

# MS. HEMPEL CHRONICLES

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## TALENT

Many of Ms. Hempel's students were performing in the show that evening, but to her own secret disappointment, she would not be appearing. All around her, she was confronted with reminders of the event: during morning assembly, an announcement (three eight grade girls bobbed up and bawled, in unison: Tickets on sale at the door!); pink flyers slapped crookedly onto the walls; a note from a parent: Please excuse Louisa, rehearsals ran late, she will turn it in on Monday.

Adelaide Burr cornered Ms. Hempel during homeroom and described her costume. Adelaide was an avid appreciator of dance. Her first book report had celebrated in a collage (dismembered limbs; blue glitter) the life and contributions of Martha Graham, and her second, a dramatic monologue, was based on a bestseller written by a ballerina who suffered through several disastrous affairs and then developed a serious cocaine habit. Adelaide seemed excited by the lurid possibilities. "Just imagine!" she said to Ms. Hempel, and clapped her hands rapturously against her thighs, as though her shorts had caught fire. The bodies of Ms. Hempel's students often did that: fly off in strange directions, seemingly of their own accord. Now Adelaide told her that she had choreographed a solo piece to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Balancing *precariously*, she said, on a kitchen footstool, she had peeled the glow-in-the-dark stars off the ceiling above her bed. "I have incorporated them into my dance," she said mysteriously. She made Ms. Hempel promise that she would come.

The building hummed throughout the day: older girls came leaping down the stairs, fishnet stockings streaming behind them like pennants. Mr. Spiegelman, his yarmulke slightly

askew, heaved the grand piano into the auditorium. From the bowels of the science wing, a trombone bleated out a solitary, echoing rendition of "Luck Be a Lady." When Ms. Hempel went into the bathroom, she saw pots of lip gloss perched along the edges of the sinks. The girls hadn't taken off their makeup since the run-through that morning, and all day their faces had squirmed self-consciously, their sticky black eyelashes batting, their shiny mouths twitching over their teeth. It was all new to them.

Before the show, Ms. Hempel groped around the bottom of her pocketbook and found a tube of lipstick she had left there long ago. The shade was a glamorous brown, and as she hid in the faculty lounge, crouching over her compact, she thought, *narcissistic*, and then corrected herself. Vain was more accurate, although not a vocabulary word. Colorless was perhaps even more precise. She rubbed a finger vigorously over her teeth: there were parents waiting outside the auditorium, herded together like hungry and disconsolate cattle; she would have to smile at them as she walked past.

The program announced that Adelaide would be the first performer of the evening. Beneath her name there was printed in italics: *I wish to thank my family and friends for believing in me*. She entered the stage in darkness; the phosphorescent stars, sprinkled over the stomach of her pink leotard, glowed weakly, as if on the verge of dying. Apparently most of the adhesive had remained on her bedroom ceiling, so Adelaide had secured the stars with Scotch tape, which caught the light from her parents' flash camera and made her glisten like an amphibian. She still had a little girl's pot belly; her breasts were only nubs. A blue spotlight followed her nervously about the stage, lurching forward whenever it seemed as if she might leap up into the air, which she did often, as well as collapse, methodically, several times onto the floor. Throughout, she

kept her eyes fixed on some beautiful scene in the distance that only she could see. But the dance remained, in some fundamental way, incoherent: it reminded Ms. Hempel of her music appreciation class in third grade, when Dr. Freducci would turn up the volume on the record player, flick off the lights, tell the children to shut their eyes, and then order them, threateningly, to move about the room. Ms. Hempel hung onto the edge of her folding chair and tried to see Adelaide as lovely and silvery and ethereal, like a moonbeam or a sylvan nymph. She finally decided: Adelaide is lovely on the inside, and soon the rest of her will catch up. For she admired Adelaide, who could easily have been a pariah, with her wall-eye, and her manic ways, but on most days she willed her eyeball into place and commandeered a sort of following.

The next girls were, in fact, beautiful. The three ninth graders stood frozen on the stage, in a staggered line, waiting for the tape to begin. They wore shiny athletic pants in shy pastel colors that swished when they started to move. On top, their little cotton camisoles showed the black straps of their bras. Ms. Hempel worried about her own bra; all day it had refused to stay put, with one strap sliding down her shoulder at ill-timed moments. She suddenly felt what a relief it was to be sitting in the darkness. As a teacher, she felt herself the object of ferocious scrutiny; kids missed nothing; they spent entire days looking at her. Ms. Hempel was always getting chalk dust in her hair, or less frequently, on the tips of her breasts, when she would stretch up on her toes and write the homework assignment across the top of the blackboard. Some days it could be lovely, this attention; but it could be tiring as well, and she was glad, for a moment, to be there in the audience.

The girls jerked about the stage in abrupt, perfectly coordinated movements, their faces stiff with concentration. Occasionally a voice would call out from the audience, "Go Jane," and

the girl would glance up and beam. The song was friendly and familiar; Ms. Hempel slowly realized that it was about a man whose penis became erect while dancing with someone whom he really liked. He sang, "Girl I know you felt it. Girl you know I can't help it," and Ms. Hempel felt herself go rigid with alarm; she was caught, again, in an awkward position: still young enough to decipher the lyrics, yet old enough to feel that a certain degree of outrage was required of her. If only she were truly adult, so that the words were unintelligible, the volume unbearable. Then she couldn't be held responsible. The girl backup singer sighed, "Feel a little poke coming throooooouugh on yooooouuuu," and Ms. Hempel peeked at the rows of parents radiating out around her. They didn't seem to mind, or even notice. Their faces were puckered, as they usually were during school performances, trying to see their children as she had tried: graceful, gifted, well-liked.

If parents *could* understand the words, would they find the song acceptable? Ms. Hempel was actively developing her sensitivity to the appropriate and inappropriate. She still had difficulty distinguishing between the two: was it appropriate for her to laugh when a kid farted in class? Was it appropriate for her to wear stretchy fabrics? Ms. Hempel was not, she knew, a very good teacher. She made easy plays at popularity: dismissing class a few minutes early on Friday afternoons; beginning each year by reading the Philip Larkin poem about how your parents fuck you up; pretending not to hear when the kids did cruel and accurate impressions of her colleagues. She bribed them with miniature chocolate bars. She extracted compliments from them. She promised herself that she would decorate her classroom with photographs of great women writers, but she never did.

She had also discovered by the middle of her second year that the work she assigned her students would come back to plague her, tenfold. And the less work she gave them, the less she had to do. She noticed that another middle school English teacher had stumbled upon a brilliant solution: debate. It had the air of intellectual rigor, but you never had to bring piles of it home with you to correct. You just listened carefully and pretended that you were writing copious and detailed notes in your grade book. But she soon learned that she had no stomach for eighth grade debate. It required a lot of newspaper reading, which she didn't enjoy, and too often the students would make sweeping assertions about terrorists' knowledge of chemical weaponry or atrocities committed by the New York City police or illegal dumping of toxic waste in residential neighborhoods, which never sounded quite right to her, but she didn't feel sure enough to correct. She found herself, during November's Debate Unit, in the midst of a deafening storm of misinformation, a great deal of it rather frightening and, she feared, damaging to her kids' sense of safety and well-being. So they returned to reading novels and poems, a territory across which she stalked with much greater confidence. The literature they read was often bleak and depressing, but it was fiction, and none of her kids needed to worry about getting stranded on a desert island or working as itinerant laborers on an isolated and soul-crushing ranch.

This was her policy: lots of pop quizzes, because she could correct them easily in front of the television, and because they made her kids feel always a little bit afraid. But pop quizzes were not without their own pleasures, which she knew with a certainty stemming from her own days as a student. Now, as teacher, she would glide into her classroom, the stack of xeroxed pages still warm against her chest, and she would sing out to them, "I have a surprise for you!" The kids would groan, together, like a Greek chorus, but they still cleared off their desks, tucked

away their books, swiveled their pencils in their tiny plastic sharpeners, with a resignation and an eagerness that she recognized. Because what are quizzes? They are everything that is reassuring about school: a line for your name; ten questions; blank spaces; extra credit at the end.

There were, of course, those children who didn't thrive under such conditions. Who muttered at her, or who cried, or who wrote nothing except their names, and a heavy dark F at the top of the page: the self-condemned. The boy now lugging a didgeridoo onto the stage had been one of those: Edward Ashe, former piano prodigy, who by eighth grade had settled into a catatonic state, interrupted only by moments of silent, unrelieved terror whenever she approached his desk. He had the biggest eyes she had ever seen on a boy, and he would widen them, like a camera aperture on a gloomy day, to suggest innocence and surprise: we were supposed to read Chapter Two last night? So genuinely panicked, so unconvinced by his own excuses, Edward could excite only pity. Ms. Hempel would move away and put another zero beside his name in her blue grade book. She did not believe in humiliation, though some other teachers exercised it to remarkable effect; she did not believe in making children unhappy, when so many already were.

Edward, for example; he had loved Scott Joplin, and even composed his own ragtime waltzes, a fact that Ms. Hempel found difficult to believe; her imagination was incapable of seeing Edward Ashe's hands bobbing above the keyboard, his body rocking back and forth on the bench. The Edward she knew moved with a languor that sometimes slowed into complete suspension. When the period ended, and the other children bombarded themselves against the door, he would remain in his seat and blink placidly. He never touched the piano now. But he would occasionally become animated by an overwhelming desire to communicate: he entertained

his homeroom by tucking the bottom of his t-shirt beneath his chin, inhaling enormous breaths and distending his belly until he appeared pregnant, his skin stretched into a luminous and flawless dome rising above his corduroys. He had also perfected another trick that involved string coming out of his nose, which the kids particularly loved, but which Ms. Hempel could not bring herself to watch. And once he learned that she, too, owned and cared for a Colombian red-tailed boa constrictor, he would sometimes startle her by asking, in the lunchroom, or coming out of the library: "So how's he doing?" It would take Ms. Hempel a moment to figure out which he Edward was referring to. "He's very well," she would say, finally. "He shed last night."

Edward could write beautifully. He told tales from the perspectives of his beloved animals: three tarantulas, a ball python, and a boa constrictor. His favorite protagonist was the female tarantula, named Jenny. *Night falls. She is awoken by a hungry ache inside her belly. She stretches out her furry legs and surveys the sand spreading out around her. Hurrah! A small rustling in the distance. A cricket, a nice cute cricket!* In another story, he described Jenny gazing sadly out the glass walls of her tank. She watches a common household spider, busily lowering itself from the back of an upholstered chair. She is astounded by and envious of its weightlessness, its gift of self-suspension. She deplores her own earthbound and cumbersome state. Retreating to the darkness of a rock, away from the unforgiving glare of the heat lamp, Jenny thinks, *I wish I were an acrobat, spinning in the air.* Edward added a footnote at the bottom of the page, which read: *This story is unrealistic. Spiders have very poor eyesight. Jenny does not know that she lives inside a tank.*

But now: look at him! And that was the miracle of it all, how some kids find a way to grow into themselves. Edward stood in the middle of the stage, a tenth grader: stately, handsome,

serene, his mouth pressed up against a gigantic wooden tube, producing beautiful and otherworldly sounds. The kids in the audience began to stamp their approval. "Eeeeeedddd!" someone howled. She could see Edward struggling not to smile; the strange, long moan trembled for a moment. And Ms. Hempel suddenly remembered the gift he had given her on the last day of eighth grade: the box, delicately wrapped in violet tissue paper, had fluttered in her hands, a small, insistent tremor, and instantly she knew what he had offered her. Through the cardboard, through the tissue paper, she had felt a murmuring. "Oh Edward!" she cried, "A rat!" It was the most thoughtful present of that year; she fed it to Marquez after school.

*My milky thigh curves up to meet my cheek.* That was what he had written. The assignment? A Description of Me. And whenever she saw Edward, that epithet sprung immediately to mind. As he toted his didgeridoo off the stage, she imagined the gluteal muscles contracting beneath his jeans. Ms. Hempel wiggled in her seat; her tights were easing their way off her hips, and she longed to yank them back up. But there was Mr. Roth, his nubby jacket scratching against her arm, and there was Mrs. Pierpont, who would turn to her and grin conspiratorially whenever the kid on stage did something clumsy and child-like. Ms. Hempel's tights slid further and further.

The audience greeted the next performer with shrieks and whistles. It was Mr. Polidori, whom the yearbook had voted the sexiest teacher for three years in a row. This was especially impressive because he taught physics, which was generally considered an unsexy subject, and because he had a reputation for being an inflexible grader. But he wore large collars and shirts made out of synthetic fabrics; his glasses were small and quirky; he grew sideburns. And he also

played guitar, a sleek black one which he now settled into his lap. The shrieking continued. Mr. Polidori raised his eyebrows in mock surprise; he bent down to examine the tuning pegs.

Ms. Hempel did not think that she approved of him. Once, in the faculty lunchroom, he observed that Mr. Peele, their principal, resembled an enormous walking penis. Why become a teacher, she wondered, if you had difficulty with authority figures? Or maybe, it occurred to her, that's why you did become a teacher. Mr. Polidori would go out of his way to test the rules: he wore jeans and Converse sneakers, sauntered in late to faculty meetings. He freely confessed to having cheated a number of times when he was still in high school. Many of her colleagues, in fact, had cheated. Whenever the issue of ethics arose, someone would inevitably ask, "Well, we've all done it, haven't we? Taken a peek at a neighbor's test? Copied a passage out of an encyclopedia? Borrowed an older brother's term paper?" But no, Ms. Hempel had not. Even as a second or third grader, she had a keen awareness of intellectual property. Her sense of herself as a *thinker* would never allow her to pass off someone else's work as her own; from her first days at school, she felt the importance of her mental endeavors. Her father was the one who had impressed upon her that intellectual labor is the most essential, the most valuable kind of work.

That was what was so sad and difficult about teaching. Taking attendance, enforcing detention, making them love you, always seemed to come first. Often the period would end before any knowledge could be pursued, and as for her own commitment to intellectual inquiry? She was just too tired, most of the time. Mr. Polidori, despite his inappropriateness, stayed until six or seven at night, preparing labs and dreaming up new ways of demonstrating the laws of gravity and motion. By that hour, she was sitting before the television, numbly shuffling through

her piles of pop quizzes. And besides, he was not wrong about Mr. Peele: his height, his probity, his crest of springy hair.

Mr. Polidori played an introverted style of acoustic guitar, with discordant tunings and dense flurries of finger picking. Ms. Hempel could feel the admiration in the audience radiating towards him, the girls' delight at discovering that beneath his sometimes caustic exterior, Mr. Polidori was an accomplished and sensitive musician. And Ms. Hempel admired him as well; he was up there on the stage, and she was sitting on a folding chair in the darkened auditorium.

Dear Cilla Mitsui, who rubbed anti-bacterial gel on her hands at the beginning and end of every class, had asked that morning, "Why aren't you performing, Ms. Hempel?" Ms. Hempel was copying a list of transitional adverbs onto the chalkboard. "Me?" she said. "Oh, I couldn't, Cilla! I no longer have any talents!" And it was true. This time, she wasn't casting about for compliments. That is what is marvelous about school, she realized: when you are in school, your talents are without number, and your promise is boundless. You ace a math test: you will one day work for NASA. The choir director asks you to sing a solo at the holiday concert: you are the next Mariah Carey. You score a goal, you win a poetry contest, you act in a play. And you are everything at once: actor, astronomer, gymnast, star. But at a certain point, you begin to feel your talents dropping away, like feathers from a molting bird. Cello lessons conflict with soccer practice. There aren't enough spots on the debating team. Calculus remains elusive. Until one day you realize that you cannot think of a single thing you are wonderful at. "You have talents," Cilla Mitsui protested, and then paused, considering. "You are an *affable* teacher!"

Ms. Hempel was moved, but knew that *affable*, although a vocabulary word, was not synonymous with good. She was not a good teacher, yet teaching had rendered her unfit for

everything else: she was not a good friend (she didn't return phone calls), nor a good lover (a student's smiling face would suddenly materialize before her, mid-coitus), nor a good citizen (she didn't have time to read up on the propositions before she went to vote). She had chosen teaching because it seemed to offer both tremendous opportunities for leisure and the satisfaction of doing something generous and worthwhile. Too late, she realized her mistake; teaching had invaded her like a mild but inexorable infection; her students now inhabited her dreams, her privacy, her language. She found herself speaking as they did; anything cheap or worn or disappointing was *ghetto*: I'm so sick of this ghetto answering machine! she would exclaim to her empty apartment. Anything extreme was *mad*: The food here is mad expensive! she would say, examining a menu. *No doubt* she used liberally to indicate her emphatic agreement. Her one comfort was the mutuality of the exchange, for they, without realizing it, had adopted her mannerisms as well. Once she overheard Michael Reggiani refer fondly to Julius Garcia Jonson as *irredeemable*. Or when Kia Brown was sent back to the end of the lunch line, she said, *I'm so cross!* But really, victory was theirs; they had taken the castle and hung their flag from the turret; they had corrupted even her impeccable spelling. Ms. Hempel, crowned Grammar Queen of her junior high, now found herself confusing there and their, and inserting apostrophes where they didn't belong. It was a war of attrition; even the most egregious mistakes, seen over and over again, can begin to assume the appearance of correctness.

She put *e* before *i*. She bought blue nail polish; she felt tenderly towards the same boys that her girls had singled out as crushworthy. Earlier that day, during after-school detention, Jonathan Hamish had reached out and grabbed her hand. She was teasing him; he wanted to make her stop. Briefly, stickily, his fingers closed over hers, and her heart jumped.

She had given him and Toby McKibben detention because they had traded punches during class; affectionate punches, not malicious ones, but she had already warned them. So she said, amiably, as she always did, "I'll see you guys after school." But it turned out that Jonathan and Toby were in far deeper trouble; only the day before they had had an encounter with the police. Joined by some other unmanageable boys, they had harassed the pizza parlor owner on Seventh Avenue, rattling his garbage cans and pressing their faces against his windows. It was an act of vengeance; he had banished them after they showered a booth with parmesan cheese. But he telephoned the police, and when the cruiser pulled up to the curb, the boys had already fled, with the exception of Toby, who was trusting and moon-faced and slow.

"Is this true what I hear?" Ms. Hempel asked when the boys showed up to serve their detention, and at first reluctantly, then with increasing gusto, they told her the story, interrupting themselves to insist upon their blamelessness: "We just spilled a little cheese –" "Maybe I bumped into one of the trash cans on the way out –" "Everybody knows that he hates kids –" And they looked so earnest, so indignant, that she couldn't help but tease them. Ms. Hempel frowned; she pursed her eyebrows; she rolled her eyes. "Sure, sure," she said. "Wrongfully accused. The two of you would never *dream* of doing something like that." It was at that moment Jonathan's hand shot out and landed upon her own, resting on the desk. "It's true!" he said and immediately it disappeared again; the protestations continued. He thought nothing of it, she was sure; it was just another one of those bodily convulsions she so often witnessed; an impulse, a thoughtless intimacy, as when her students, lost in concentration during a test, confused by a question, needing help, would raise their hands and ask her, "Mom?"