Maeve, Becoming Confused With Adults

“Maevis Morgan, please report to principal Gantt’s office!” crackled the archaic loudspeaker, with rather too much enthusiasm. The grade 7 class swivelled their thirty-four heads toward the Exact Centre of the Classroom, where Maeve’s desk was: Fourth row of seven, third column of five. Boom. Centre.

Maeve had been busily carving an emoji (Boredom) into the linoleum desktop with her grandfather’s sturdy, ancient compass. It was the last of a series of six symbols she had been patiently perfecting for the better part of the week.

The announcement was easy enough to pretend-not-hear. There were so many of them throughout the day, as though the office staff were trying in vain to kill the antique P.A. system once and for all, and were willing to shout almost anything into it at this point to get the job done.

Her classmates, however, always eager for a third-period plot twist, had now forgotten their books completely, and their collective attention was washing over her like a heat lamp on a hot dog. There was a rustle of excited whispers, as conjectures were hurriedly swapped back and forth, trading-card style. What would it be now? Would the consequences be terrible, or just embarrassing? Everyone had opinions, everyone needed to know.

Eyebrows furrowed in feigned concentration, Maeve absently poked at a few ringlets of hair attempting yet another escape from her ball cap. She didn’t like being interrupted in the middle of art projects.

*Fine…* She looked up, looked around. Eyes. Eyes everywhere. *Seventy eyes*.

Mr. MacReady, swathed head-to-toe in blue and black denim as was his habit on Thursdays, was looking at her from the front of the room over his cheap prescription sunglasses (which he got online), not without some admirable concern. “Maeve, sounds like you’re needed in Principal Gantt’s office. You can go”.

Maeve blinked twice; carefully put the compass into its red, scuffed plastic case. She snapped the case shut, as slowly and quietly as one can.

*Snap*.

“Well, I don’t think I’m actually *needed* in the office”, she thoughtfully corrected, staring down and to the right, at a neighbor’s green shoe. “Principal Gantt is a capable man”. Nobody said much, not wanting to miss anything. MacReady figured there was a punchline, and cocked an eyebrow to indicate she could proceed. Maeve cleared her throat, her voice lowering to a husky, accidental, almost-whisper. “I’ve seen his work. Assembly halls. Poster arrangements. Solid stuff”.

“Maeve”.

The teacher preferred to understate his disapproval, when at all possible. He was all about strategy; he played Risk, like, twenty-five times a week or something.

Maeve let escape an inaudible sigh, which got betrayed by her shoulders. She put her books into her pack, exchanging knowing looks with her desktop’s near-complete emoji family. Frustration. Wonder. Chagrin (her personal favorite – she had captured the eyelids perfectly). Resolve. Surprise.

And now Half-Boredom - really just a little winking dude, and not a proper emotion at all. She really hated not finishing projects. Half-Boredom seemed unconcerned with the situation. Maeve got up and walked from the room, dragging her classmates’ attention with her to the door, which she closed behind her like a magic spell. *Click. Go back to your Things people, eyes front, nothing to see here.*

Principal Gantt’s office consisted of a cluster of three small rooms, all connected to one another by unnecessarily heavy wooden doors with narrow, reinforced glass windows in them, so whichever room you were in, you could stare into either of the other two and feel equally confused as to why you were there. The high interior-window-to-floor-space ratio allowed visitors to feel observed from all angles, and the actual windows in two of the three rooms invited the outdoors to join in on the observing.

Maeve entered the first room (which she called the Antechamber) from the main hall. There was another kid in it already, sitting in the farthest of three chairs placed there for waiting and worrying purposes, and so she sat down next to him, in the middle chair. He leaned very slightly away from her as she did so. One of the ceiling lamps flickered faintly for effect.

“So, what are you in for?” asked Maeve. It seemed like a reasonable way to break the ice. Open with a joke.

The Antechamber was small. Too small to properly ignore the other person or people (it could only comfortably fit up to three people) who might be sharing it with you. In addition to its three chairs, the room had three doors, a small end table piled with an array of rapidly aging science magazines, and a handmade magazine rack stuffed with brochures and pamphlets explaining various facets of life, in case you’d missed anything important up to that point. It was an oddly stuffy-breezy room, and it had a knack for encouraging its occupants to reflect on past decisions, while perhaps re-evaluating future plans.

There was no receptionist here, because there was no conceivable way to fit a desk anywhere, without blocking at least two of the doors. The administration staff had actual work to do anyway, and so were located further down the main hall, near the building’s main entrance, in a large, functional room with a (more-or-less) balanced mix of computers and sunlight.

Most kids, when they got sent to see Principal Gantt for some reason, were sent alone, and so were there by themselves, sitting in either the first or third chairs. If two happened to be sent there at the same time, the middle chair was the buffer, and usually held the bags of one or both visitors.

If there were *three* kids in the Antechamber, it could get a little uncomfortable. Sometimes in these cases, if one of the kids was quite secure in their own introversion, they’d eschew the middle chair and stand instead at the magazine rack, rifling through its contents, as though deeply engaged in important, pamphlet-based research. Occasionally, an unusually brave kid would refuse to feign interest in the magazine rack altogether, and just sit on the floor near the tiny table, in mute solidarity with the displaced science literature, waiting patiently for their time to be up.

Maeve could sense this boy was regretting not taking the floor spot.

“Awkward silence”, observed Maeve. The boy’s head turned somewhat further away from her, presumably to more closely examine the texture of the door leading into the second room, which was full of files, boxes, and old posters. Maeve called that room the Storage Closet, even though it had two doors of its own, and an impressive window looking over the front parking lot, which most real, genuine closets do not have.

Maeve leaned slightly forward in her seat, trying to re-invade the boy’s peripheral attention. He was probably just shy, but shy people never bothered her much. She found them to be an interesting challenge. The more she leaned forward, she observed, the more the boy leaned slightly away, and slightly further toward the Closet door. He was getting a really good look at it now. Probably onto something big. It occurred to her that the two of them must have looked a little odd.

She wondered if she could make the boy touch the door with his forehead.

“Maeve, come on in, please”, the ruddy face of Principal Gantt had appeared through Door #3, across from the trio of chairs. “Hello, Niall” he added. The boy quickly looked up, shot Maeve a sidelong glance that, in her opinion, was not all that friendly, and then turned back to examining the veneer on the door to the Storage Closet.

“See you later” Maeve said to the boy’s turned head, as she got up and entered the Inner Sanctum (Gantt’s office). The boy did not respond, but she could feel him relaxing considerably as she left the room, which made her slightly sad, if she were being totally honest with herself.

The Inner Sanctum was roughly twice the size of the Antechamber, which is to say, it was a small room for the principal of an institution the size of Edgar P. Hillary Memorial Middle School. E.P.H.M.M.S. had almost 1300 students, and (so the rumor went) boasted the largest class sizes of any middle school in the quad-county area. In other words, it was a Big Deal to go there. It really should have had a bigger principal’s office.

The room instead got its sense of grandeur entirely from the ancient, massive oak desk which took up two-thirds of its floor space. It was heavy and impressive, and one of its sides (the one mostly covered by a tall, long-suffering rubber plant) was scarred with years of hieroglyphics carved into its varnished surface by generations of students – armed with compasses, pocket knives, and thumbtacks – recording their passage through the area, on route to bigger and better things. There was probably nearly a century of notes etched into its pockmarked side panel.

Maeve often wondered where the principal had been, when the carvings were actually being done. Or, for that matter, how they had gotten the desk into the room in the first place. Was it built here? Did they take a wall down to fit it in? Did somebody – decades ago, when the area was still farmland – just find it sitting by itself in a meadow, and decide to build a school around it, because hey, free giant principal’s desk?

She had once asked for permission to write a history paper on its origins, and the subjects and authors documented on its surface, but had been politely refused. She was beginning to think that asking for permission was not always the most effective way to get real science done anyway.

The Inner Sanctum had three full-size people in it already. Principal Gantt was in the middle, and had by now already slow-waltzed his way past the plant, and was carefully wedging himself behind the desk and back into his chair. Mr. Claudreich, her almost-retired homeroom teacher, was on the left, propped awkwardly on the corner of the desk, in his signature Very Grey suit. Dr. K, the youngish school counselor, dressed comfort-sensibly as always, stood on the right, in front of this room’s Storage Closet door, sporting her best I’m-here-for-you look. Behind the Principal’s desk was the Inner Sanctum’s only window, half the size of the Storage Closet’s window (though it did have a view of two trees, when you sat in the right spot).

Dr. K had a small stack of papers in her arms. Maeve’s assignments from the last few weeks, no doubt.

Principal Gantt motioned politely to a lone chair placed in front of the desk. It occurred to Maeve that the seating arrangement would make it difficult for her to see all three adults at once – an interviewing tactic which she thought seemed a little heavy-handed to use on a twelve-year old. Then again, the room’s configuration didn’t allow for many options. She wished Mr. Claudreich at least had chosen to call in on his cell phone. He looked uncomfortable trying to balance on the edge of the desk. She thought about offering to trade spots with him.

“Maeve”, Dr. K said, in her kindly professional voice, “Will you please take a seat? Thank you”.

Maeve had closed the office door, sat in the offered chair, and was now backing it slowly against the wall, to best address all involved parties. “You’re welcome”, she mumbled.

Mr. Claudreich’s mouth had already begun to swing slowly open, as he drew in the great amount of air he’d require to express the full measure of his disappointment over whatever she had most recently done, but Dr. K. Continued.

“Maeve, we’re all a little concerned about you”.

“Oh”, remarked Maeve, keeping it neutral, “Is something happening to me?”

Principal Gantt pursed his lips, jowls wiggling slightly in vexation. His jowls were wonders of nature, and must have had specialized muscles not granted to the average set of jowls. Mr. Claudreich was already expelling his unused air audibly, somewhat deflated at having been pre-interrupted so soon. Dr. K. Continued.

“Your schoolwork. It’s very well-written, as always… but if you don’t mind my saying so, you don’t seem to be taking it very seriously”.

Maeve thought about that honestly for a few seconds. “I didn’t know that was a requirement”. *Uh oh*. Claudreich had twitched involuntarily, which Maeve caught out of the corner of her eye. Dr. K took a step forward, opening the assignment on the top of the stack.

“*Stress Makes People Unreasonable and Annoying: an Essay by Maevis Morgan*”. You wrote this last week? Dr. K looked up for a confirmation.

Pause. “Yeah”.

The counselor nodded slightly, and flipped to the next assignment. “*Metaphors and Nonsense: Why Writing Fiction is Stupid, by Maevis Morgan*”. She flipped through the paper briefly, pausing to examine one of the diagrams. “I thought you liked fiction, Maeve”.

Maeve shrugged. “I’m on the fence”.

Mr. Claudreich was shaking his head, faintly. Principal Gantt un-twined and re-twined his fingers, a thing he liked to do to help keep conversations moving along smoothly.

Dr. K opened a third assignment, looking up at Maeve as she recited the paper’s title, “*Statistical Analyses of the Emotional Viability of Children from Single Parent Houses: a Research Paper by Maevis Morgan*”. Dr. K waited to see if Maeve had something to say.

“I interviewed 112 students. The data’s at the back, in a spreadsheet. LibreOffice Calc”. Maeve avoided Dr. K’s eyes and looked past her to the small window, but of course couldn’t see the trees from this angle – just sky, or maybe a painting of a sky. “That’s open-source software”.

“The data *are* at the back”.

“Right, sorry”. Maeve’s cheeks blushed ever-so-slightly. She did not enjoy making mistakes in front of Dr. K.

The counselor put the stack of assignments on the desk, and exchanged a look with principal Gantt, who handed her a small bundle of pale blue paper, bound with fuzzy yellow yarn. Where had they dug *that* one up? Maeve tried to remember what she had written in there, and when, but couldn’t recall. Was it from her Secondary Colors phase?

“*Why I Want to be a Cyborg and Not a Girl Anymore, by Maeve M*”. The counselor inclined her head somewhat, regarding the girl with a curious mix of concern and… something else. The woman was all kindness and professionalism, like a fluffy blanket with a PhD. A lump had appeared and stuck in Maeve’s throat, from out of nowhere. Through the window, she caught sight of a blurry crow flying by in the distance. Maeve had a wet spot on her eye. *Unfair move, Doctor*.

“These topics were not *assigned* to you, Ms. Morgan” Claudreich stated, long and flatly. “They also do not match the subjects that you submitted them for. Not even a little bit”, he reached over and took the next assignment from the stack on the desk. Dr. K was still watching Maeve with… that new look. The one Maeve had already decided she wasn’t sure she liked all that much.

“Mr. Claudreich”, began Principal Gantt, but the elder teacher held up two fingers, and ignoring the Principal, announced the next assignment’s subject, somewhat dramatically, “*Who Shot First? Analyzing Newly Re-Uncovered Evidence of Artistic Revisionism in the Late 1990’s: A Controversial Research Paper by Maevis Morgan*”. There was a pause, in which the other adults seemed to consider this briefly.

Claudreich waved the papers about, as though submitting evidence at a trial, “You submitted this in place of your mid-year *Mathematics* assignment”.

“Well, there’s a lot of trigonometry in it. It’s on pages 6 and 7, and then later, on page -”

“*Miss Morgan…*”

“That’s fine, Maeve”, Dr. K was now between Mr. Claudreich and the girl. She collected the assignment from the teacher and the papers from the desk, and placed them all neatly on a cabinet next to the windowsill. Claudreich sat back down, somewhat awkwardly, frowning at nobody in particular. Principal Gantt rapped his baby knuckles on the desk, hoping the counselor had a plan to tie the matter up soon. He had things to do. Principal things.

Maeve sat staring at the broad, as-yet-unmarred front of the enormous desk. She really wanted to scratch something into it. Badly. Out in the hall, the P.A. system crackled an important amendment to the cafeteria seating protocol.

Dr. K thought for a moment, and then carefully added, “Maeve, you’re not in any kind of trouble for these reports, you know. They are quite good. I’ve always been very proud of your ability to express yourself clearly”.

Maeve’s face revealed nothing. She had managed to wipe the wet spot from her eye while everyone had been looking elsewhere, and was now envisioning the dragons-fighting-robot-samurai mural she would enthusiastically hack into that desk someday, when she could afford to buy it at a school-closing auction.*Go on*, she thought.

“The issue is”, the counselor sent a quick glance Mr. Claudreich’s way, who did not return her look, “I’m not a teacher here, as you know. Assignments do have to be handed in to the teachers who assigned them to you. It’s not entirely fair to them to have to come find me to retrieve your homework. I understand that you have a note from your mother, but -”

Principal Gantt’s eyebrows had shot up, almost in unison. “Wait, hold on. Maeve, have you been submitting your *homework* to Dr. Krishna-O’Murphi?”

Maeve was, in fact, doing this. It made more sense, since Dr. K was the only teacher – that is, adult – who understood her. The rest tried hard, but really.

“Well, yeah. I got a note from my mom. She’s OK with it. I figured Dr. K, you know… that she had the time”, she paused, looking at the floor. “She’s not… you know, exactly busy here”.

Something shifted in the counselor’s demeanor just then. Maeve made a mental note to get better at reading the woman’s body language, and continued.

“I mean, there aren’t a lot of kids in the counselor’s office most days, right? I’m in there, like, two or three times a day, and there’s never anybody in there”. She looked back to the young woman now, “I thought maybe you could use something to do to pass the time. You know, marking papers, filing stuff”. Maeve had always been a bit concerned for Dr. K’s long-term employ-ability at E.P.H.

But the three adults were only half listening to her now, and sharing a perplexed, adult moment between themselves. What was going on?

Principal Gantt spoke, “Maeve… that’s fine. You can go back to class now. We’ll talk about this more later. Everything’s fine. Thank you very much for talking with us”.

Maeve sat still for a couple of seconds, wondering what had just happened. Gantt just smiled awkwardly and nodded. She looked to Mr. Claudreich, but there were no smiles being offered by the man – just a pensive expression, not seemingly meant for her. Dr. K was looking at the floor, arms folded, betraying nothing of her thoughts or feelings. So, Maeve stood up, took her backpack, and walked at a neutral, medium speed out of the office.

*Well, that was weird*, she thought, passing through the Antechamber, and past the boy, whom she had forgotten had been sitting there. He watched her leave, and as the door to the main hallway closed behind her, he said, “See you later”.

Five, or maybe six seconds later, the door opened again, and Maeve’s face reappeared. The two sized each other up for a slightly longer than normal moment. Then Maeve cautiously disappeared again, the door clicking shut behind her. The boy blinked twice.