

Sam Keenan – Open Division, 1st Place

Better Graces

We like Miss Honour, even when she says ‘Shhhhhh!’, even when she hisses it over us like a punctured tyre that’s on its way to deflating. We cross our arms high. We hide the holes in our pinafore frocks. We conceal our mothers’ imperfect arranging of our hair, how it falls all spidery and disreputable. Dis-rep-u-ta-ble. Sound out each syllable so you know how to spell. It is appalling to be thought of as disreputable.

‘You cannot be a good person without effort,’ says Miss Honour after roll call, her starched collar peeking whitely from her dress. Concentrate all your thinking on being good or you won’t do it properly. Sound it out. Con-cen-trate. You might be like the false people, all handsome and clean-like, smooth-saying ‘Good morning children’ with a Scottish burr. You might kiss hands all charming, all smiling, while Mrs Mudge spits ‘Tssk!’

Miss Honour stands over us while we do our handwriting, and we write sentences about how to be good. We use the words ‘nice’ and ‘kind’ not knowing if Miss Honour’s billowy sighs are because of our handwriting or the uncomplicated words contained within it. We sit blankly with our failings, whatever they might be—we shoo them away like the roaming hens, fat, feathery and annoying, and in the way of Right.

‘Right is the proper way,’ says Miss Honour. Right is the only thing that will save us. Miss Honour smiles at the boys that seem the Right ones, they of the pressed shirts and side-parts and fluttery black lashes. But how quickly the world turns to terrible when they are disappointing.

Jacob walks to Miss Honour’s desk and presents his handwriting. He flicks his cowlick appealingly. Miss Honour takes his slate and pores over it in silence. She pores over it like scripture—difficult to decipher and full of unwelcome news.

‘Did you take *care* when you wrote this, Jacob?’ Miss Honour asks.

Jacob looks down himself at his neat socks and perfectly tied shoes. He feels our eyes on his back like burning holes as he is cast adrift in the sea of Miss Honour's question.

'If I asked you what percentage of care you took when you wrote this, Jacob, what would that percentage be?'

'Arrrr, ummm,' says Jacob, filling the air with sounds that don't say anything.

Another silence drifts across the classroom, and then Jacob says, 'I think I did take about 83 percent of care.'

Miss Honour does her stare, the one that's a flame against your face. 'Only 83 percent of care?'

Jacob looks down at the floorboards.

'What has happened to that 17 percent? Where did it go, Jacob?' Jacob says nothing.

'Did you spend it on some other teacher, Jacob?' Miss Honour's voice deepens. 'I thought I was your loveliest teacher? Look at me, Jacob. I am *very* sad.'

We see the corners of Jacob's mouth turn downward. We watch him try to hold in his own sad, but it spills from his edges like a cloth used to mop up far too much water.

Miss Honour ups her voice so it's close to a shout and carries on all stern, 'Don't you *like* me enough to take care, Jacob? Don't you think I am *good* enough?'

Jacob's face scrunches up tight. He snatches his slate, sprints to his seat and hides his face in his shirt. Miss Honour looks well satisfied, like she is the queen of spiders and Jacob is one of her sickly flies. She throws us girls a look as if we are co-conspirators.

'We can't blame the *boys* for everything, now, can we?' she asks in a loud whisper, like it's a special secret to be let in on. 'Whose fault is it if we don't look after

ourselves? It really *must* be my doing if I am not Jacob's loveliest teacher.' She directs us to look at the boys while she continues. 'Surely it's a woman's fault if she does not remain desirable. We can't blame the men who appear to love us and flatter us, then settle on finding us a bore.'

We nod with false knowing.

'Men, boys. They seem so kindly, but consider their misleadingness, girls, the way they lift their hats as if you might be special, how they act as if they have respect.' She turns to the boys and says 'RES-PECT.' Then we sit in silence until the bell sounds.

At interval, we watch Miss Honour in the resource room. We watch her as she watches Mr Palmer in the playground. There he is consoling the awkward relief teacher, draping his warm arm around her, looking her in the eye when she's speaking. His shirt is beautifully pinstriped. See him squeeze her hand as she sobs, while around them the wind lifts and scatters the leaves from the oaks and sends shivers through the flax. It catches Mr Palmer's jacket and the relief teacher's thinned-from-screaming hair as they sit together on the playground bench. The field behind them stretches up the hill to nowhere where evergreens sprawl around the creeks—the high place Miss Honour calls 'wretched' because there is just no room for roses with the pungas fanning their dark below the canopy, preventing the sunlight from getting in.

'Some of us must live in the dark,' says Miss Honour in morning science. 'There have to be those who are *unfortunate*, or the word *fortunate* would not exist.' She teaches us to hear loneliness in the throats of birds, and how the sound in the valley is a deep hollow you can feel.

We stay away from the boys at lunchtime. We must do as we are told or the world will chew us up and spit us out and into the poor people's houses to sit with babies and sick. We see their houses from the school's front gate. We see old papers blow into their front door steps which remain unswept. Miss Honour asks us to consider the very many ways there are to fail, what with babies and husbands, and no babies and

no husbands. Two boys yell to us 'Come and play tag', but tag could be a terrible reckoning. It could lead you on to the path of Wrong, which is like a snow-covered mountain that is steep and slippery and ends with you falling on your face.

'We cannot play tag,' we say. We don't raise our voices, because that's only for adults talking to children. There is no screaming between Right adults, or from children on the side of Right.

In afternoon arithmetic, Mr Palmer's face peers around the doorframe. 'All right for assembly?' he asks, and Miss Honour swallows as if she is drinking an ocean and murmurs 'yes' in what seems like just the wrong tone.

'Got the certificates?' asks Mr Palmer, and Miss Honour lets out an unnatural-sounding 'yes'.

'See you soon,' he says, and Miss Honour husks an almost inaudible 'yes', and reds up her face like she's been too much in the sun. When Mr Palmer goes, she shakes her head and says things to herself. She lets out noises like the hushed whispers she thwacks us girls for.

'Girls must have better graces,' says Miss Honour in afternoon social studies. We listen as she tells us how to become ladies. Don't be like her. Don't be humiliated. Hu-mi-li-a-ted. Be high and silent. Don't spill your feelings so. If you feel sad and lovesick, pour your achiness into the playground creek, climb up away from it into the reaches of the biggest evergreen. Wait for the swollen berries to turn the colour of burning lanterns and your silly-girl feelings won't be painful as much. Girls are born to have painful feelings. They were made to bear the weight of the world. Consider the word 'career' before you embark on it. Think about how it might make you unlovely.

Mr Palmer passes by the room again and asks briskly, 'Do you have any matters of discipline?'

Miss Honour shakes her head and Mr Palmer offers no words in return. He walks

away, and Miss Honour's straightness collapses a little.

After the afternoon break our clothes are damp. Miss Honour sees the discolouration on our skirts and faces. 'Don't you go getting them creek fishes,' she says, and we laugh because we know they aren't fishes, only Michael (not his real name) tries to explain. Michael (not his real name) does not realise when he has stepped off one tongue and onto another, and the word with its vowel sounds ups the room with magic, lights the shadows, brings a flicker to Miss Honour's eye as he says, 'They are kōura.'

We set about gasping at the forbiddenness, at the sight of a word meant to be kept in dark rooms being shaken out in the light of day. We hold our breath inwards to will away the sound, but it lingers like drifting particles, like dandelion seeds all soft and open, hanging in the air.

Miss Honour knows good so well. She knows it as she marches Michael (not his real name) off to Mr Palmer for justice. Justice is about Right and Wrong. We must learn from our punishments and mistakes; they are manifestations of Wrong. We must better ourselves. We can't sit and cry and moan and pine. We must make new plans and resolve never to be on the side of Wrong again.

Miss Honour strides so handsomely. The thick fabric of her dress grazes the naked arm of Michael (not his real name) as she leads him to the office. He hides his upsetness, but we see it plain as a bee struggling at a window looking all hopeless and desperate onto the world outside.

At afternoon assembly, Michael (not his real name) is sat at the front. His various sins are read: 'Did speak on the school grounds a language that is forbidden. Did fail to apologise immediately after.' Mr Palmer readies his whip. We try to remain calm and serene, because the punishment punishes the judge more than the criminal. It is hard for good people to rightly enforce the rules, but rules are there for reasons, and it would be no good to let bad deeds go unpunished. What would the world be like then? Pain can save us, says Miss Honour, like when she let her heart be ripped out all ripe and red. How could she have been so stupid? We need to punish ourselves. We

need to punish others to stop them from being stupid again. We must save them from her humiliation. Hu-mi-li-a-tion.

Outside the hall, a soft wind brushes across the fields, and when the whip strikes, it's as if the wind catches Michael (not his real name) in its grip. He sucks inwards and inwards and his face is full of fright, only Mr Palmer doesn't notice and whips him again. Now the wind has Michael (not his real name) good and proper, and carries his breath away with it. The breath is the soul, Miss Honour told us in religious studies, and sure enough the wind takes the soul of Michael (not his real name) to wherever it is the wind takes things.

When Mr Palmer sees him go all limp like a river eel, his face becomes wide-eyed and huge, and Miss Honour catches this wide-eyed hugeness. She plays with her hands; she moves her head slowly. 'Come children,' she says, and leads us from the hall. We follow her to where she takes us, which is away and away from our classroom and the school hall and the schoolyard. We follow her to our town's highest field, all blank and open. And suddenly all the world is full of breath, as if it had been whipped out of Michael (not his real name) and scattered among the grasses, where it crawls through the green and brown blades like a scurrying thing until it runs completely out of sight.