

Chapter 2: Isms

As if she is suffering from a terrible toothache, Mary Wiles has wrapped her woolen scarf around her oval face. Head bent, shoulders rising and falling in silent gasps, she is determined to finish her worksheet. From one row over, we can see the rivers of ink coursing down her paper and making a soggy bank at her right hand. She wraps and rewraps her scarf until it is apparent that it is not her own ache, but Sara's bruised and swollen legs that she is bandaging.

Sara's sobbing comes in little fits now through the thick door. A cuckoo out of sync and out of key, she bleats out her objections: *No, she does not want to go to the nurse's office; no, she does not want to show the nurse; no, she does not want everything better. No. No.*

Sara and Miss D are in *Camelot*, the stairwell just outside our classroom, the stairwell that we and the other 2nd-floor classrooms use for fire drills. Weeks ago, after several days of King Arthur, we changed the "EXIT" sign above the door to "EXETER" as a surprise for Miss D.

"Children!" she shouted, not taking her eyes off of the new sign, "*This* is no longer a way out. It is now a way in."

Shortly after, Exeter became our passage – not to fire drills – but to an ideal place, a place that we could go to on any day, at any time. During math lesson, in the middle of language arts, in the midst of a peer's recitation, any one of us might rise from his seat and wander in to feel time stop, to be alone, to feel the quiet, to walk away, to feel the train of joy in breaking rules, to hear one's own heartbeat – and after a while, to miss the others, to want the others.

Next to the door is a throne on wheels: Miss D's chair draped with a checkered print – remainder from an Easter dress that Mary Gillis donated, and for which act of charity her parents punished her for weeks. For a ceremonial feel: green and white pom-poms retrieved from someone's bicycle, and hung from the arms. On birthdays, and on Composition days, any one of us is allowed to wheel the throne through Exeter and into Camelot. Time and time again, Nicholas Kastinopoulos will plant himself in the throne during our writing hour; notebook and pencil in hand, he will tip his head back in thought, and wait for the muses to descend upon him. When Bailey Arnold will not stop sniffing, Sabrina Kaslov will retreat to the throne for a quiet read. And when John G. Ashe becomes suddenly impatient with the 4th grade in general, he will huff off to the throne for what Miss D calls *his spell in the catbird seat*.

Today, however, the throne stares back at us, abandoned, unconsulted. We picture the two of them, Miss D and Sara, sitting on the cold concrete stairs in Camelot and everything seems out of order, the earth off its axis.

This is "isms" month, the month when each of us brings in a word that ends in *ism*, what Miss D calls a verbum – *a word among words*. For most of us, the choice of word has nothing to do with meaning, although Miss D assures us that *meanings will come, meanings will come*.

We flip through the *Sanctuary*, reading each word from right to left, and pouncing on the first –ism we find. We scribble down the root-word as an afterthought. On Presentation Day, we make the words our own: we copy our words onto brightly colored placards, we take turns holding our words in front of the class, we say our words to the class and hear the class say them back, we say the word in a sentence of our own making, and then – the most exciting part – we climb a ladder, and hang the word above the blackboard.

Today, against the sound of Sara's desperate crying, we sit helpless and helplessly alone in our seats. Some of us are scanning the room as if to find a word for what's happening:

Ac-tiv-ism.

Rac-ism

Others are quietly weeping. Like a virus, Sara's garbled lament is spreading through the classroom.

Pat-ri-ot-ism.

Os-trac-ism

Mag- net-ism

We struggle to remember the sentences that the words belong in.

Last week, during Science, one of the boys in the class showed us how magnets too close to one another will push each other away. We gasped a collective gasp to see how pull became push so suddenly, how at precisely the point where we thought that the magnets would grasp one another and fall into one another's magnetic orbits -- instead they spun away from one another. Miss D said that sometimes it was the same with people too.

Against the muffled din of Sara's spasmodic cries, that moment seems to come back to us now, that moment that we saw during show-and-tell, not as science, but as an inexplicable moment when like things rejected one another.

In the first seat of the row closest to Exeter, Glen Rooney is lifting the visor to his astronaut's helmet. The helmet was a gift from Miss D after Glen announced to her one day his dream of orbiting the earth. On a typical day, he dons the helmet from morning arrival until afternoon dismissal -- retiring it to the top of his desk only for recess, but always wearing it for fire drills. During whole-class lessons, he peers through the helmet's plastic shield while he reads Miss D's lips as she guides us at the blackboard, or as she shuttles us through the sentences of the great Roman orators: Cicero's impassioned speeches parsed into columns of persuasive words like the concrete columns of the Roman Republic.

During writing and reading hours, Glen sits at his desk hovering over word problems or over his science text as if he is hovering over the earth's arc -- his only air supply coming from his deco-style, laminated desk: his port, his dream base. Today, however, Glen Rooney is leaving his port: he has lifted his visor, and is wiping his nose and gasping for air. He seems to be breathing some noxious gas. A few of the motherly girls surround Glen, tell him to go back inside, back under his hood, and not to cry. Somehow we need him to do as they say. If Glen stops breathing, surely we all will.

Org-an-ism.

In spite of Miss D's and Sara's absence, Sabrina Kaslov is determined to present her word. It is after morning songs, after math lesson, and it is her turn. She is the prettiest girl in the class, and she is accustomed to performing on queue. She stands before us, and with an affected British accent, she reads the definition that she has copied directly out of the Sanctuary:

ORGANISM: ... *the whole as well as the parts, and the relations of the parts to the whole* ...

None of us are listening. *Definitions*, we have learned by now, are hardly meanings. Definitions are what Miss D calls, *small apologies* – *apologies for a life not lived*. They are too tentative, too conditioned, too – and this Miss D says with her arms swinging through the air – *too sweeping*. Although Miss D has gone, we can feel the lasting breeze of her swinging arms. What we want is Sabrina's *sentence* -- the word particularized, the life lived.

But, Sabrina has clearly rehearsed something more polished. In addition to her comprehensive list of meanings for the word, she offers a catalogue of examples. *Organism as ecosystem, organism as bio-system, organism as governmental system.* She seems to be speaking in tongue, and yet, none of us are moved.

For a visual, she holds up a photo-enlarged mushroom – a *fungus*, she tells us, and not nature gone wrong. *Organism par excellence.* She offers an accent aigu on the word *excellence*. She reads, from a powder-blue note card, words that she has copied verbatim from the *Sanctuary*:

fungus: a spongy growth, like proud flesh formed in a wound

We are tired and distracted, and we are disgusted by her image. But, Miss D has returned to the classroom, and is already on her feet. She is singing, "Oh! Oh! Oh! Children! Did you hear that?" And she is writing Sabrina's horrid description on the board:

Like proud flesh formed in a wound

And Miss D is singing,

"*Science and Poetry! Poetry and Science!*

See how we need one another?"

We do see it.

Although Miss D has returned, Sara's seat is empty. We feel Sara's absence like the absence of exact meaning, like a story too awful for language to hold – but that perhaps science, or medicine, or a school nurse's care might heal. We feel the desperate beating heart in Sabrina's analogy – and in all analogies. *Like proud flesh formed in a wound.* We see the precision of science in the face of human suffering, and we feel the lightness that comes with that precision. And, we know we won't be graded on this – not today at least.