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## *Fallen Angels*

*2 a.m. and reading Robert Louis Stevenson again. I've always loved his deep compassion for the fallen angel.  
Yours, Miss D*

In a tone that she usually reserves for announcements of no real consequence, Miss D informs us one rainy morning that the *BAD BEHAVIOR BOOK* is now the *BIG IDEAS BOOK*. It is a revolutionary move. According to John G. Ashe's complaint, it is downright tyranny.

A massive tome of empty pages that apparently comes with the classrooms at Johnson Elementary School and that occupies the corner of a teacher's desk, the *BAD BEHAVIOR BOOK* is where the bad child – the soon-to-be penitent one, the one who needs our prayers and the prayers of all the saints – will scribble his own cursed name as proof of mutiny at Johnson Elementary. It is a lawyer's evidence for parents of 4<sup>th</sup> graders on *Meet Your Teacher Night*: names of the lost souls in our class. It is our *Book of the Dead*.

In changing its name from the *BAD BEHAVIOR BOOK* to the *BIG IDEAS BOOK*, Miss D announces to us that these are labels that she does not want recorded in ink. Tucked behind our desks, we watch her as she feverishly crosses out the names of the guilty until, apparently unhappy with their shadowy permanence, she tears the pages from the book. It is our first attendance at an exorcism.

For the majority of us – even the bad children – these are labels that we will not give up easily. Handing over these classifications will require our starting again, establishing new identities, imagining new criteria for *who will be loved* and *who will be disinherited*, *who will be remembered warmly* and *who will be condemned*. These were identities that we had worked hard to acquire – personal profiles, like overtures that precede us as we move from grade to grade in this public school system. This, John G. Ashe objects, would be meddling at a whole new level.

As if unclear about the revolutionary change that Miss D has put into place, or perhaps resistant to her brand of forgiveness and renewal, the bad children continue to fill this massive book with their names. At first, when Miss D calls their names out from the book and asks them to stand and share with us *their big ideas*, they stand heads hung, shoulders rounded, characteristically ashamed.

*Chin up, Miss D calls out, We want to hear your big idea!*

And when the one who has been called upon claims to have forgotten his or her big idea, Miss D calls on the rest of us to put our heads together. *We will help*. We will come up with a big idea. When John G Ashe complains to Miss D that she is *turning everything upside down*, she takes more time than usual in answering him. She moves to the middle of the classroom and says in a whisper,

*Would the bad children please raise their hands?*

Bailey Arnold starts to lift his arm, but the girl behind him hisses at him and swats it down. Miss D looks all around the classroom, stretching her neck as though trying to imitate the most earnest of searchlights.

*Would the good children please raise their hands?*

John G. Ashe raises his hand, then Sabrina Kaslov, and then a few of the pretty girls. The classroom erupts. Mary Wiles objects that John G. Ashe has no business raising his hand, since he took the last ice cream at lunch and he is the most selfish boy that she ever knew. Some of the motherly girls get on their feet: one closing the door to the hallway, others conferring with one another. When Nicholas Kastinopoulos turns the lights on and off – a technique for getting our attention that he learned from our 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher – and tells us that he has an announcement to make, we listen to him because he is bigger than most of us, more man than boy, and because he insists upon our listening.

*No more good and bad forever.* Nicholas K sternly announces,  
*You're gonna have to earn it.*  
*Every day?!* John G. objects  
*Every day*

Nicholas K. bows his head and returns to his seat as if to say *meeting adjourned*. We wait for Miss D's intervention, but she is neatly tucked behind her desk and out of range. She has been watching us, her only contribution: folded hands, a smile and a raised eyebrow. Sabrina Kaslov shrugs her shoulders, slips her No. 2 pencil out of its velvet sleeve, and returns to the math problem on her desk. The rest of us follow suit. The cool, clear water of Arithmetic for the time being. After a while the only sound that we hear is the scratching of pencils and Miss D's drone humming – and her periodic gasps of wonder – as she pours over our morning compositions.

It is only a few weeks before several of us have lined up to inscribe our own names into the *BIG IDEAS BOOK*. We know that we could be called upon now, and that we must be ready to surprise Miss D and the others with something that they never could have imagined – something shocking, or brilliant, or hilarious, or daring. More often than not, when Miss D *does* call on us, we stutter an inarticulate but no-less *big idea* – but we know, somehow, that this is not our *real* work.

We have sensed a shift in paradigm. Although we cannot know its implications, we see that by playing along with Miss D we have participated in something bigger: we have given the bad child a second chance; we have given him back his good name.

We have allowed him to save face.  
To go on living.  
To consider metamorphosis.

At least for the time being, we have changed our label for him from *bad child* to simply *child* – and in doing so, we have somehow changed ourselves as well.

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