.'

Those are Trina Gaspardo's words, not mine. I like discussions about feelings. They beat math. I hear they have a lot of them in the regular classes.

"I'm sure we all share Emily's sentiment's about Jonah but we have to..." she begins.

Emily's sentiment's about Jonah. Good going. "I'm sure we're all happy about the fact that one of ours got to rename the school but we have to get back to the lesson...Emily."

Quaker Oatmeal let's go and sits down again, smiling. Me, I'm rigid as a corpse. Even worse, on top of my shame over my little unintended performance, my pandering, I now have some feeling in my stomach resembling the sensation of eating too many Sweet-tarts. I think I got it because I actually like that, close up, Emily Baer smells like the health food store and a little like the thrift store, mixed together. Not quite barf, not quite happiness. What scares me most is this feeling started when Quaker Oatmeal decided to hug me and not let go. "Fuck you Eleanor Roosevelt," I yell in my mind, "I tried to honor you and all you give me is embarrassment and a potential weeks worth of "Jonah loves Quaker Oatmeal" on the playground." And to top it off, the whole debacle went down in front of Gina who will surely never take me seriously for letting Quaker Oats blubber all over me.

In my seizure of shame, I find myself blocking the projector beam with my frozen head so I quickly sit down and pretend to grab and read something else, the adult copy of Great Expectations left on the floor. This will not be a good end of class comprehension test. I have to think about how many fights I'm going to get into based on this day and how I'm

going to still keep Gina in my sights as a potential wife after the two weeks of teasing and Quaker Oats jokes.

“Ten minute reading point!” announces the student teacher who stops the projector and hands out the first part of the day’s test. Fortunately, it’s multiple choice. Unfortunately, the book we’re reading is *Great Expectations* and I’ve only read one page from the real book, not the screen. I look at the red bubbles and try to create a mental image of the person who wrote this test. Imagining what the person who wrote the test looked like, based on the wording of the questions, is often a good way to figure out the multiple choice pattern. Guys with big professor beards and professor glasses, in my mind, usually like to place a majority of the correct answers in B or D.

As I try to decide whether the author has changed midway through the test, I feel someone breathing in my ear. It’s Gina. Is she trying to help me cheat? She never ever takes even a sideways glance in the middle of a test much less talking.

“I’m proud of you,” she whispers. “But not for the speech, for making up such an awesome lie about the Girl Scouts and the flag.”

I’m stunned. So stunned I can’t even guess. I fill out “A” for the seven remaining questions instead of making educated guesses.

We turn in our tests and for the rest of the class, everything seems to slip back into normal. Normal until Emily Baer asks to go to the bathroom. When she leaves the room,

Gina let's out a turrets-like barrage of "Jonah loves Quaker Oatmeal! Jonah loves Quaker Oatmeal! Jonah loves Quaker Oatmeal!"

"Ms. Torricelli! Whatever breakfast Mr. DeJong ate is not relevant to the reading," scolds the student teacher.

Shit. That's what happens when Mr. Jerez gets student teachers from the North Side. They underestimate the savvy cruelty of MacArthur – I mean *Eleanor Roosevelt* Elementary School children. They underestimate how hard we third-graders work *not* to get pretend boyfriends or girlfriends. I am definitely walking home this afternoon, especially since Emily Baer turned around again to smile at me again.

"Sometimes being a genius in this school, maybe even in life," I think, "is just like being one of those retarded kids who rides the tiny yellow bus every morning."

.

