

Awarded First Place - Love Category

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Excerpted from the forthcoming book: *Beginner's Mind*

A Good and Simple Meal

The Shipyard's tired trombone. We imagine the morning shift falling in, and we shift in our seats accordingly. Like trained monastics, we look up from our morning lessons, our *Matins*, expecting John Paul Ambrose III. He is later than usual.

Four out of five mornings, he arrives after the second horn offering apologies: ten-car pile-ups, bus collisions; the bridge was up and a Royal Fleet passed under it; their linen sails seemed to touch the soles of his feet. Fires, fallen limbs, occasional fatalities. Though we want his fantastic stories, we know better. We have seen John Paul Ambrose III with his mother, now and then, at the corner store. We have heard her slurring speech, watched her struggling to count her change, fighting to stay still, straddling to keep from falling over as if her earth were on a different axis than his and ours. And John Paul Ambrose III standing so stiff beside her as if to keep her upright and the grocer's suspended light bulbs bathing his silky, bowed head in a shimmering light.

Most of us have had our turn in the whiskey-damp air of this shipyard town: mothers suddenly sour-breathed and graceless; and the *good* fathers, the ones who come home with their paychecks, the ones who take their drink at home. Most of us have had our turn in those days without prospect and so the shame on the face of John Paul Ambrose III is our shame as well.

North Weymouth was a town between bridges, yet so often there seemed to be no way out. When Mary Wiles put it that way, or something like that, Miss D shook her head hard and hollered at her, *HIGH ART, MARY! HIGH ART!* Miss D hated self-pity. *Self-pity*, she said, *is a common man's art* and her *4th-grade students in Room 20 will be making high art this year.*

The distance from Johnson Elementary School in North Weymouth to Harvard University in Cambridge was a direct route of about 15 miles. Forever standing between those two points, however – as if to intercept certain life ambitions – were the colossal cranes of the Quincy Fore River Shipyard. Like cathedrals that generations of men from the surrounding towns had built, the shipyard's cranes pierced the sky and towered above behemoth ships below them. And like medieval cathedrals, the cranes and ships became points of destination in themselves.

In the early morning hours and then again in the late afternoons, in a changing of shifts that looked more like the rotation of pilgrims, our fathers and grandfathers made their tired treks over the bridge going to and from the shipyard. When the morning air was cold and clear, we heard the gigantic cranes flex and swerve and lean and yaw as we dressed for school or as we lingered over our toast and tea.

The history of the Quincy Shipyard and of the Fore River Bridge that guarded its entrance was our history. During the Second World War, the Yard, which was operated by Bethlehem Steel Corporation and employed 32,000 people, turned out more ships than any other shipyard in the country. These were facts that we could tell anyone that asked. This was our home field. We marked the change in seasons according to the building phases of freighters and aircraft carriers and LNG tankers.

We knew the wars were over when the Yard grew quiet. Our surnames were inscribed into the shipyard's payroll book and our initials were etched into the bridge's iron railings: *MB was here*, or *TM loves MG*.

In the spring, when the bridge hoists itself up to let a string of boats pass under it, we pour out of our stopped cars and fight for a spot to lean over the bridge's railings and watch the parade of barges, sailboats, and scows below. In the winter, when the bridge's steel and lattice floor ices up, our cars careen into the bridge's iron curb like seals on their bellies. And, on hot afternoons after school, on a dare from their peers, our brothers jump from ledges beneath the bridge risking their lives as they catapult into the water below. From the back seats of our cars, we see them leap into the murky depths and our hearts leap too with fear and horror – and pride.

As if she has never heard of these hallowed places, Miss D presents us not with field trips to the shipyard or to local industries, but with a map of the universe; not with creative lessons about the great Commonwealth of Massachusetts, but with instructions on how to plot stars from our bedroom windows at night.

When in doubt, look up, she tells us.

We take her advice to mean that for answers we should look toward the stars, or toward our various gods, and we notice that she does not say *look around*. Her lessons all but forbid us from looking around; all but prohibit us from relying upon the familiar references in our lives for answers. Answers, in fact, are the last thing that Miss D seems to want from us.

What she seems to want from us is something immeasurable in a place of measured outcomes – a new way of behaving that, as best as we can tell, our first-grade teacher, second-grade teacher, and third-grade teacher at Johnson Elementary have already classified as acting out and cause for a trip to the Principal's office.

Static and a muffled shuffling from the loudspeaker in our classroom. We sit up, fold our hands on the tops of our laminate desks and wait for the Principal's *Morning Announcements*. We look up at the speaker, at the door beneath it, at our classroom walls, at John Paul Ambrose III's empty chair. The back rest of his chair has become the canvas for a dancing stream of morning light; the Principal's voice, the drum and bass for our drifting thoughts.

In a tone that she usually reserved for announcements of no real consequence, Miss D informed us on a morning like this that the *BAD BEHAVIOR BOOK* would from now on be the *BIG IDEAS BOOK*. It was a revolutionary move. According to John G. Ashe, the smartest boy in our class, it was downright tyranny. A massive tome of empty pages that apparently comes with the classrooms at Johnson Elementary School and that occupies the corner of the 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 – scribbles his own cursed name as proof of his unruliness. It is a lawyer's evidence for parents on *Meet Your Teacher Night*. It is our *Book of the Dead*.

In changing its name from the *BAD BEHAVIOR BOOK* to the *BIG IDEAS BOOK*, Miss D announced to us that *there are some labels that she did not want recorded in ink*. Tucked behind our desks, we watched her as she feverishly crossed out the names of the guilty until, apparently unhappy with their shadowy permanence, she tore the pages from the book. It was our first attendance at an exorcism.

For most of us – even the bad children – these were labels that we would not give

up easily. Handing over these classifications would require our starting again, establishing new identities, imagining new criteria for who would be loved and who would be disinherited, who would be remembered warmly and who would be condemned. These were identities that we had worked hard to acquire – personal profiles, like overtures that preceded us as we moved from grade to grade at Johnson Elementary. This, John G. Ashe objected, would be meddling at a whole new level.

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

Chin up, Miss D called out, *we want to hear your big idea!*

And when the one who had been called upon claimed to have forgotten his or her big idea, Miss D called on the rest of us to put our heads together. *We will help. We will come up with a big idea.*

It was only a few weeks before several of us lined up to inscribe our own names into the *BIG IDEAS BOOK*. We knew that we could be called upon 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 *did* call on us, we stuttered an inarticulate but no-less *big idea* – but we knew, somehow, that this was not our *real* work. We had sensed a shift in paradigm. We saw that by playing along with Miss D we had begun to participate in something bigger: we had given the *bad* child a second chance; we had given him back his good name. We had allowed him to save face, to go on living, to consider metamorphosis. At least for the time being, we had changed our label for him from *bad child* to simply *child* – and in doing so, we had somehow changed ourselves as well.

This morning, it is as if some big idea, something braver than us, has taken hold. What else can explain why, when Miss D stages a *sing in* to drown out the Principal's *Morning Announcements* ... we decide to join her.

I do not subscribe to detaining human beings! Miss D proclaims to the loud speaker in our classroom; and so, to our horror and delight, with the classroom door open wide, she leads us in a round of song that consumes the Principal's voice:

*O What a beautiful morn-ing,
O what a beau-ti-ful day ...*

She continues to lead us in song, until the Principal has finished this morning's roll of students who will serve after-school detention:

*I've got a beautiful feel-ing
Everything's going my way*

In this unwelcome pause in our song, we see ourselves at once victorious and condemned. We follow Miss D's lead and stomp our feet twice between verses, ostensibly to keep time with our song, but also – we cannot help but notice – our stomping drowns out the Principal's monotone recitation of the names of our peers.

In spite of the fun that we are having, we cannot help imagining the sentencing that

awaits us. We cannot keep from watching our open classroom door through which our voices drift like pieces of a play in rough rehearsal – *Oklahoma*, we might tell the Principal when he arrives, or perhaps a scene from the storming of the Bastille. A tremulous trail of song, our voices echo and hang in the hall like a cloud of noxious gas that, in future days, will stir the other teachers and periodically draw them to our classroom door for a peek inside.

The Principal will have to trace the noxious gas past the other open doors, past the other classrooms of children with quiet mouths and quiet minds tucked neatly behind their desks, past Room 15 with its eternally sun-lit walls, past the *Garden Patch display of Spelling Bees* in Room 16, past the 1st-place ribbons for the *3rd grade Thespians* in Room 18, past Room 19's Roster of *Magicians in Math* – to us.

As ethereal as Miss D looks to us – floating up and down between our rows of desks and waving her right arm like a conductor of some heavenly chorus – and as much as we feel her invitation to join her on our feet, we also feel the weight of learned habits, of institutional codes that have become the very core of our small consciences. Still, we cannot help but admire and even envy Miss D, so we raise our heavy heads toward her and we stay in our seats and sing in our chains:

*I've got a beau-ti-ful
fееееel – ing
Ev'ry-thing's
go- ing
my way*

These are brazen acts from Room 20 and we know it: to assert that yesterday's misbehavers need not be today's detainees. To flaunt our innocence like Arthur's sterling sword. To take back our kingdom, as Arthur did, by releasing a sword from a stone that no one else could release. To trust these occasions as Natural Law – and not accidents in nature. To see ourselves as part of these natural laws. To trust our sword-powers. To trust ourselves. And ultimately, in this makeshift chorus of boy sopranos and girl sopranos, led by Miss D's rumbling baritone, to affirm what we already know: that the Principal is not a man to us but an idea. And on this particular morning, he is an idea that we dare to challenge.

Certainly, the redhead in the second row knows this. She whimpers at the slightest address not only from the Principal, but from any adult – even Miss D. And in singing over the Principal's announcements this morning, we seem to caress the belt marks on the backs of her legs. As misplaced a remedy as this seems to us even now, it is as if we realize that this is all we can do for her – and so, most of us sing.

Our classroom door to the Fire Escape stairwell is propped open so that John Paul Ambrose III can slip in from the back of the school, unaffected and unnoticed by Miss Rose in the school's front office with her massive tome filled with notes and grids titled *Tardy, Absent, Sick*.

When John Paul Ambrose III does arrive, his face is damp and flushed, his eyes dark and blank, his pants and shirt clinging to his narrow frame. Miss D has set out his breakfast: a banana-nut muffin and a bottle of apple juice. Next to this, a packet of papers rolled up and tied in purple ribbon – this morning's worksheets prepared for him, as one might prepare a judge's morning schedule.

He slouches toward his morning meal and begins to eat without looking up, without looking at any of us. But we are all looking at him. Miss D has told us again and again that, when he does come, our Savior will wear a beggar's clothes and that it is we who should be ready for *him*, not he for us. We have finished our morning

lessons and we gaze at John Paul Ambrose III as if we are expecting a speech or a vision or some sign from him.

The smell of banana and nut winds through our classroom. It is a good morning for our Savior: no tardy slip, no detention, and a good and simple meal.

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