



LAKE NEWTON

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THERE IS A BOY STANDING ON THE CORNER

of Twenty-eighth and Bloomington on the south side of Minneapolis, Minnesota, hawking drugs to those in the know, lounging aggressively on a parked car or against the fence that separates the barren lawn from the street. I loved that boy. No, I love him still — a raw, angry, mama-tiger kind of love. If I were smarter than I am, I would have let go of these feelings by now, but I am not, and I have not.

All teachers have a story like this to tell, except they never tell it to the end. Nobody likes how this story ends, and I'm sure you won't either. It would be easier to end this story in the middle. Really, I could do that. Everyone else does.

The teachers who tell this story halfway have elevated it to the status of myth. That myth is everywhere now. You can find it in teacher-training textbooks, in educational pamphlets, in made-for-TV movies: A starry-eyed, idealistic teacher

(almost always white, almost always female) goes off to work in a tough, urban school, hoping to Make a Difference. Teacher arrives at the school and realizes from the first fistfight she is In Over Her Head. Teacher meets Nemesis, the tough, urban kid (almost always black, almost always male) who sits in the back, slides way down in his chair, clutters the aisles with his lanky legs, his large, sneakered feet; the kid whose eyes are half closed, whose chin juts sharply forward, whose lips hang loosely in a sneer. Nemesis plots to make Teacher miserable. Nemesis succeeds. Nemesis tries to drive teacher away, but Teacher has a few tricks up her sleeve. Nemesis starts participating in spite of himself. Nemesis completes homework on the sly and starts bringing a pencil to class. Nemesis finds himself inexorably drawn to Teacher due to her unfailing faith in him. Teacher discovers that Nemesis is actually brilliant, a veritable diamond in the rough. Nemesis, so touched that someone can finally see his potential, becomes equally starry-eyed, equally idealistic. Teacher packs up her books, takes one last, longing look at the cramped, dingy classroom, and, with the music swelling behind her, returns to her normal life in the middle-class land of white people, where things are safe and ordered and, presumably, a little dull.

But there is more to this story, a second half that doesn't play well in a movie. In this part the kid is doing well, yet is still desperately at risk. The teacher painstakingly develops a connection, and then loses the student anyway. That's the sequel they never make. If they dared talk about that second half of the story in teaching textbooks, we'd have an even greater teacher shortage. Instead they tell us only the first part, then send us into America's classrooms with lofty ideals in our heads, useless lesson plans in our brand-new briefcases (a graduation gift), and the latest theories and catchphrases on our tongues, but with no clue as to what sort of pressures these kids face every day; with no clue how much it hurts to care about a child and still lose him forever.

MARCUS IS LOST FOREVER. I KNOW IT. HE knows it.

Actually, I need to rephrase that. Marcus is lost *to me*. Let's be clear whom this story is actually about. As teachers, we delude ourselves into thinking that it's all about the kids, and that we slave selflessly in the background with saintlike devotion to our calling. But that's a lie. We are just as much at the mercy of our own egos as anyone else, and when it comes down to it, most students are no more than minor characters in the complicated dramas of which we are the stars. This isn't to say that we don't help the children who sit in our classrooms, or that we don't love them. Of course we do. We love them more than is good for us. That is our tragedy. There was a brief moment when I could have helped Marcus, but I missed it somehow. And now any saving has to come from him. It cannot come from me.

I see him from time to time on that corner of Twenty-eighth and Bloomington, his hair perfectly coiffed in intersecting braids that accentuate the smallness of his skull, the

thinness of his neck. He is sixteen now, but for all his swagger, he is still a little boy. He's been under the impression that he is a man since he was ten — ever since his brother went to prison. I slow down when I see Marcus. I know he recognizes my car, but he continues to lean against a chain-link fence, or a rusty Camaro with its engine rumbling. He is dressed from head to toe in baby blue and white: gang colors. They are all he wears now. His friends wear matching clothing, and I like to pretend they belong to a sports team that requires them to wear their uniforms all the time.

I slow my car even more, and Marcus's eyes slide lazily along the pavement. He will not make eye contact with me anymore. Twice before I have stopped, causing the traffic to back up angrily behind me. I have lowered the passenger window and invited Marcus in for a ride. Both times he looked to his friends for guidance. They shrugged. He shrugged at me and turned away. He did not speak.

I FIRST KNEW MARCUS BY HIS CONSTANT

muttering. In my tracked eighth-grade classes, he was in the lowest track. He had failed every class in every quarter the previous year, for the simple reason that he had not completed a single assignment. Not one. He never did the in-class work I gave him. Instead he drew lovely and disturbing pencil sketches on his desk: city scenes, or collages glorifying marijuana. There were even a few pictures of me, and they were actually pretty good likenesses, if you took away the pointy hat, fangs, and broom. Marcus threw balls of paper at girls he liked. He looked out the window. He hummed. He refused to take aptitude tests. No one knew his reading level. No one knew which math class he should be in. Everyone knew he was a royal pain in the ass. He sat in the far back corner of the room, regardless of what seat I assigned him. He would not bring paper to class. He muttered incessantly.

My first Marcus moment went like this: We had just begun a unit on the civil-rights movement by watching a documentary and making posters. He'd slept through the documentary and refused to make his poster. I'd unwisely let it slide. Now we were about to start reading the novel *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, by Mildred Taylor, about an African American ten-year-old growing up in rural Arkansas against the backdrop of poverty and institutional racism. When I passed out the books, Marcus threw his in a clean arc over the heads of the kids in front of him, over the podium, and right onto my desk chair. He eyed me defiantly, then crossed his arms, squinted at the marks he'd made on his desk, and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "I ain't going to read that fuckin' book."

(end of excerpt)