



A
BARRED
OWL

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Mr. Bausch is an English teacher. He has been an English teacher for nearly forty years. He has weathered, in addition to the general decline of literature, various ludicrous fads in its teaching—the celebration of mediocre achievements by those considered “disadvantaged,” the emphasis on querulous self-expression—and has emerged intact. His middle-school students receive a traditional education, the canonical texts of boys’ and girls’ literature, with no self-esteem-boosting fluff. He does have them write poetry, to teach them form, meter, rhyme. It used to be easier to get them to versify; these days all they want to do is text each other and draw pictures of video-game monsters and pop stars. Society around him seems to wish to move backwards from words to pictograms. On the first day back from winter break (no longer “Christmas,” oh no) he asked his sixth-graders what books they had read over the holidays, and the majority answered none. Or rather, they did not answer at all, but glanced at each other with dumb cunning, waiting for someone else to speak up.

He spends his days like this, waiting for a response that does not come. He has grown more patient. As a young man he would slam his open palm onto a slouching student’s desk, toss a rubber ball to the chattering girls in the back of the room, demand some verbal indicator that the students were mentally present. These days, in his thirty-eighth year of teaching, he is content, sometimes, to let a whole class period go by without a murmur from the pubescents. If no one

wishes to engage with the book, to volunteer an answer to the reading questions he offers in the first few minutes of class (this does not include the fewer and fewer bookworms, generally homely girls, whose outstretched, quivering hands he has learned to ignore—for his sake and theirs, he thinks), he leans back on his stool and reads aloud. The students nod off, or take out paper and begin to draw, and he imagines the literature seeping into their ears and through their stubborn brains like rain moistening the soil.

He teaches six classes a day, pausing at noon for an egg and tomato sandwich in the teachers’ room—a large, wallpapered kitchen with some of the larger appliances removed. The middle school is housed in the mansion of its founder, Henry LaMoyne, an eccentric atheist who willed that his property be turned into a private secondary school unaffiliated with any church. His gloomily secular portrait hangs over the fireplace in the former living, now School Assembly room. They have added a row of low classrooms snaking around the house’s back courtyard, a cafeteria, a cloverly lacrosse pitch, but the overall impression as one enters the circular driveway is still of a house, with a few too many garages or garden sheds. Class sizes are so small—the seventh grade, the largest class, contains thirty-six students—that there seems no need for further expansion.

The tuition for one term of middle school is more than Mr. Bausch paid for his college education. It is a school for professional athletes’ children, for the children of orthodontists and

lawyers; the parents swing through the driveway in black SUVs and jade-green Jaguars. Nothing Mr. Bausch does will change the destiny of these children. They will go on to LaMoyne High School, then upper-crust colleges (usually Princeton, sometimes Harvard, the weakest shuffled off to UPenn and UVA) whether or not their souls are set aflame by *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and as a rule they are not.

But LaMoyne has been kind to Mr. Bausch. As the most senior of the English faculty, he is allowed to oversee the campus literary magazine (the inanely named *lower case*). His worries of being pushed into retirement in favor of a better-qualified younger teacher are always smilingly deflected by administrators; he is told he is a pillar of the school. So he teaches his six classes and goes home to a neighborhood where every house has been torn down and rebuilt larger so many times that his postwar bungalow now looks like it could be one of their fallout shelters, if anyone still had fallout shelters.

This year the spring term progresses no better or worse than usual: the same bored, spoiled faces; the same hopeful trickle of doggerel into the submissions dropbox for *lower case*, the rejection of which, with flicks of his red pen, is one of Mr. Bausch's last remaining joys. Then one day as he is finishing his sandwich a woman enters the teacher's room, no one he has seen before, wearing a dress the color of mustard and brown opaque stockings. She is smiling. She pulls out the chair opposite Mr. Bausch and sits

down, her legs canted sideways. Mr. Bausch thinks of nineteenth-century ladies on horseback. She places on the table a paper napkin, a fork, and a clear plastic container holding a brown indeterminate food and holds out her hand.

"Clarissa Vogel," she says. "Interim history teacher. You must be Jerome."

He grasps her hand, realizing too late that there is tomato juice on his fingers, a crumble of egg at the corner of his lips that he attempts to lick away as he replies, "Yes indeed. Interim?"

"Yes, for poor Helen." She snaps open her plastic container. Mr. Bausch recalls receiving a letter from the administration two weeks ago detailing Helen McIntyre's stroke, the search for a substitute teacher to finish out the school year while everyone waited to see whether and to what degree she would recover. He had taken a moment to reflect on Ms. McIntyre, whom he had watched transform, over the twenty-five years she worked at LaMoyne, from a stoutly handsome woman to a hunched, turtle-necked creature.

Spinsterhood was a wasting disease, he thought. She had approached him at a faculty meeting soon after she arrived, had let it be understood that she was available. She had suggested dinner; he had countered with drinks, at a bar near his house. Her coyness had made her ridiculous—her fleshy body and thick black shoes and mannish haircut, pantomiming coquetry. Yet she had allowed him to sleep with her, only turning her face away as he unbuttoned his pants as if she would ignore what was about to

happen. The next day he made a point of striking a friendly, collegial tone with her in the hallway, and she seemed to understand. Only from time to time, even years later, she would look up at him with injured spaniel's eyes. The stroke had seemed inevitable when he read about it—she was the kind of nervous, frantic woman who would have a stroke—and he had soon put it out of his mind.

Clarissa Vogel is eating her brown substance with pleasure. It seems to contain several varieties of bean. Her face is striking but not pretty, a wide mouth, wide forehead, a small upturned nose whose nostrils are somehow too visible, unseemly. Her dull brown hair falls over one shoulder as she leans down to eat; she continually tucks it behind her ear.

"How long have you worked here, Jerome?" she asks, with her mouth full. Mr. Bausch notes that she wears a delicate gold chain with four charms, but he cannot tell what they are.

"Oh, quite a while," he says. "Thirty years."

"Were kids this dull in the old days? Can we blame the video games and the rap music?"

The thought, so close to his own recurring complaint, catches him off guard: he laughs, a wheezy cackle that embarrasses him. He opines that these surely didn't help, but that the problem lies deeper, in the home. When children are raised by a nanny rather than by a mother... He allows himself to trail off. Clarissa is looking at him with interest, almost fascination. He is no longer used to being the recipient of someone's full attention. The

students regard him sideways, from under half-closed lids; strangers' eyes glide over him as over the wrong book on the shelf. The invisibility of men over sixty. Mr. Bausch excuses himself and gets up to leave. She waves goodbye with her elbow tucked into her waist, a girlish gesture. She can't be more than twenty-seven.

While teaching his next class, Mr. Bausch thinks of things he could have told her, ways to have kept the conversation rolling along. He could have joked about their mutually Germanic names, reminded her that "vogel" means bird. He wonders how she will get along at LaMoyne, as one of the few pre-menopausal women on staff. The old biddies may band together against her as against a common threat: her youth, her vivacity. If this happens, he resolves to stand firmly on her side, take her under his wing. There: he could have made that pun, "wing" to "bird". In the middle of an anemic eighth-grade discussion of *Wuthering Heights* he sees the glow of a student's phone, held under his desk so it illuminates his denim-clad crotch. Mr. Bausch leans back on his stool.

"Mr. Park."

The boy shoves the phone back into his pocket and looks up. "Yes sir," he mumbles.

"To the front." Park leans sideways from his chair, straightens up slowly, then lopes to the front of the class with the exaggeratedly slow, rolling walk so many of the boys affect. A thug's walk, on a boy wearing an \$80 T-shirt. Mr. Bausch holds out his hand.

"Your texting device," he says. Park feigns ignorance for a

moment, then hands it over. Mr. Bausch puts it into his desk drawer, shuts it. "Back to your seat."

Park stays put. "When will I get it back?"

Mr. Bausch shrugs. "When I'm done updating my Facebook status."

It's a gamble, and it works; the class giggles, gasps, shifts in its seats, the tension released. Park returns to his desk, crosses his arms over his chest, stares straight ahead. Mr. Bausch can sense all the phones in pockets and purses, the hands reconsidering reaching for them. The rest of the class belongs to him.

That night he masturbates for the first time in months, to a series of short web videos, a minute long, or two, clicking through to the next as soon as one has finished. They are made to look like the work of amateurs, dimly lit, the cameras fumbling, the set a rumpled bed or stained couch. He finds this makeshift quality incredibly arousing, even as he recognizes its artificiality; the squeals of the women and the pneumatic pumping of the men are, in their own way, polished. When he has finished he goes out to the kitchen and drinks a glass of milk. He can hear his heart thumping beneath the thin skin of his chest. He feels a mixture of shame and resolve, as if he were about to change his life.

He sees Clarissa in the teacher's room nearly every day at lunch. She is always eating something that looks like animal food. One day he asks her why she eats this way.

"I'm a vegan," she says. "No animal products. And I avoid processed foods, so I mostly eat fruits and veggies, beans, grains."

Mr. Bausch doesn't respond; he's thinking of the word, "vegan," how lovely it is; he's seen it written but hasn't heard it before. She must take his silence as incredulity, because she explains further.

"It's weird, once you start eating healthy, junk food doesn't do it for you anymore. When I first went off dairy after college, I used to crave cheese doodles and nachos. Not real cheese, just the processed shit. One day I caved and ate a whole pack of Kraft singles, and spent the rest of the day pooping bright orange. It was like my body was throwing up its hands. So I said, Okay, body, I'm sorry. I won't do that to you ever again. And I never looked back."

She shows him what she's eating, sliding it across the table so he can peer into the Tupperware like a miniature aquarium. The little grains look like rolled-up condoms.

"Quinoa with tomato and kale," she says. "Try some," and hands him her fork, a flimsy piece of pressed metal. Mr. Bausch thinks of his family silver, left to him reluctantly by his mother when she realized he would never marry. The grain—another new word, "quinoa"—is springy against his teeth, the kale crunches thickly, the halved tomato bursts and releases tart juice. He chews and nods. "Not bad," he says.

Each day she wears a dress and tights in two different colors: lavender and gray, black and cobalt blue. Mr. Bausch learns to guess with some accuracy which color combination she will wear on a given day; when she surprises him he is pleased. She wears boots and a large, shapeless parka with fake fur around the hood,

and the necklace with its dangling charms. Without seeming to look too closely Mr. Bausch tries to determine what they are. There is one that looks like a ring, one like a raised hand. The others he cannot decipher.

He is anxious to know what the students think about her, but he cannot ask them directly. His fourth period class comes to him right after History; one day he asks them with feigned casualness what they are learning these days.

“The Huguenots?” a girl says. “And the Jesuits, and the Puritans? How this area was settled by religious refugees?”

“Interesting,” he says.

The girl continues. “And how some of them thought the Native Americans should be forcibly converted to Christianity? But most people just thought they should be killed?”

“Well,” Mr. Bausch says.

“It was like the Jews turning around after the Holocaust and oppressing the Palestinians,” someone else chimes in, a sharp-faced boy who is either a frustrated genius or a manic-depressive.

Inadvertently Mr. Bausch glances at one of the Jewish students in the class. She shrugs.

Clarissa laughs out loud when he tells her this story over lunch. “Frankly, I’m thrilled they remember any of it,” she says, stirring her soup. “I do jazz it up by tying in contemporary issues, I do give my own opinions. Kids this age crave being told what to think. If they disagree, all the better: they discover they have opinions too. The discussion you’re talking about actually led us interesting places, like the politics of Native American sovereignty.”

Mr. Bausch, ashamed not to know what she is talking about, furrows his brow and nods. She smiles brilliantly and blows on her spoon.

Submissions to *lower case* always pick up in February and March, squeaking in before the April 1 deadline. At that point, Mr. Bausch will pass along the small batch of poems and stories he finds less heinous than the others to the student editors, who, in addition to fundraising and layout, are responsible for final editorial decisions. Almost without exception, they choose the most sophomoric pieces, but there is nothing Mr. Bausch can do. The magazine comes out the week before eighth-grade graduation and sells most of its 200-copy print run at \$5 apiece to the same parents who have already bought ad space in its pages on behalf of their businesses. This ingeniously circular moneymaking logic pleases Mr. Bausch, or would if the money weren’t funneled into increasingly extravagant, increasingly awkward graphic design.

In late February, he receives the first love poem. Submitted anonymously, it’s a roughly Shakespearean sonnet, praising an unnamed woman for a catalog of plagiarized virtues that nevertheless strongly recall to Mr. Bausch his lunch companion. She is described as possessing “laughing eyes,” a “slim figure,” and, the clincher, “vibrant attire”. The writer expresses a desire to be close to his lady fair, to kiss her cheek and stroke her hair; in reference to a teacher it is obviously inappropriate, and Mr. Bausch rejects it. Then he reads

another poem, a fractured attempt at Cummings, conveying similar but incrementally less chaste desires. He begins to see references to Clarissa even in the pieces he has already approved. One poem’s insistence on capitalizing the word History, which he had crossed out each time, now makes sense; a short story describes a female visionary with flowing chestnut locks leading a youthful army to liberate captive animals. There is, in fact, an abundance of literary output glorifying Clarissa Vogel. It is a vertiginous feeling, this realization, not unlike the discovery fifty years ago when it was his class’s turn to put on the Christmas pageant that the serene Virgin Mary under the blue cape could simultaneously be a sixth-grader with a runny nose.

Mr. Bausch decides to tell Clarissa what he’s discovered immediately so she can nip any inappropriate fixations in the bud. If necessary, he’ll also tell his classes that pieces submitted for the magazine cannot refer to current students or faculty in a recognizable way. He can turn it into a libel argument, if it comes to that. But these logical reassurances don’t quell his sudden anxiety, his feeling that an uncontrollable force has been set in motion.

She’s not in the teachers’ room at the usual time the next day, so he brings his sandwich to the cafeteria and searches for her. He finds her sitting at a table of sixth-graders, laughing at something, her head and shoulders rising cleanly above the upturned faces around her like Titania among the fairies. He picks his way over to her and taps her shoulder.

“Ms. Vogel, I wonder if I might have a word with you,” he says.

She peers up at him with alarm. “Jerome!” she says. “Something wrong?”

The students at the table are utterly silent; he knows they’ve noted her use of his first name.

“Could I speak with you in the teachers’ room?” he asks. “It’s sensitive.”

She rises, making an apologetic face to the students as if they are charming guests at a cocktail party, and walks with him only as far as the cafeteria entrance, where she stops. “What’s up?” she asks.

Mr. Bausch stops too, reluctantly; nevertheless they are out of earshot of the children, so he tells her what he’s discovered, the adoring poetry and fiction. She looks into his eyes deeply for a moment after he finishes, wrinkling her brow as if trying to discern whether he is joking.

“But why is this a crisis?” she finally asks. “They’re kids, they fixate on things and people. Aren’t you happy they’re writing poetry at all? Isn’t that what you try to get them to do?”

He attempts to explain that the merest suggestion of inappropriate behavior on her part, which includes doing nothing to stop the inappropriate behavior of students towards her, could be grounds for suspension. He tries to make her imagine if the situation were reversed, and twelve-year-old female students were writing—publishing, in a school literary magazine!—love poems about a young, attractive male teacher.

She smiles again, differently; she has a different smile for each occasion. This one is charming,

understanding, and condescending all at once.

“Jerome, I appreciate your concern,” she says, placing her hand on his arm, “but I think you’re overreacting. God knows I had crushes on teachers when I was in junior high, wrote terrible poetry about it, and caused nobody but my parents any trouble at all.”

While she talks, her hand slides almost imperceptibly down and up his upper arm. Mr. Bausch becomes aware of a background noise, a low hooting that rises in pitch until he realizes it is not a ringing in his ears but something external, and turns to see dozens of impish student faces, leaning over tables to see better, whooping and howling at this display of affection. Clarissa turns as well, and makes a mock-scolding face, pointing her finger at the nearest table as if she has discovered the ringleaders. Mr. Bausch flees.

When his fifth-period class, sixth graders, enters the classroom, a few of the boys resume the hooting. Mr. Bausch, having had time to consider a plan of defense, waits at his desk with his eyes lowered to *The Scarlet Pimpernel*; the sound grows bolder and louder with his lack of response. Once all the students have entered the classroom, he gets up, walks to the door, and slams it shut with all his strength. Silence follows. He turns to the class, their half-shocked, half-smiling faces.

“Your actions today in the cafeteria were unacceptable,” he says. “Ms. Vogel and I disagree on many things, we were disagreeing today, but nevertheless you owe her respect. I had hoped that you had

outgrown such behavior when you left elementary school.”

The glee on their faces turns to disappointment and embarrassment, and he knows he chose the right tack. With sixth-graders, he has learned, one appeals to their vulnerability, their awareness that they are the lowest in the hierarchy, the implication that they must prove themselves. With eighth-graders, it would be the reverse: call on them to set an example, remind them of their imminent departure, the necessity of leaving the campus better than they found it. With seventh-graders one can sometimes hedge one’s bets, appealing to both the dignity of no longer being pitiful sixth-graders and the desire to impress the powerful eighth-graders, but this does not always work; seventh-graders are anarchists.

So of course it is the seventh grade that is rewarded each spring with Nature Weekend, a 90-minute bus ride to the Delaware Water Gap for a two-day course in environmental education. They sleep in cabins, sit around campfires, take laborious hikes and ask the park staff insipid suburban questions. Each year Mr. Bausch is in charge of the boys’ cabin, having acquired a reputation for being no-nonsense, which he is, and outdoorsy, which he is not. The girls’ teacher-cum-counselor is usually the math instructor, a forbidding lesbian with whom Mr. Bausch would not trust his hypothetical daughters. This year, he is informed by the letter sent to the seventh-grade parents to get their permission and \$100 fee, it will be Ms. Vogel. The decision shouldn’t surprise him; she is the students’ clear favorite. He supposes he hadn’t

realized how much the administration has taken her popularity into account.

By the time April comes around, the *lower case* crisis has blown over. After the speech to the sixth-graders, he made a slightly different one to his seventh- and eighth-grade classes, emphasizing the legal angle: harassment, libel. He thinks the lack of all references to Clarissa in the submissions received after that date probably has more to do with the students' embarrassment at having their obsession pointed out to them by old Bausch—they often seem to forget that he is their first reader—but he'll take what he can get.

The Saturday of Nature Weekend is warm and clear even at seven in the morning, when the students gather on the front porch of the school with their sleeping bags, looking sleep-deprived and sweet. Mr. Bausch isn't fooled for a second; he knows the drowsiness will transmute, in the closed environment of the bus, into mass hysteria. He has brought Kierkegaard to pretend to read so it won't look like he's outright ignoring his charges (in reality he suffers from motion sickness and spends the whole trip trying not to vomit); he's also brought *Kidnapped*, to read to the boys tonight in the cabin.

At 7:27, minutes before they are supposed to leave, when Mr. Bausch has already told the students to pile their sleeping bags by the luggage bay of the bus and line up by the doors, Clarissa comes running from the parking lot.

"Sorry I'm late, Jerome," she gasps, dropping her black duffel bag on the driveway, bracing her hands on her thighs and leaning

over to catch her breath.

"You're right on time," he says. She is wearing high-top sneakers, jeans, a tank top and hooded sweatshirt, the first time he has seen her out of her dress-and-tights uniform. Her posture and the low cut of her tank top make it easy to stare down the front of her shirt, as Mr. Bausch catches several of the boys doing. She straightens, flips her hair out of her face, breathes deeply through her nose, claps her hands. "Load 'em up, move 'em out!" she calls. The students obey, shoving forward in line so the ones already on the steps of the bus are nearly crushed. She herself boards without waiting in line, slipping ahead of a cluster of girls who make no complaint. Mr. Bausch brings up the rear, and by the time he boards all the seats have been taken except for the one Clarissa is saving for him, in the front row. In the past he has sat up here while Ms. DiMattei, the math teacher, sat in the back, but it's too late to ask Clarissa to move, and he won't switch seats with a student in the back for reasons of both propriety and nausea, which worsens toward the rear of vehicles. So he makes his usual speech about proper bus behavior, is ignored as usual, nods to the bus driver that they can begin, and drops into his seat. Clarissa beams at him as if he is her ideal traveling companion, as if she hasn't noticed his monosyllabic replies at lunch over the past weeks. Mr. Bausch gets out his book and opens to a random page, but as the bus pulls out onto the road he has to close his eyes and begin breathing deeply; already he feels sick.

After a minute he feels a hand on his arm. "Are you all right?" He nods. "Carsick?" He nods again. He hears a rustling. "Try these."

He opens his eyes to see Clarissa holding out a small plastic bag containing translucent brown lozenges.

"I always bring these with me on trips," she says. "Ginger drops, great for nausea."

He takes one and puts it in his mouth. It tastes of ginger and lemon, more pungent than sweet, like a strong tea. He sucks quietly for a minute, embarrassed, but worried that if he tries to speak he'll gag. She looks at him intently. Finally he nods. "Thank you."

She puts the bag on the seat between them. "Take as many as you need."

Ginger floats up into his sinuses and burns down his throat as he swallows. It's strong stuff, and it helps. The dreadful clamminess is gone. Clarissa smiles at him.

"Back to the world of the living," she says. She is still wearing the charm necklace, he notices, despite her outdoorsy outfit.

"What's the story there?" he asks, nodding towards the necklace.

"Oh, this." She fingers the chain, hesitates for a moment. "It's a gift from my partner. One charm for every year we've been together."

For a moment Mr. Bausch is frozen: the gender-neutral choice of words, the mystery of her domestic life; he's heard of lesbians very different from Ms. DiMattei, but never encountered one. Clarissa laughs, clarifies: "My boyfriend," and Mr. Bausch

feels himself reddening at the obviousness of his thoughts. He blusters, "I was just surprised. You've never mentioned him before."

Clarissa nods gamely. "I try to keep my personal and professional lives separate," she says. "Plus, you know, the school wouldn't be thrilled if the kids started talking to their parents about how Ms. Vogel is living in sin."

He chuckles, but it sounds like a car failing to start; all the moisture has left his mouth. He clears his throat.

"Here," Clarissa says. She unclasps the necklace and holds it out to him. "Each one is a blessing from a different religious tradition."

She takes him through the symbols: the Christian fish, the hand of Fatima, the Om, the eight-spoked wheel of Hinduism. As she passes each charm through his fingers, their hands brush together.

"We'll be celebrating five years together in June," she says. "I'm hoping for a yin-yang." It sounds so silly, preposterous, that he laughs again, but she doesn't seem to notice.

"You won't mention this to anyone, will you, Jerome?"

"You're safe with me," he says. She smiles at him, tenderly, gratefully, lowers her head to re-clasp her necklace. He allows himself to imagine leaning over to smell the nape of her neck, then puts such thoughts out of his mind for good.

The rest of the drive is uneventful. Clarissa plugs a small music player into her ears and closes her eyes. Mr. Bausch studies the necklace again, running the symbols through his mind: the fish, the hand, the Om,

the wheel. The children sing several rounds of something that gets more vulgar with each verse; it takes Mr. Bausch four verses to realize this, upon which he stands up and glares at the back of the bus until the song dissolves into laughter.

Then they arrive at the campsite, and Mr. Bausch steps again into the role of weary despot: directing the children to get off the bus and retrieve their luggage, then dividing them by gender, a few of the rowdier boys, as always, attempting to sneak into the girls' line. Clarissa handles it, waving them out of the line with an indulgent gesture. The boys follow Mr. Bausch to their own cabin, and almost knock each other down with their duffel bags trying to claim the most desirable beds. The boys' cabin is split into four rooms with three bunk beds apiece, and as always the question of who sleeps in what room with which roommates is a major social undertaking. Since there are only seventeen boys, a few of them claim bunk beds all to themselves. Mr. Bausch chooses last, and is amused to see how the sleeping bags are rearranged once he's chosen his bed, boys grudgingly allowing refugees from the "teacher's room" to bunk above or below them on what was previously a private bed. In the end three boys are left in his room, all of them the lowest of the low: boys who still play Pokémon, boys who are failures at sports. It is to these boys that Mr. Bausch will start reading aloud later tonight, allowing the sound of his voice, the allure of the story, to draw the other boys into the room. Mr. Bausch likes to think that

this show of favor might go some way towards rehabilitating these boys' social image, but he acknowledges that it probably won't make a difference one way or the other.

After lunch there is a series of outdoor activities, to burn off the energy of the bus ride and try to forestall nighttime rowdiness—in the past there have been "raids," in which either the girls or the boys run screaming into the other sex's cabin with no clear goal apart from mayhem. There is a two-hour nature hike, a demonstration of Native American fishing practices by the water with an imperturbable environmental educator, an examination of owl pellets and arrowheads in an "outdoor lab" consisting of magnifying glasses on picnic tables.

At first the children behave themselves, stunned into temporary docility by the vaguely threatening outdoors—on the hike the students at the back of the line actually hurry to keep up—but by the end of the afternoon they are more comfortable and the horseplay begins again. During the fishing demonstration a boy pushes a girl backwards and she splashes into the water, shrieking that he has ruined her shoes. Clarissa puts her arm around the girl, slips off her own shoes and offers them in exchange. The environmental educator casually mentions the number of fatalities the park sustains each year from people falling into the river, and the offending boy lowers his head. Mr. Bausch admires the way Clarissa moves in socks over the rocky beach as if nothing has happened, helping the environmental educator hand out lengths of a weighted fishing net

for the children to hold, the girl's expensive flats tucked under her arm.

After dinner, which is even worse than the food at LaMoyné but which the children enjoy because of the novelty of a hot cocoa machine, there is a one-hour rest period before the campfire. Twilight is falling as they walk back to the cabins, and Mr. Bausch hears crickets, the velvety coo of an owl. "Listen," he says, and stops, and the line of boys behind him and the line of girls behind Clarissa stops, and in the silence the owl calls again. A dark sap rises in Mr. Bausch's chest, and, helplessly in thrall to something larger than himself, he declaims a poem he first read twenty years ago, when he still bought new books of poetry, when he still committed poems to memory.

The warping night air having
brought the boom
Of an owl's voice into her
darkened room,
We tell the wakened child that all
she heard
Was an odd question from a forest
bird,
Asking of us, if rightly listened to,
"Who cooks for you?" and then
"Who cooks for you?"

Words, which can make our
terrors bravely clear,
Can also thus domesticate a fear,
And send a small child back to
sleep at night
Not listening for the sound of
stealthy flight
Or dreaming of some small thing
in a claw
Borne up to some dark branch
and eaten raw.

There is silence after he has finished. Then a voice: "Creepy." Clarissa says nothing, but he can see her smile, her glittering eyes, in the fading light as they begin

walking again. He could take her hand, but does not.

Back in the cabin, he tells the boys to be ready to head out in fifty minutes, then lies down on his bunk with his hands clasped behind his head. He begins to see his role clearly now, the older man, the steady friend. He is flattered that Clarissa has chosen him as the bearer of her secret. He allows himself to imagine more lunches, greater confidences, the slow swell of trust. As he drifts off he sees confused images, her coming to him with a tear-stained face, pleading with him, clasping his shoulders with her hands.

When he wakes it is dark and silent. The boys are gone. He sits up quickly and fumbles for the switch by the bed. Squinting in the sudden flood of light, he searches for his shoes, his jacket, wanders into the other rooms to be sure he is the only one left behind. A piece of paper flutters off of the top of a duffel bag, and he picks it up. It's a drawing, the crudest of caricatures: a hunched, balding figure, with extended tongue and crossed eyes (represented by a slashed x), clutches his ballooning penis. Two thought bubbles above his head display, respectively, an open book and a smiling female figure with extravagantly globular breasts, whose hand rests invitingly on her cocked hip. The paper is wrinkled and smudged; it has passed through many hands. The original drawing is in black ink, but other artists have been inspired to add further detail: outflung sweat drops in blue ink surround the head of the male figure; a thick pencil has added nipples to the female figure and

coiling hairs to the base of the male's penis. Mr. Bausch sits down on the bunk and rests the paper in his lap. The shapes of the drawing seem to fade in and out of meaning. Circle, teardrop, spiral, x. He folds the paper in half, then in quarters, sharpening the folds between his fingers. He tucks the drawing into his pocket and stands up again.

Outside the cabin, Mr. Bausch can hear a distant snapping and popping, a muffled roar. He follows the sound through the trees until he can see the campfire's orange glow. As he approaches, he can hear above the sound of the flames a single, melodious voice, speaking in long, rolling phrases that rise and fall. When he first emerges from the trees into the clearing, he sees only the roaring pillar of flame and smoke; then, around it, a ring of faces. The faces turn towards him, appalled; then he watches their expressions slacken and release as they all realize, in the same moment, that it is only him.