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Flying

by Tricia Warren

Bursting out of school, Ethan ambled down a short lane, then a narrower dirt path, where light seeping through hickories, oaks, bedazzled his head, spreading liquid shadows over the soil, until maybe a glimmer of red brick was still visible. Was he preoccupied? Possibly he was admiring the shadows that frolicked underneath his sneakers and hid behind the trees. But this was unlikely, his mother, Claire, surmised from yards away,. In the clearing, he slid a piece of paper from his back pocket, folded it, and hurled a paper airplane into the air, where it made an arc, fluttered, and then plummeted to the ground.

As the airplane lay quivering, Claire thought of her bedroom walls when she was eleven. Was this relevant? An indelible shade of pink, a twist of light; she wasn't sure if attending to these phenomena put a wedge between her and Ethan, adding unnecessary clutter, or thoroughly etched him into her heart.

"Hi, Bo Bo," she said.

"Wammy!" Gallant as ever, he scooped up the airplane and handed it to her. It was a citation, which she read aloud.

"Ethan was out of his seat after recess, standing by the air-conditioner with two other boys, blasting air up his shirt.' Signed: Carol Fears, fourth-grade teacher. True?"

As she awaited his response, Claire tried to look judicious. Rhetoric about honoring classroom order as well as one's inner creativity stirred in her mind; even a homily took shape. Usually, however, she aimed for more subtlety than that.

"Yes," he said, falling down, collapsing into a hip-hop move. "Can I go to the park now? You can follow!"

While Claire expeditiously stuffed the pink slip into her bag, he steered his bike around

the corner, swerved, regained his balance, and headed toward a friend's house. Quickly, she caught up and trailed them both to the park, where Abdi's mom, Ingy, as bright as sunshine, awaited them.

"Hi," Ingy said, gesturing toward the soccer field as if she were down there too, preternaturally ubiquitous, in a way that only a mother of four could be. "Abdi's over there,"

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she said to Ethan, who gamboled in that direction.

"Faster!" commanded Ingy's younger daughter from the toddler swing. Ingy complied, then flipped her blond hair about, like a flash of electricity. All luminous eyes and symmetry, her face could've gilded a magazine cover, or moved cars from showrooms; hovering about her was a spontaneity photographers craved. In fact, just behind her, across the street, rose an enormous house that her husband was renovating for her and the kids, as if to contain her beauty. Unlike her daughter, Ingy seemed to relish the arrival of a grown-up, while Claire yearned for a toddler—for a toddler's fresh laundry smell to encircle her like perfume.

"How are you? Abdi's been getting these, um, pink slips lately—has Ethan?"

"How'd you know?" Claire asked, above the rhythm of the creaky swing.

"Several boys have gotten them recently."

A cluster of them were approaching—Ethan, Robert, Abdi, Manuel, and two others who had gathered at the park—and were leaping past each other to claim a swing. En masse, they landed and squeezed into two tangled heaps.

One kid who didn't get a swing said, "I know someone who once got a wart in his armpit," and from there, a hubbub ensued.

"I gotta go when my mom leaves," said Robert. "She saw your moms leave the park once to pick up sandwiches for everyone. She saw your moms."

"I wonder what the difference is between a zit and a pimple," Ethan said, apparently uninterested in debating who erred, the mothers who got sandwiches or the mother who was appalled.

"If your face is clean, you don't get pimples," said Abdi.

"How does your face get clean?" asked another kid.

"Just wash it. My mom does it every night."

"How old is she?"

"Thirty-four. You can get zits forever."

"It depends."

"My mom's forty-five!"

“You mean after you’re a teenager, you can get zits for the rest of your life?”

“I don’t know what’s so bad about warts. Most are really small. My sister has a wart.”

“The way I got rid of mine is half came off in the pool, and I picked the other half off.”

“I had one for a long time; it had black things in it.”

“Really?”

“Maybe, sorta?”

“Wanna play basketball?”

“Let’s go, Robert,” Robert’s mother said, striding up from the field with her daughter. “There’s no time for basketball today.”

“Hi, Julia,” Ingy said. “Hi,” Claire echoed. “Did Robert get a pink slip today?” Ingy asked.

“No, he did last week. He was banned from the park for the weekend. So—fingers crossed, hope he learned his lesson.”

“Ethan’s already so anxious he sometimes has a headache after school now.”

“Better check him for allergies,” Julia said. She handed the lacrosse sticks to her daughter, who placed them in the immaculate trunk of an SUV. Quickly, after they all got in, the doors clicked with secure locks, like punctuation, while a trio of sparrows fluttered away from a puddle nearby. Conjuring images of fences, gates, and national borders, Claire wondered if she should’ve imparted that perspective to Ethan when he arrived home with his pink slip earlier.

* * *

Luckily, Claire was working at home the next day when she received an urgent e-mail from the assistant principal. “Ethan didn’t return his pink slip signed by a parent,” it advised. “Some children will conceal a school’s disciplinary action from their parents,” it continued, but Claire didn’t finish reading.

Indignant about the false accusation because, she protested to no one (husband was in Beijing, probably at a business dinner), he *didn’t* conceal it, she rushed the pink slip over to the school. She’d simply forgotten to put it in his backpack. What greeted, and even mollified, her was a banner that hung out front. “BOLTON HILL ELEMENTARY: TOP-

SCORING SCHOOL STATEWIDE! GOVERNOR'S EXCELLENCE AWARD!"

Obviously, they knew what they were doing, instructing kids in Asian history, mixed numbers, ancient Greece, even the lunar cycle. Claire closed her eyes and imagined them bestowing a garland wreath upon Ethan's head every day, on all the kids' heads! As she handed the slip to the office staff, she didn't need to feign her contrition.

But four days later, there was another slip. Its shade resembled Pepto-Bismol this time.

"The assistant said I was disrespectful when I escorted John to the nurse's office," Ethan said.

"Disrespectful?"

"I smiled at John, and she said I was 'smirking.' What does 'smirk' mean, anyway?"

"To smile in a sarcastic way. But why were you visiting the nurse?"

"Mrs. Fears always asks a kid to escort John there, so he can take a green pill--like an M&M. He says it keeps him from going crazy. Lots of kids take them. If John doesn't take his, he stands up in class and ticktocks like a clock. John's funny."

"Ticktocks!"

"My head hurts. Do you think I need a pill?"

Claire smirked, and made an appointment with the assistant principal. After Ethan fell sleep that night, she prepared a few august remarks about education. She fancied herself and

the assistant principal carrying on a Socratic dialogue, a tête-à-tête, or a civilized discourse in the tradition of the Enlightenment. There was Homer to consider, isosceles triangles, aerodynamics, and Shakespeare: She couldn't sleep for Googling concepts—and sonnets!—in her twilighty bedroom with the windows open and the bulbous yellow moon shrinking slowly into a polka dot.

At 12 p.m. the next day, slightly jittery from her sleeplessness, she tottered after Mrs. Henderson through a warren of offices until they passed a boy who sat at a desk, eating a ham sandwich, and they entered the next doorway.

"Ethan hasn't been a big troublemaker," the assistant principal said, smoothing her khaki skirt and offering Claire a seat. "But we're always happy to engage with parents," she added, sounding curt rather than

happy. Even if it was antiseptic, Claire admired her office, which was so unlike her own. Scanning for clues, for possible avenues that might lead to a dialogue, she squinted at Mrs. Henderson and her new husband standing under a floral archway, and moved on to a crayon drawing of a snow leopard. Below that was a box of latex gloves. "But, of course, if he acquires enough slips, he'll be lunching here," Mrs. Henderson added, nodding toward the boy with the ham sandwich.

Seeking another path, Claire scrutinized the titles pertaining to education lined up on the bookshelf, while her mid-morning croissant roiled in her gut. "Shouldn't learning involve—joy?" she asked, hoping to sound winsome. But the word sputtered, slid down the cinder-block wall, and landed with a morose thud, like the titles. "I mean, isn't the discipline a little harsh? Ethan earned one slip for smiling. And recently, he's been complaining about headaches." Her tone lurched and rumbled into an alto, sounding saccharine; Mrs. Henderson grimaced.

Which was somewhat understandable. Maybe parents hoping for the gray clouds of

administrative neutrality to pass, for sunflowers to pop out of her soul, were tiresome? Or maybe Mrs. Henderson enjoyed using jargon. Or maybe some higher-up required her to speak that way?

"We reinforce good behavior, and punish bad," said Mrs. Henderson placidly, still unmoved, as she opened a gray drawer and pulled out a batch of turquoise paper bobcats. They were sturdier replicas of a bobcat that had slipped out of Ethan's backpack the other day. "The children are rewarded with these Bolton Hill bobcats whenever they behave appropriately," she said, while the bobcat stared emptily at the wall. "If a child earns six, he or she wins a T-shirt," she added. Out of the drawer she pulled a T-shirt that said *I think outside the box*.

"Isn't that a little—Pavlovian?"

"Our methods are well-researched, and the ways we utilize them are very successful, Mrs. Phillips." No longer was Mrs. Henderson focusing on her, but beyond her somewhere, bouncing against the walls, winding through the corridors, and spiraling toward various hallway voices. The meeting was over.

* * *

Late that night, when she opened the private-school website, Claire marveled at an array of limestone buildings and stellar amenities throwing a glow around her den, and studied the admissions checklist. In the morning, she phoned a psychologist listed on the website and asked to register Ethan for a SPIT-CO test. Whatever that was.

"It means 'social, psychological, and intellectual comprehensive,'" the secretary explained. "It's not the right time of year, but I'll check with Dr.

Waldrop,” she added.

Claire studied his credentials, his “expert advice as featured on TV and other media,” and his picture. His hair dazzled post-salon, and his smile resembled Ethan’s when he faked it for a picture. Under the smile, the caption listed a host of maladies—attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, anger, addiction, self-mutilation—and finally, contact numbers for Dr. Waldrop himself, who purported to have a panacea.

Two days later, the secretary called. “Can you hold?”

Claire sang the lyrics to the hold line tune until the psychologist interrupted, booming: “I’m joining ZNN’s permanent team in New York, and we’re inviting my remaining SPIT-CO appointments to take the test before an online audience!”

Thus, Claire called another psychologist.

“Ethan is brilliant,” he said after the test. “Only one of his ten categories was average—his processing speed, but that could well mean he has a sense of complexity.”

Soon afterward, they were invited to visit the private school. From suburbs to city they followed a winding road, then a congested road, until they parked next to a homeless man standing beside the meter, boxing the air, smiling beatifically. Nearby, the school’s honey-colored edifice beckoned, as if to embrace them at long last.

“Maybe they’ll encourage curiosity over regimentation!” Claire whispered to herself, admiring petunias tumbling from the classrooms’ flower boxes, as she swung open a heavy door.

“Hello, you must be Claire and Ethan,” said a woman in a flared skirt.

“Yes—”

“I’m Lauren,” said the woman, as the upbeat school psychologist appeared and vanished with Ethan.

Her Guatemalan skirt swishing cheerily like she’d bought it beachside over spring break, Lauren guided Claire through a campus so exquisite that Claire almost collapsed into an upholstered chair upon reaching the library. As Lauren discussed social justice, Claire took her cadence as background music and silently beseeched her to admit Ethan. She imagined him climbing toward the stars, branch by branch, on a tree that soared through the roof. Maybe he’d study astronomy, or literature, or Japanese. The book titles ripped through her mind like stanzas in a sacred poem.

* * *

Then the waiting began. Claire did chores she usually neglected, while Ethan intermittently asked, "Have we heard?" When a competitive neighbor asked about his school plans for next year, Claire thumped downstairs with the recycle bin at quirky times to avoid her.

One day Ethan came home with another slip. It said he'd been filling in his math answers so quickly, he must be making them up. So Claire checked the answers and drew a big smiley face at the top: all correct!

"Sometimes this country feels lonely to me. Like people never pause, never linger over meals together," Ingy said at the park that day. Claire had been to Europe several times, of course, but never to Ingy's native Denmark. So she wasn't sure what to say.

"Well, it's not like I want it that way," Claire said.

"Does your husband travel a lot?" Ingy asked.

"Not a lot. Sometimes." The wind picked up, and Claire pretended to observe a yellow poplar tree as its leaves shimmied. A lacy pattern fanned over the soil and shrubs, and she found its circularity alluring, or pretended she did.

"Do you just like it that way?"

She never thought so, Claire began, but the story was unwieldy, rather than circular; it encompassed garbage as well as stars, a second child who never arrived, and oh, how it all piled up. Grocery visits, bird-watching, and frozen-yogurt toppings all played a part, as did finessing her zigzagged resume into a flawless chronicle of accomplishments, but when she opened her mouth to shape this random list into a coherent tale, the black paved parking lot sparkled before her mockingly, as if the tale could end only enigmatically. Or with the second law of thermodynamics. And anyway, Ingy was peering into her eyes, as if she thought she knew the answer.

"No. So how's your renovation going?" Claire asked, motioning back toward the trucks parked at Ingy's house, which was almost tilting now on the hill. Renovations were easy to discuss. Whatever transpired beneath the neighborhood's surfaces usually went unsaid, except in an occasional flurry of Internet commentaries. Like the Hudsonian godwit she'd learned once could fly several thousand miles without landing on the ground, however, an ineffable truth seemed to swoop over that cacophony as well as the everyday silences, rarely appearing unless one was very alert.

"It's a mess. Look!" As Claire looked up at the vast house, she spotted Julia approaching them, her blouse tucked in, her navy shoes bearing prim buckles. Even working in her home office, Claire resolved, she should start wearing matching outfits from now on.

“We just finished our renovation, so there’s hope,” Julia said. “You should come over and see,” she said more to Ingy than to Claire.

“I hear you have a sunroom overlooking a pool,” Ingy said.

“It’ll be ready for Robert’s birthday party! But I want him to see that it takes work—and money—to renovate, and buy cool cars.” Claire tried to follow Julia’s starchy logic but mostly remembered the time they chaperoned together. It was on an early morning field trip, and Julia had described with a plethora of details her previous career in international development. Which was interesting, except the subject seemed to be something else entirely. But this time, Manuel’s mother appeared, cuddling her dog, and changed the subject with her presence.

“Get off work early?” Ingy asked.

“Yes! Haven’t seen everybody in so long!” Perry said. It always seemed odd that Perry worked for the FBI, because she was such an affable, even dreamy person, whose dog presently was covering her face in kisses. “Is anyone else planning to be at the pool this summer?”

“Be careful—there’s bacteria all over that tongue,” Julia said, and they all turned to watch the boys, who were down on the field. “ARE YOU SINGLE?” the usually shy Manuel was asking a bevy of girls four years his senior.

“MANUEL! TIME FOR YOUR ALLERGY SHOT!” his mother said, and the boys swarmed up to gawk at her, because she had such a cool job.

“Good to see you, Perry,” Claire said, hoping she didn’t sound sarcastic. Although Claire disagreed with her on politics, Perry’s warmth felt like the breath of angels. Everyone crowded around the car, as if they felt the same way. The dog hopped beguilingly onto Manuel’s lap to poke his head out the window.

* * *

As it turned out, Ethan hadn’t any allergies, according to a message left on their home phone. Another message followed the doctor’s, however, and began with an apology about the voicemail. Lauren and the school were impeccable, even with rejections.

“There were unanswered questions, the pink slips—and Ethan’s processing speed was—average!” Like a beginning violinist, or a thirteen-year-old boy, Lauren’s voice squeaked involuntarily, when she said “average.”

When Claire finished listening twice, she still didn’t tell Ethan. She couldn’t bear to, just yet. As he was busy experimenting with an airplane, she didn’t want to disturb him.

“You can get a lot more lift if you curve the nose,” he was saying. “It’ll stay up longer. You have to avoid drag. That’s aerodynamics. It’s how air moves around an object. You know about aerodynamics, Wammy?”

“Only a little bit.”

“Mom, can we move into the city and invite John and Abdi over to fly airplanes and make sandwiches for that homeless dude?”

With precision, he folded another airplane, dashed outside—where the air seemed to invigorate him more than air-conditioning—and hurled it across the street, away from passersby and two pink dogwoods just blossoming. For a few stunning moments, it hung in the air, like a bar of sixteenth notes, and soared.

Tricia Warren lives outside Washington, DC, not far from Chain Bridge and a few shiny sycamores. Her work has appeared in *The Tower Journal*.

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