

Outside, below the grey cast windows of a classroom, orphaned children play with imaginative excitement throughout a pitifully barren playground. Storm clouds hang low over the compound, heavy with the promise of impending rain, but for now they withhold and the cheerful noise persists. It is muffled though, distant from the quiet calm of the classroom and behind her desk, Sister Roth sits watching over the kids playing without really seeing them. Around her the murky, cloud filtered light faintly illuminates an already colorless room, dreary and cold.

Her motherly face, comfortable with bright smiles and stern lectures, remains drawn and unfocused in boredom or perhaps she is just tired. She yawns suddenly and blinks herself free of the daze. Looking around at the shrouded classroom, growing darker as the clouds continue to grow more dense, she turns a light on and fills the room with white glare.

The outside lost in the wash of fluorescence and of a sudden need to do something, anything, she takes the apple from the corner of her desk and bites sharply into it. As the sweet tang of the fruit wakes her up a little more, a light knock announces the arrival of her students. A pale face, Gabriel, peeks around the door and into the class, squinting in the bright light. Before he can say anything, Shane pushes his way past the smaller boy and strides into the room. A pleased smile spreads across his young, handsome face as he catches a glimpse of the apple in his teacher's hand before she can drop it in the trash.

Gabriel recovers from the shove, saved by his grip on the door. He shuffles by his teacher, sweeps the mess of black locks out of his eyes and gives her a shy smile before sitting down quietly in his seat. He begins pulling a tangle of notebooks out of his satchel. Shane, already sitting at the front of the class, holds a sharpened number two pencil and waits.

"You won't need any of your books Gabriel, just these." She passes him a number two pencil and an eraser and stops short of giving one to Shane, seeing he is already prepared. "We are having a test today." She gives a discerning look at the far too ready, far too pleased boy.

"Sister Roth?"

"Yes Gabriel?"

"Is the test going to be for just me and Sh... for us?"

"Yes, it's just for you two. Don't worry Gabriel, it's not the kind of test you can study for, just do your best, ok?"

He smiles slightly, which is about as much as he ever smiles and the quiet voice loses a little bit of its tension. "Ok Sister Roth."

Shane rolls his eyes, but the teacher catches the movement out of the corner of her eye and gives him a disapproving frown. He smiles, all instant charm, but twists as easily into glares of annoyance at the smaller boy when she turns her back to him.

Strangely enough, for all their contrasting differences, the two share a likeness. They could almost be family. Gabriel wonders idly, while ignoring the hateful looks, if Shane has noticed the similarity and if, perhaps, it is why the other boy enjoys tormenting him so.

Both boys begin immediately after Sister Roth passes out the answer cards and the question sheets, but Gabriel soon looks up, pondering each question before answering. It is then that he notices the stranger standing just outside in the hall, watching the two boys through the doorway.

Gabriel shivers.

Used to the adolescent antagonism of bullies, such as Shane, Gabriel immediately recognizes the stranger's smile. Spiteful, hateful and malevolent. However, all the playground torment Gabriel has suffered pales before the promises of pain in the stranger's smile.

Gabriel doesn't like him, not at all.

Startling Gabriel, Sister Roth closes the door, shutting the stranger out of the room suddenly and she nods towards his test, still empty of answers. "You only have an hour and half boys, don't waste any time."

Gabriel nods and tries to forget that smile so he can turn his attention back to answering the questions. He rubs his arms quickly to warm himself up, trying to dispel the shivers and frowns. He was never really all that good at tests.

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He had planned on pacing himself, but there was no way that little runt was going to out do him. Instead he races through the questions, barely reading them and filling in the answer sheet circles with impatient pencil marks. Every now and then he looks up and over at Gabriel, irritated by the slowly filling circles the neat freak is making over his own answer sheet. Such a waste of time. Shane wonders why anyone puts up with the moron.

Shane is done his test in just over a half an hour.

Gabriel takes his time. Not intentionally, it is just how he is. He knows that some call him slow and fully gets the implication that he might be lacking in smarts, but he knows he is not stupid. Perhaps a little unfocused and his mind tends to wander. Also, it's hard to ignore the regular leers that Shane sends his way from across the room. When the time is up, he is still working on the test, the last five minutes spent hastily scribbling in random answer circles after realizing the time. But the answer sheet also has a beautifully flowing figure along the boarder, shaded in pencil and holding an apple. Gabriel likes to draw.

"Ok boys. Times up. Bring up your tests and then you can both go out and play with the others."

Outside it is still dark, hard to see from within the too bright classroom, but children can still be glimpsed as blurs of color running through the yard. It hasn't started raining yet, but it will, very soon.

"Sister Roth?" Shane's voice is clear and at the moment sounding quite pleased.

"Yes Shane, what is it?"

"Are you going to mark the tests now, could you please?"

The two boys pass in the test papers, Gabriel cringes slightly as he places his papers neatly on the desk.

"Yes Shane, I can mark them now. Gabriel, do you wish to see your mark right away?"

He only nods quietly.

She marks the papers and Shane takes the opportunity to grin victoriously at Gabriel. He knows he did better than Gabriel. Gabriel just waits quietly, ignoring the other boy, occasionally glancing nervously at the classroom door.

Sister Roth puts her pencil down and smiles at them both, pleased. "You both did very well, excellent job." That is all she says.

With a little surprise and more than a little annoyance in his voice, Shane asks... almost demanding, "But, what was my mark?"

The teacher looks at him, a warning look on her suddenly stern face, "you achieved a ninety seven Shane." And of course he beams proudly at that.

"What about Gabriel, what did he make?"

“Gabriel, would you like to know your mark?”

He nods and quietly replies, “yes please Sister Roth.”

She smiles. “You achieved a seventy two, Gabriel, very well done.”

“Thank you Sister Roth. It was a very difficult test.”

“Yes it was, but it was supposed to be.” She ignores the growing look of disbelief on Shane’s face and leans toward Gabriel. Her voice losing just a little bit of the teacher-like sternness, she asks, “I really liked the picture you drew, do you draw a lot Gabriel?”

He nods, “yep, um... Father Clive says too much,” and smile shyly, “would you like to see some of my drawings?” A little bit of excitement creeps into his quiet voice. He too is doing a good job of ignoring the look of upset on Shane’s face.

The smile that Sister Roth gives him does not come from the reserved teacher-like role she must usually play in the class, but from herself and nods. “I would like that, you can bring some tomorrow and show me after class, ok?”

“Yes Sister Roth, thanks Sister Roth, goodbye Sister Roth.” Beaming in no way because of the test, Gabriel walks, suddenly without a shuffle, out of the classroom.

Sister Roth looks back to Shane, still standing in front of her. She realizes that he is seething, his face flushing slightly and that she can no longer ignore him. With a sigh she opens her mouth.

“A seventy two... that’s it!?” he interrupts her, his voice pitched higher and louder than any kid would dare to imagine using in her classroom.

All the sternness of being a teacher returns to her face in an instant and her astonishment at his outburst raises her eyebrow more than enough to show him just how much trouble he is in. It has no effect on him at all, which is even more shocking.

“And all you have to say is ‘you both did very well,’ what is wrong with you?”

For all his bluster, he is still only twelve. Her voice easily washes over him as she stands and pulls a history book from a shelf.

“What is wrong, is that I have to deal with a certain young man who has managed to forget who he is talking to! It was not a contest, it was a test and you both did well.”

She lets the book fall on her desk sharply and opens it to a random page. Shane, bright blue eyes flashing furiously, opens his mouth but she quickly drowns him out as she points at the random page.

“Now, you will have a three page report finished on,” she looks quickly at the chapter the book has opened to, “chapter four and on my desk by the beginning of tomorrow’s class and if you can manage to somehow keep yourself under control and respectful to me and your fellow classmates for the next couple of weeks, I may consider leaving your ninety-seven as it is. If I have to speak to you one more time about your behavior, I will replace that ninety-seven with whatever mark you receive on this report. Is that understood!?”

His face is flushed more fully with outrage, the tips of his ears having gone dark red, and his breathing coming in quick pants, but he says nothing else. Just grabs the book and storms out.

Moments later, the stranger enters and gathers the tests from her desk. He smiles with sickly humor and says in a smooth mocking voice, “boys will be boys.”

She just turns to look out the window again and murmurs, “turn the light off.” Her voice has lost the steel it had before the boy, now it’s just weary. He leaves her to the quiet gloom of the empty classroom.

It's unbelievable, to her, that no one has told the boys yet.

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The rock is heavy. Not too big or unwieldily, but solid. It feels good in his hand, wrapped in a fist. It feels right.

No one really sees him approaching, the clouds are still dark overhead and no one ever really pays attention to Gabriel. But they notice when Gabriel goes down, falling with a pathetic cry of pain. It hurts like hell, his fist, but the rock helps and it is worth it. Gabriel's lip is split wide open and spilling blood onto the dry dirt. Shane smiles to himself, pleased. People are finally getting what they deserve.

Gabriel doesn't get back up, just pushes himself up from the ground and looks at the pool of blood continuing to collect below him. He looks up from the stained earth as lightening flashes and flinches at the suddenly illuminated smile on Shane's face. It's worse than usual and reminds him of the stranger. The thunder rumbles in then and brings with it the rain, finally.

"It's just not right..." Shane's voice reaches clearly through the hiss of rain. It is calm, regretful almost, but Gabriel knows the smile is still on Shane's face. "... just doing your best is rewarded and praised, while doing great is ignored. I see it every damn day and it makes me sick. Mr. Nicodemus is right, it has to be stopped."

Lightening flashes once again and Gabriel sees Shane's arm raised once more, rock in his fist and that smug smile on his face. Its not frightening anymore for some reason and instead of cowering like usual, Gabriel rises up to his feet and spits a gob of hot blood mixed with cold rain at the other boy.

"You talk too much Shane, you know why Sister Roth was so pleased with me today, its because I'm better than you!"

The rock comes down and for Gabriel everything goes black. The rain is cold, pouring over his face and it's the only thing he can feel.

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The little smart mouth goes down after the second punch and doesn't move, but Shane moves to hit him again. And again and again and again. But someone grabs his hand from behind, tight enough to cause the rock to drop from his hand. He gets spun around to face an equally disbelieving and outraged Sister Roth.

"What do you think your doing Shane, get you're a..."

Her voice cuts off suddenly in shock as Shane's free hand slaps her sharply across the face. She is stunned and around him Shane can hear kids crying as they too become overwhelmed by the unbelievable scene. He ignores them and focuses on the teacher.

"What am I doing? This is your doing, if you could only do your job right none of this would be necessary. But you can't and for what reason? Because you pity him, the poor little abandoned boy," the icy calm in his voice begins to shatter as anger filters into it, until finally he is shouting at her, "his parents left him for a reason, he's a waste of flesh and they knew it!"

She replies in a stunned voice, almost automatically, "his parents were killed in a car crash, twelve years ago when he was an enfant, just like..."

She pauses then, realizing what she is saying, but before she can tell him the rest, he turns and flees into the fallen night.

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Gabriel recovers with a nasty bump on his head, but nothing serious. He continues to doodle, but refuses to talk to anyone about Shane. Shane is never found and never returns, but late one night a rock gets thrown through one of the classroom windows. It is scratched with the words, 'I am still right.' Sister Roth is ashamed to admit to herself that she is relieved that he never returns. She asks for forgiveness in her prayers.