

The Good Thief

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 excuses: *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 my 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, Massachusetts 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, clasped her hands behind her back and pacing big strides in front of us all, she hollered, *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 Johnson Elementary Public School would be making high art this year.*

The door for fire escape drills is propped open so that John Paul Ambrose III can slip in from the back of the school, unnoticed by the Principal's Office. When he 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.

John G. Ash is reading aloud when our Art teacher, Mrs. Foreman, appears in our doorway. She is round and breathless. Her flushed cheeks draw our eyes up to the wilted silk petunias on her straw hat, and then down again to the ruby snap- buttons on her boxy housecoat.

One by one, we have been called out of the classroom to be interrogated by her in the hallway, and now her scent seems to hang on our clothes and in the air. It is a dizzying scent, like a medley of Christmas samples from the perfume counters in department stores – rosehips, holly flowers, lavender, and apple blossoms.

It is our second week in France, and we are what Miss D calls *everything French*. The American Flag in our classroom has been paired with the French Republic's stripes – stern and blazing primaries in blue, white and red. For 8 days in a row, Sabrina Kaslov has worn her uncle's French beret to school, and for 8 days we have eaten lunches of bubbling cider, pungent cheeses and pates, baguettes, apples and pears.

When Mrs. Foreman could not be with us last week, Miss D led our art lesson. At precisely the moment when Mrs. Foreman should have entered our classroom, Miss D leaped to her feet and asked us

Children! What color is this?!

It was a small cylindrical bottle that Miss D passed under our noses as she glided up and down our rows.

*Close your eyes!! Close your eyes!! What
color is this scent?*

For what seemed like hours, we passed around seasonings from Miss D's kitchen, and we wrote down the color of cinnamon, the color of oregano, the color of mint. After a while, we forgot Mrs. Foreman's taxonomy of primary and secondary colors, and instead we painted palettes of seasonings all around us. At lunch time that day, over the scent of liver pate and fresh pears, Miss D showed us a black and white photo of a handsome man with thin silky hair whose dreamy eyes seemed to see us -- and then see through us.

BO-DER-LAARRRRRR-E.

Miss D's lips made a sensual oval, and then released a long and rippling breadth as if she were blowing smoke rings. We struggled to follow her smoke.

BOW-DEEE-LAI-YERRRR

We puffed out the mispronounced name with a new sense of chic. We seemed to be speaking in tongues as Miss D led us in a kind of chant or rhapsody of saying his name in parts:

***LARRRRRRRRRRRE** LAYER **DER**
DE **DERLARRRRRRRRRE** DELAYER *Bau – der – laire**

We said his name backwards and forwards, until our lips were thick and trembling, until our tongues were no longer ours, and until our faces looked utterly French. *Un homme de genie! A don! Un extraordinaire!*

Miss D sang these French words. They were words and phrases already on placards on our wall, words that we had now and then felt encouraged to attach to ourselves. *A genius! A gift! Extraordinary!* But, this day, these were clearly his traits, and our exercise in matching scents with colors was his lesson for us. *An astonishing man with astonishing ideas*, Miss D told us, he could be one source for our own dormant gifts. And according to Miss D, we were shockingly gifted: future astronauts, future sopranos, future poets, future painters, nurses, marathon runners, actors. We were all there.

John G. Ash and Miss D are giving us their best performances today when Mrs. Foreman appears in our doorway and interrupts by pretending to clear her throat. We know that we should respond to Mrs. Foreman, but it is the storming of the Bastille that we are immersed in, and Miss D is causing a gust as she breaks down enormous invisible prison doors in the front of the classroom. Mrs. Foreman clears her throat again. John G. Ashe stops reading and Miss D stops breaking down doors. Mrs. Foreman tells John G. Ashe and the rest of us that SHE knows that ONE OF YOU KNOWS where my \$5.00 went. She leans into her words like a seer and she dangles her straw purse from her forearm.

What color is fear?

We all straighten up. Miss D has seated herself and is looking over her own pleated skirt, and picking off pieces of invisible lint.

What color? What color is fear, darlings?

Mrs. Foreman looks aghast as her eyes move from Miss D to all of us, and then back to Miss D.

White, like a scared face!! Mary Wiles shouts out.

Brown, like a Negro, John G. Ashe chimes in.

A few weeks ago, Miss D had told us about a black man from Mississippi who had forced a university to admit black students too and then he caught a shot in the back while walking home. *It wasn't just any walk home,* Miss D told us, when that black man fell dead from a shot in the back. He was making what he called his *March against Fear*.

We must all march against fear, Miss D told us, and so we marched that whole week. While our peers played ball or jumped rope and innocently sang "Mi -ssi- ssi and a ppi," we trotted double-file across the playground. We marched not so much against bullets or racism, but against fears that we knew: we marched against belt marks on the backs of a girl's lily-white legs; we marched against codes that label us; we marched against the dead soul in whiskey; we marched against the relentless summoning of shipyard horns; and we marched against the brutality of our own schoolmates.

Joy?

Miss D is asking us to think like Baudelaire again:

Green and red, Mary Wiles shouts, *like Christmas* *No! Joy is bright pink!!* Sabrina Kaslov corrects her.

We are all in it now. Some of us are on our feet shouting out colors, others sit still and scan the array of hues all around us. Miss D continues to address us without looking up:

What about anger -- what color is that?

It's white! Nicholas K. offers right away, *like a fist!* And in the same breadth, he instantly corrects himself, *No, it's red. Yeah, anger is red. Like poor old Tommy's face when the 5th graders are done with him.* A few of the motherly girls exhale a collective sigh and turn in their seats to examine Tommy Breen. Miraculously, he has escaped the 5th-graders' bullying today. His pale and freckled face looks plumper and fresher than usual, and when he smiles a crooked smile, the motherly girls all tip their heads to one side as if they have choreographed this for him. Sabrina Kaslov even blows Tommy Breen a kiss.

Miss D seems to want to know more:

And what does anger sound like?

A beating drum! Mary Wiles shouts. She is on her feet and excited by the game, but she quickly slumps back into her seat when Nicholas K. lets out a grown of disapproval.

We sense that the game may be coming to an end, so we look toward Miss D for more. Miss D tips her head backwards and searches the ceiling for a word, for a human condition, for a moment in our lives:

Loneliness?

Like nothing, someone instantly offers, as if this has been the easiest word of all, *Loneliness sounds like nothing.*

And it's white, someone else adds.

We all look at the redhead in the back of the classroom, the bruises on her ivory forearms showing beneath her blanched and crumpled blouse. *Extraordinaire*, Miss D gasps. *Extraordinaire*. And she bows her head, and with her right palm, she irons the front of her skirt – a gesture she saves for us. It is a gesture that says *well done*, and we know that she has to look down or else our brilliance will blind her.

Mrs. Foreman is holding her ground. She announces that one of us must come forward this instant – or she will punish us all. We are genuinely confused. We look to Miss D for help, but she shrugs and smiles.

Let's have a collection! Mary Wiles shouts, *for the Good Thief!*

Weeks earlier, Miss D had read to us the story of The Good Thief. *What should happen to a thief?* Miss D asked us that morning. *He should get the strap*, Glen Rooney shot back from under his astronaut's helmet. Miss D pursed her mouth to that, the way she does when she is giving us time for a different answer. When the thief in the story did *not* get the strap but he did get Paradise, we remembered that. Miss D said that stealing does not make a man a thief, and we wondered what it made him then.

That is up to the man, she said. *Until his last breath, that is up to the man*. John Paul Ambrose III and a few of the other boys looked relieved to hear that.

Mrs. Foreman hovers in our doorway and looks out over our heads. Above her head, and above the door, are blue and red and white placards with the terms we have learned:

AMOUR REPUBLIQUE RESISTANCE

We look steadily at one another – not a thief among us – and then back at Mrs. Foreman. Within a few minutes we have repaid the thief's debt. We have filled a lunch bag with Saltines, a pear, and a handful of coins from our milk-money box. Mrs. Foreman glares at us. We are communicants, but not in her parish. We are patriots, but not from her country. We are French. We are a Republic.

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

Published in the Summer 2016 issue of [Carolina Quarterly](#)