

SCOTT RANDALL

The Gifted Class

ON THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL, when Vice Principal Garner visited the classroom right after the 9:30 bell, the students knew she would probably come many times throughout the day. Mr. Ryan pulled the door shut behind him after he stepped out into the hall, but their voices could still be heard in the classroom. All of the doors in Wellington Elementary were raised an inch off the floor—in case there was a fire, according to Billy Pace—and whenever Vice Principal Garner visited, the entire grade two gifted class fell quiet so they could listen in.

“He said it’d depend on next year’s budget.”

“And when will that be announced?”

“Late July usually. Sometimes into August.”

“Eleanor, I’ll be back in grad classes throughout the summer.”

“I know.”

Closest to the door, the students seated at the Green Table heard the conversation best. Belman Oz, Billy Pace, and Marla Rosebush stopped working on their morning project—cutting cereal boxes and toilet rolls and reassembling the cardboard pieces into three-dimensional geometric shapes—and the only sound in the room was the squeaking of their gerbils’ exercise wheel.

Marla leaned closer to Belman and whispered.

“Eleanor.”

She raised her eyebrows, and Belman nodded.

Some of the students at the Blue Table and Orange Table resumed taping together their pyramids and rhombi, but the room was still quiet when Mr. Ryan re-entered. He smiled and said Mr. Nasaga and Mrs. Agana sure were getting a good cardio workout this morning.

Mr. Nasaga and Mrs. Agana were the class’s pets, but Mr. Ryan preferred to call them the class’s subjects, two brown gerbils who lived in an aquarium lined with wood chips and covered by a wire mesh screen on

top. Belman turned to look at the animals and saw Mr. Nasaga digging excitedly into a glass corner and Mrs. Agana running on the steel exercise wheel. Or maybe Mr. Nasaga was running and Mrs. Agana was digging; it was sometimes hard to tell them apart.

Above the aquarium, Mr. Ryan had posted three computer printout banners on Bristol board. *Do not pick up Mr. Nasaga and Mrs. Agana without Mr. Ryan's supervision. Do not feed Mr. Nasaga and Mrs. Agana snacks from home. Mr. Nasaga and Mrs. Agana are anagrams of anagrams.* One of the banners was almost too faint to read because it was printed a dot-matrix printer, and the letters in the other two were streaked with small white lines. They came from the bubble-jet printer. The school bought two new PCs for the gifted class when Mr. Ryan started in September, but he was still waiting on the money for new printers.

Drifting from table to table, Mr. Ryan repeated *good work, nice job, and grand*. That was a word he used a lot. Grand. The tables weren't really tables, but three desks pushed together into triangles for group work. While Mr. Ryan was still talking to the Red Table, Billy Pace raised his hand and waved it until Marla told him he had to wait his turn.

"Sorry," Billy said. "My mother says I sometimes will get impatient because Dr. Fitzgerald switched me from Ritalin to Dexedrine and my body needs time to adjust."

Billy had changed medications five months earlier, just after the Christmas break, but he continued to mention it regularly. He said the Ritalin was effective, but his mother and Dr. Fitzgerald made the decision to switch him too Dexedrine because Ritalin was too conversational.

"Controversial," Marla corrected him.

"Yeah, that too."

Belman thought Marla was the smartest student in the class. And she was sweet too. When his dad moved out of the house two months ago and Mr. Ryan announced that everyone had to be extra conscientious around Belman, Marla was the only one who treated him the same as before. Her parents lived together, she explained, but they had never actually married, so maybe matrimony wasn't so important as everyone thought.

Her geometric shape was a cone that she'd made by cutting a toilet paper roll down the side and twisting the brown cardboard.

"Good work," Mr. Ryan said. "Sometimes the most clever ideas are the most simple ones."

"Belman's is just a square," Billy said.

"It's called a cube, Billy, and I believe it also looks quite grand."

Ever since his parents split up, Belman noticed Mr. Ryan had grown less serious about Belman's work. At parent-teacher night in January, there

had even been talk of moving him into a destreamed class for the third grade, but that subject seemed to have disappeared. Now Mr. Ryan asked him how he was doing almost every morning, and he said that if Belman ever wanted to talk, he would listen.

“I guess a cube is all right,” Billy said.

The next subject of the morning was Maths, and so the students all lifted the tops of their desks to remove their abacuses. The lesson was fractions, and Belman tried hard to follow along. Whenever he found he couldn't, Marla would whisper to him and pivot her abacus in his direction. Billy spent most of the lesson flicking the wooden beads along their metal rods—just to watch them bounce back—but whenever Mr. Ryan called on him, he came out with the correct answer.

“Twelve-fifteenths,” he said.

“That is correct.”

Billy waved his hand.

“Which can be reduced to four-fifths. Or zero point eight zero.”



At first recess, the gifted students were allowed to go out in the schoolyard, but most of the class chose to stay indoors. The older grades tended to hog the swings and slide no matter who got there first. And besides, recess was when Vice Principal Garner would probably come back to see Mr. Ryan again, and no one wanted to miss that.

Belman took his morning snack from his bookbag and was disappointed to see that it was once again a fruit roll-up. Grape. He unrolled the purple sheet on the top of his desk and slowly lifted the cellophane film from one corner. Shapes of a car, bus, train and truck were moulded into the sheet of pressed fruit and he studied them all before offering Marla a bus.

“Or you can have a train if you want,” he added.

“Thank you, Belman.”

She placed a round shortbread on his desk.

“Did you know fruit roll-ups have gelatine in them?” Billy asked. “And gelatine comes from horse's and cow's feet? Ground up into a powder than is finer than salt but not as fine as talcum powder. Probably from sheep and goats also. My parents won't buy them.”

Belman nodded and chewed on a car.

“Jello too.” Billy said. “But not pudding.”

Billy had told him this before. Last year, they were in the same class, a split senior kindergarten/grade one gifted class. Teachers like to seat students

alphabetically, and so Belman imagined that he would probably be sitting beside Billy Pace until at least Junior High. One of their projects in grade one had been to construct a mobile, and Belman hung four stuffed fish from his wire hanger. They were only paper fish, but he'd folded his paper before cutting so he could have two identical fish silhouettes, and then he taped along the outsides and stuffed them with crumbled Kleenex tissues. He'd even drawn blue and green scales on each fish.

Billy now mentioned the mobile whenever Belman was unable to produce a correct answer and when he took longer than everyone else to finish a project.

Belman's other Green Table partner, Marla, transferred to Wellington, so she hadn't been in the same gifted senior kindergarten/grade one class. On the first day in September when Belman met Marla, Mr. Ryan asked everyone to stand up for introductions and she told the class that she was originally from Chicago, which was in the United States of America in the state of Illinois. Her mother was a lawyer and her father was a professor of French and Spanish, and they moved to Toronto, Ontario, Canada because he was offered a new job. During her introduction, Belman thought he should tell her that his dad was a professor too, but he taught Classical Studies instead of French and Spanish, and he worked at a community college and not a university, which his mom said was not like being a real professor at all.

When the students had finished their first-day speeches, Mr. Ryan announced that he wanted his turn, and stood up. His first name, he said, was Alex and his middle name was Trevor, after his grandfather. He was a vegetarian, which meant he didn't eat animals, and his favourite food was spaghetti. When he was in elementary school, he explained, he was put into a gifted programme as well, and the experience had changed his life. It was grand. He wasn't married and he had no children, but one day he wanted them. Then he was quiet for a bit and added he hoped his children would be as clever as everyone in his new class.

The students had clapped.

With their snacks finished and the wrappers put into the garbage where they belonged, Marla asked Belman if he wanted to go look out the window with her. He knew she wanted to ask about his mother's new boyfriend. She wanted to know whether or not he'd spent the night over at Belman's house yet. The new boyfriend's name was Frank and he was a fireman, a job that held a lot of influence in the second grade. Except for Marla, Belman hadn't told anyone about him.

The side window was lined with Dixie cups holding the class's bean sprouts. Each cup was labelled with masking tape where the students wrote

their names in red and green Magic Marker. Belman's bean sprout hadn't risen out of the dirt yet, but there were a few of the cups like that, so he didn't feel bad about it.

Marla leaned against the window ledge, and Belman told her that Frank the fireman still hadn't stayed over yet.

"Well," she said, "they've only been together a month."

"He has to work a lot of nights." His mother had told him this. "So they only see each other Fridays and Saturdays usually. Sometimes Sundays."

Marla assured him that Frank the fireman would sleep over soon.

"You'll be watching TV on a Saturday and he'll come downstairs and say good morning to you."

Belman couldn't imagine it.

"He'll still look sleepy and your mom will be all distracted and far-away when she makes your breakfast."

They were quiet for a moment and then Belman said firemen make good money.

"Better than community college teachers, my mom says."

Belman nodded, and then Marla asked if he thought Mr. Nasaga and Mrs. Agana were a couple or just two gerbils who shared an aquarium.

The 10:45 bell rang and all of the gifted second graders returned to their seats. Mr. Ryan was still out in the hall with Vice Principal Garner, but he turned around and looked through the door window when he heard the bell.

He came back in the room smiling.

"Good news."

He waited until he was at the front of the class by the Purple Table to explain.

"We will be getting new printers for both computer workstations in about a week. One of them will be a colour printer too, so we can print out images and photographs we find on the Internet."

Billy raised his hand and waved it.

"What photographs?"

"Oh, I don't know, whatever we need for History or Science or Current Events."

Billy waved his hand again.

"We'll be in grade three, so really only you and your next-year students will get to use the new printers."

Mr. Ryan was still smiling, and he asked the class to take out their *New Horizons* readers and turn to page twenty-eight. Everyone should try

to read the story by him- or herself, he said, but when they were done, he wanted the tables to answer the comprehension questions as a group.

“Uncle Leonard” was about a boy who inherited his uncle’s stamp collection after his mother’s brother died suddenly. Belman wondered how the man died, but the detail wasn’t something the author included. Most of the story was about how the boy—his name was Jack Pierre—organized all of the old stamps into an album. First Jack wanted to arrange the stamps by how much they were worth, but it turned out they were all from different places with different currencies. Jack’s second idea was to arrange the stamps by colour and size, but he decided that would be boring. In the end, he arranged the stamps by continent and country, and when she showed the album to his mother, she cried and gave him a hug.

The comprehension questions Mr. Ryan wrote on the board were pretty easy, and even without Billy and Marla’s help, Belman thought he could have figured out the answers. After the questions were done, though, each table had to discuss something that they collected and why the collection was important. Belman enjoyed this assignment more. Then, everyone had to stand up at their desk and talk about what they collected and Belman told the class about a box of action figures he found in the basement after his father moved out.

“My Dad said they were called Adventure People by Fisher Price. All of his friends played with Star Wars and Battlestar Galactica figures, but he liked the Adventure People better. He said they drove cars and rode in canoes and sailboats, but mostly they were just like regular people.”



Unless it was raining, the gifted students were expected to go outside for half an hour after lunch. And since it wasn’t raining, Marla and Belman walked around watching their classmates. Billy Pace and a bunch of boys had stolen some crayons from the Arts Supplies box and they were peeling the paper off each one. Afterwards, Billy laid the crayons end to end so he could spell out his name. Since it June, he said, it was hot enough to melt the crayons and his name would be there all summer.

Marla and Belman drifted away and went to sit against the yellow portable. The portable classroom was used for special education students who didn’t have their own teacher, but met with consultants and facilitators who came to the school for a week at a time, sometimes two weeks. Most of Mr. Ryan’s class thought it was better to have the same regular teacher every day and the special education students got a raw deal, but Marla and

Belman agreed that there might be advantages to seeing a variety of teachers.

“That’s what it’s like when you go to junior high and high school and university,” Marla pointed out. “This way, you’d be used to having many different teachers.”

Belman picked a blade of grass and nodded.

Leaning against the portable, they could see the staff parking lot, where some of the Wellington Elementary staff sat in their cars smoking, as if no one ever told them about carcinogenics. Past the cars, Belman saw Mr. Ryan and Vice Principal Garner standing on the sidewalk and he pointed them out for Marla.

Mr. Ryan was unwrapping a sandwich from wax paper and nodding about something Vice Principal Garner was saying. When she finished talking, she touched his forearm and he gave her half of his sandwich, which was probably an egg salad or cheese because Mr. Ryan was a vegetarian and wouldn’t bring turkey or bologna. They stood out by the sidewalk all through the lunch break, but Belman and Marla stopped watching.

“It is rude to stare after all,” Marla said.

She asked him if he had a story ready for the afternoon and he nodded. Afternoon story came right after the lunch bell and today was the Green Table’s turn to present. Much like Show-and-Tell in grade one, Afternoon Story meant standing at the front of the class and making a speech for five minutes, except the students didn’t have to bring anything for the Show part, and the Tell part didn’t have to be true or anything.

“I get nervous sometimes,” Belman said.

Marla touched his forearm the way Vice Principal Garner touched Mr. Ryan’s.

“You don’t have to be afraid, Belman. Standing at the front of the class is the same as a presentation from our desks really.”

Belman nodded.



After the 1:15 bell, Billy volunteered to begin Afternoon Story and he explained why his right index finger couldn’t extend fully, a story Belman had heard before.

“When I was little and I was still crawling I would get into trouble all the time. My parents tell me that I was always naturally curious. One time I pushed the door to the garage open and fell down three stairs and hit my mother’s Buick. Another time I crawled into the cabinet where we keep the pots in the kitchen and my mother couldn’t find me for an hour.

On the day I hurt my finger, my mother was making Campbell's tomato soup for lunch. She opened the lid with a can opener, but she only went most of the way around the top. She bent back the lid and poured out the soup, then bent the lid back down and put the can in the garbage."

While Billy broke off from his story to explain why he preferred chicken noodle soup over tomato, Belman let his mind wander and looked above the blackboard at the front of the room. Over Billy's head, there were yellow cardboard pictures of punctuation marks that Mr. Ryan put up there at the beginning of the year. The period had thick black eyebrows that made it look stern and angry, and the comma smirked like everything would always be all right. The quotation marks were a pair of twin boys with the arms across their chests; they were probably fraternal twins, Belman thought, because they didn't look exactly alike.

"I know Mr. Ryan doesn't eat chicken," Billy continued, "because he's a vegetarian, but my parents say that we have to eat meat because that's the only way we get the protein we need."

Mr. Ryan smiled and nodded.

"So I was crawling, and I guess I am naturally curious because I got into the garbage bag on the floor. I stuck my finger in the can, but when I tried to pull it out, it got caught on the bent-in lid right near the top knuckle part. And the more I tried to pull it out, the more the lid cut into my finger. After a while, my finger was all cut up and bloody. My father says the tip of my finger was only held on by a small piece of skin, but my mother says the lid didn't cut through the bone, only muscle."

The students groaned, and Billy held up his finger sideways for the class to see.

"The doctor fixed me, but the end of my finger will be a little bit bent down for the rest of my life."

He paused and smiled.

"That's the end," he said.

Mr. Ryan led the class in applause and asked Marla to come up and share her story. At the blackboard, she stood up straight and held her hands together in front of her.

"Last weekend, my parents took me to the McCullin Organic Farm, which is located thirty minutes northwest of Toronto, just outside the municipality of Brampton."

She'd asked Belman to listen to her practice the story at lunchtime, so he knew what she was going to say. Not only was her recitation well rehearsed, the story was pretty good too. It built from her sampling three different kinds of cheeses in the farm showroom to taking a hayride behind

a chestnut-brown mare, and then at the end, Marla described how she got to hold a soft yellow baby chick in her hands.

Belman looked at the punctuation pictures again. The parentheses were a boy and girl holding hands, and he wondered if they were really a couple or if they just dated casually.

The class clapped at the end of Marla's Afternoon Story and she leaned forward at the waist for a modest bow.

"Belman?" Mr. Ryan smiled.

Standing at the front of the room, Belman could smell the tuna fish salad someone had brought for lunch and his stomach hurt. He looked to the back of the room to see Marla, but someone's head at the Mauve Table was blocking his view.

"Uhm, a long time ago, there was this couple called Orpheus and Eurydice."

He slowed down to make sure he pronounced the names the way his father had told him to.

"Eurydice was the wife, but she was bitten by a snake and died. Orpheus loved her a lot and so he cried a lot after she was gone. He was so sad that he even started singing sad songs."

A girl at the Blue table gave Belman a sceptical look that made him falter.

"Because that's what they did when they were really sad a long time ago, they sang songs."

He looked at Mr. Ryan who nodded for him to continue.

"So Orpheus sang so much that God decided to let him come to heaven and get his wife back. God told him that he had to walk in front of Eurydice on the way back to earth, though, and he wasn't allowed to look back at his wife. So Orpheus went to heaven and he found his wife, but as they were walking back to earth, he did turn around and she disappeared."

When Belman had asked his father why Orpheus would turn around, his father shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Then he said he supposed Orpheus was just worried about her.

"The end," Belman said.

The class clapped, but Belman thought they'd probably liked Billy's and Marla's stories better. Billy's had violence and Marla's was sweet. Belman wasn't sure he even understood his own story.

Current Events usually came after Afternoon Story, but as today was the last day of the school year, Mr. Ryan surprised the class with a chocolate and vanilla marble cake and gave them all key rings with their names on them. Most of the class got a brown leatherette key ring with their names

embossed in metal, but Belman's was different. Mr. Ryan said he looked and looked for one with Belman's name but he didn't have any luck, so in the end, he had one specially engraved.

Belman held out both his hands as the teacher presented it to him. "That's grand, Mr. Ryan."



After the 3:15 bell, Belman stood with Marla while she waited for her bus and they talked about what they would do for summer vacation. She was going to horse-lover's camp for two weeks, but she said she'd be back by the end of July. She'd ask if Belman could come over sometimes. They could go for a swim together in the family's pool. Belman smiled and waved with both hands when her bus drove away.

Alone, he leaned against the school and watched from his mother's car. It was a blue Sunfire and there were lots of them on the road so he had to watch closely. Remembering the crayons Billy had laid out at lunch, Belman walked behind the Technical Arts wing, but all he found was a puddle of melted wax, swirled with orange, blue and green.

He looked at the staff parking lot, which was nearly empty when Mr. Ryan and Vice Principal Garner came out. She was walking fast ahead of him and it looked like he was trying to keep up. Mr. Ryan said he was sorry and Vice Principal Garner said she should have known better than to get involved with a younger man. He apologized again while she fumbled with her keys and tried to open her car door. She told him he was a child and said it like it was a swear word.

After her car pulled away, Mr. Ryan looked up and saw Belman. The teacher smiled and shrugged. Belman shrugged back. Although he liked Mr. Ryan a whole lot, Belman was already thinking about grade three.