

Orphans

Miss Pointy likes poetry. No, she *loves* poetry. She gives us copies of poems by famous poets, one every couple of days, but she doesn't quiz us about them, so most of the kids throw them in the garbage can about two minutes after she passes them out. Miss Pointy gets mad, but she doesn't make the kids take them out of the garbage can. She says that's our bad choice, all she can do is give them to us, she can't make us take them. Darrell doesn't even look at them, he just crunches them in a ball and pretends the garbage can is a hoop, and uses the poem for a slam dunk or sometimes a three-pointer.

I never throw away the poems she gives to me. I keep them, I memorize some of them. My

favorite is "Autobiographia Literaria" by Frank O'Hara.

When I was a child
I played by myself in a
corner of the schoolyard
all alone.

I hated dolls and I
hated games, animals were
not friendly and birds
flew away.

If anyone was looking
for me I hid behind a
tree and cried out "I am
an orphan."

And here I am, the
center of all beauty!
writing these poems!
Imagine!

Frank O'Hara called his poem "Autobiographia Literaria," which means, his life story. He told it in just a few words, not like me having to write page after page like this! I whisper these words I learned from Miss Pointy's inky ditto to

keep myself company when Mom is late coming home from work. The rhythm is sweet, it reminds me of church. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. When I was a child I played by myself.* I know it is bad to say they feel the same, but I can't help it, it's true. When I'm alone opening a can of corn in the kitchen with dirty dishes piled high, I imagine coming out from behind a tree and being the center of all beauty, which doesn't seem likely, but Frank O'Hara said it happened. All he had to do was come out from behind a tree, and he was Somewhere Else. I say his words over and over again, like a spell, if I say it maybe a thousand times it will come true for me, too. Maybe the poems are a test, like Cinderella's slipper. Maybe if you can make them fit, you can be queen. That would be useful. But not everybody finds poems useful. Not everybody trusts poets, or Miss Pointy.

"Poetry is for punks," said Darrell.

"I'd like to know who isn't a punk, according to you," said Miss Pointy.

Darrell had the answer right away. "People with money."

"Then you should love poets, because they know the value of a word the way a banker knows the value of a dollar. A poem is a small economy of words. Each word is worth its weight in gold."

"Yeah, take a poem to the store, see what it buys you," sneered Darrell.

"If you spend a poem wisely, you'll get love back in return, not breakfast cereal or coffee. We're not talking food stamps here."

Raphael snorted, but it was a clumsy snort, because having a teacher talk about love is so gross you can hardly snort. Still, I wrote out my favorite poem in my best handwriting and I folded it into a little square. I didn't sign it. I tried to think who to give it to.

The door opened. It was Peaches, the Special Needs teacher. I couldn't help slinking down in my seat. She waved to me. I waved back, miserably.

"I'm here for Darrell," she said to Miss Pointy, who was writing on the chalkboard. Darrell started to get up.

"Sit down, Darrell. I didn't say you could leave

your seat," said Miss Pointy. "Where are you taking him?"

Peaches looked surprised. "Services," she said in a lowered voice.

"What services?" said Miss Pointy, not in a lowered voice. "Religious services? I wouldn't have guessed he was Jewish. He doesn't speak *any* Yiddish and his Hebrew is *entirely* illegible. But that's okay. He's a little *slow*," Miss Pointy rasped from behind her hand.

Peaches laughed. I recognized that laugh, an oh-I-heard-about-you laugh. "We don't like the word *slow*," said Peaches.

"We don't?" said Miss Pointy. "Then what do we do about snails and turtles and broken watches?"

Peaches straightened. "Miss Poitier, Darrell Sikes need special help. He has been *identified* as having *impulse control issues*," she said, even lower than before. "He acts out."

"Who doesn't?" Miss Pointy asked.

"No, I mean . . . haven't you checked the records?"

"Oh, wait! The records! The *records*! Oh, yes!

Darrell Sikes! You'll have to excuse me, I'm new! Ha-ha! Now let me see! I got a note about his *services* . . . just recently . . . there has been a change, now where did I put that note? Oh, I am so disorganized! Didn't you get a copy? The first week of school? About the change in Darrell's *services*? Hmmm. . ."

Watching her, I realized I had a front-row seat to some serious and amazing lying. She wasn't looking for anything at all, she was just touching everything on her desk. First she lifted the flower vase, and then she opened a drawer; then she ran her hand over some files, and then she started rifling through a pile of papers. Then she made clicking sounds with her tongue and opened another drawer and swished her hand on the inside so you could hear all the scissors and paper clips and stapler removers clattering around. "Oh, where is it!"

I told myself not to jump to conclusions, but even Darrell Sikes was making a constipation face to keep from smiling. Why, why, *why*? Why would a teacher want Darrell Sikes in class, let alone *lie* to

keep Darrell Sikes in class? Especially after all the trouble his psycho mother had stirred up. Especially after George Washington and his cherry tree. What happened to honesty and accountability? Why would she lie to help a crazy bad boy like Darrell Sikes? *Darrell Sikes!* It was a mystery to me.

Finally, Miss Pointy turned to Peaches and said, very decisively, "You must have it."

"Me! I don't remember getting any note," said Peaches. "What did it say?"

"It said, Darrell's mother has refused services this year. No pullout."

Peaches touched her lip. "You're kidding." The she lifted her arm and pointed straight at Darrell, who was pretending to be very interested in the wall. "The note said *he* is not going to be receiving services? *Him?*" She looked kind of excited, like she had been told she had won the lottery but she still couldn't quite believe it.

"Isn't it a shame?" Miss Pointy made her eyes wide. "You can call his mother. Maybe she'd be willing to talk." She smiled innocently. "Or go to

the principal and tell him you lost the note. But I'm sure that's what the note said."

"I guess we could try it." Peaches looked worried. "I hope, though, you will come to me if you need, you know, support."

"That's very kind," said Miss Pointy. "I'm grateful for the offer."

Peaches brightened. "And Sahara?"

"Yes?"

"How is she . . . doing?"

"Gee, I don't know," said Miss Pointy. "Sahara! How are you doing?"

"Fine," I said in a small voice.

"Good," said Miss Pointy. "She's just fine, thanks for asking. And how is . . . your mother?"

"Fine," said Peaches. "Fine."

"Oh, that's excellent. Everybody seems to be fine."

"All right," said Peaches. "Then I'll be going."

"Fine," said Miss Pointy. "Thank you! Bye now!" She walked Peaches to the door.

Miss Pointy sat down at her desk, which she hardly ever does, and smiled behind her fingers.

She and Darrell were staring at each other. "She's a nice lady," said Miss Pointy.

"Yes, she is," said Darrell sternly. "And yet you behaved very badly."

"Uuggghh," she grunted, holding her stomach. "I think I have impulse control issues." They both burst out laughing. I don't think I had ever heard Darrell laugh before. Oh, it was nice, rattling and light like a tambourine at church!

I dropped "Autobiographia Literaria" on Darrell's chair as we were heading out to recess.

"Sahara, may I see you?" Miss Pointy caught me at the classroom door. "Please stay behind. I need to speak with you for just a minute."

Speak to me about what?

She left me alone in the room while she walked the rest of the class to the exit.

I saw the pile of journals on her desk. I had been doing the journal assignments every day since I had been sick. That couldn't be it. Luz's journal was on top, stickers sparkling. I swallowed hard. I couldn't even think about if she knew how bad I was.

Did she see me drop the poem on Darrell's desk? I didn't mean anything big by it. Sometimes people just need a poem sometimes, didn't she say so? Was she going to talk to me about boys, in which case I would truly have to die? Maybe she knew I was snooping in Darrell's journal. Just once in a while, and just Darrell's, it's easy to find in the pile because it's all beat up and anyway you can hardly read it, the spelling is so bad. I don't even know why I would read it, it's just he is kind of surprising, it's not like he'll just come out and talk to you like a regular old boy. She said she liked snooping herself, didn't she? But I can't tell her I know that, because I was kind of snooping *then*, too, by pretending I was asleep and listening.

But what if it wasn't about Darrell at all?

Oh well, here it comes, I thought. "Wouldn't life be easier if . . . ?" She'll talk to me like I'm *special*. Maybe I'll have to sit out in the hall again. Maybe she read my file. Maybe . . .

Miss Pointy swept back in. "Sorry," she said.

"Miss Pointy, sometimes I look in Darrell's journal!" I exploded.

She froze for a second, and gave me a funny look. Then she unfroze. "Well, don't get caught," she said. She went right for the pile of journals, but Luz's journal was flung to the side, and so was Darrell's. She dug sloppily until she pulled out my own journal, with my name written in my tight little handwriting on the cover.

"This." She held it in the air and shook it like a lawyer on TV. "This."

I stood in front of Miss Pointy, but she didn't say anything more for a moment, just stood there shaking my journal. "Y . . . yes?" I squeaked.

"You'll excuse me, but I need to ask some things about *this*." Miss Pointy glared suspiciously down her pointy nose. "You're not involved in any *time-travel* debacle, are you? Like, you didn't go a few years into the future, write this, and *come back*?" She leaned forward and squinted at me in an accusing way.

"N . . . no, ma'am," I said. "I don't think so."

She took out a pair of glasses from her desk. X-ray specs, with spirals covering the lenses. "Hold still," she demanded. "Nothing personal.

Just doing my job." I nodded as though I understood. She stared into my face, hard, I think as hard as anyone has ever looked at me besides my own mother. I couldn't see her eyes, but her eyebrows were going up and down like she was trying to crack a safe or defuse a bomb. "Extraordinary!" she whispered. "It's all there!"

"What is?" I asked.

"Words," she said. "Your *talent*." Then she pulled something out of her tight sleeve. A gold star, with a rainbow streaming behind it, just like the one I had taken from Luz. "Well, that's all I needed to know," she said. "Run along."

I burst onto the playground. Rachel and Cordelia were waiting for me. "What did Miss Pointy do to you?" asked Cordelia, but I ignored her and rushed past, across the playground. To Paris.

"What?" asked Paris. I took her hand and slipped the sticker inside, secret-like. She looked at her palm, and then at me. She didn't smile, and she narrowed her eyes. But she closed her hand around it, nodded and ran off. To Luz.

I felt myself breathe again.

I could hear feet clumsily drumming toward me as Cordelia and Rachel raced to catch up. "You in trouble?" huffed Rachel.

"No," I said. "Not anymore."

But I was wrong. When we came back in the classroom, I thought Darrell would sit on the poem I left for him and that would be that, but he saw it even though I folded it so small. He opened it, and opened it, and opened it, he didn't even sit down. Then he read it, and then his face turned a purplish color and he looked mad. He looked so mad I got scared and slunk down low in my chair.

He yelled a swear word that I know I shouldn't write, and the whole class looked at him. Then he roared, "Who put this on my chair!" as deep and loud as an angry giant. I thought about climbing into my desk, but I figured I wouldn't fit. "I ain't no orphan!" He nearly screamed. "Somebody's calling me an orphan!"

"Nobody's calling you an orphan." Miss Pointy was looking so exactly the other way of me that I

knew she was thinking about me. How does she know everything? I hoped Darrell wouldn't notice. His chest heaved up and down and he looked at all of us with red, wet eyes.

I could have cried from feeling scared, and I could have cried for being so terrible, for nearly making the meanest, most special boy in school explode.

But all I could think of was how it would be at least a week before I had the chance to snoop in his journal again. And how Miss Pointy was right. Poetry is not for punks.

II

Why Teachers Get Apples

It had rained, and the fallen leaves made the sidewalk look like the floor of the kindergarten, spattered with red and yellow and green paint. Miss Pointy was telling us another story. It was about a teacher. We listened as we pressed leaves into our leaf identification books. Miss Pointy wore a crown of red maple leaves that she had stapled to some construction paper. It looked pretty against her green hair.

"She was very old."

"How old?"

"Old enough for gray hair. Old enough for a small hump in her back. Old enough for a squint in her eye." Miss Pointy squinted. "She walked to school. She got up early in the morning, so early in

the morning that the dew was still on the grass."

Raphael burst out laughing. "Did she step in the dew?"

Miss Pointy's eyes slid, warning him. "As a matter of fact, she did, since the dew was droplets of water, Raphael. As she walked, the toes of her shoes grew wet from the dew and made little wet half-moons at the tips of her shoes.

"She lived out in the country, and every day she took the same route, down the brown path through the woods, across the clearing, past the play yard and to the school."

"Why didn't she drive her car?"

"It was before cars."

"My grandma's old, and she drives a car. A Buick LeSabre."

A few kids called out the makes of cars their grandmas drove. "I can wait," said Miss Pointy. And she did. "Anyway, if you ever lived in the country, you'd know why she didn't drive her car. She wanted to see the part of the day when the sun and the moon are both in the sky at the same time, on opposite ends."

"I seen that," nodded Angelina knowingly.
"Uh-huh. That pretty."

"I like it, too. It reminds me of two children at opposite ends of the playground, two girls who haven't met, who are too shy to come together." I looked at Rachel and smiled. She smiled back. I felt Paris looking at me and turned around. "In the country, the air smells like snapped green beans, and the crickets are playing their legs. *Be-deep! Be-deep!*" sang Miss Pointy.

"And every time you take a step, a mess of them jump out of nowhere, uh-huh!" Angelina was getting excited. "That how it was at my grand-ma's house this summer. Miss Pointy telling it true."

Miss Pointy looked at Angelina while she spoke. "And isn't there something about being alone when you walk in the country, early in the morning, listening to the leaves as they whisper and twist like a hundred thousand tongues of silver-green, straining to tell a secret only to you?" We all looked up from our projects, expecting her to turn into a tree from the way her voice went soft, like a breeze. "A tree has its own language. If you knew

how to listen, a tree could tell you a story for every ring in its trunk. A story about the storm whose lightning struck it in the spot where children used to climb, or about the bad-tempered squirrel who decorated its drey with diamonds that fell out of a burglar's sack, or about how the tree mourns for the old owl who was so swift and quiet, he could catch shooting stars in his claws."

"Maybe the tree was just trying to say 'Good morning,'" said Luz.

"Maybe," agreed Miss Pointy.

"Or nothing at all," said Rachel.

"Or nothing at all," repeated Miss Pointy. "Or maybe just humming. Or going over tree times tables." We groaned.

"Maybe tattling," said Janine. "Do trees tattle?"

"I expect so. Most everyone tattles at least once."

"Sakiah more than once!" Dominique called out. Everyone laughed.

"Miss Pointy! Dominique is making fun of me!" Sakiah whined.

"This is stupid. Trees don't talk or tattle or

none of that baby imagination stuff. Trees is just trees," Darrell reminded us.

"That's the spirit, Darrell. And teachers are just teachers. So this one teacher walked to school every day, past the trees, magical like Angelina's trees. . . ."

"Uh-huh!" nodded Angelina.

"Or not magical, like Darrell's trees, we really don't know," Miss Pointy confessed. "But the teacher sometimes thought they might be magic, because sometimes their knots looked like eyes and mouths and their branches looked like noses and arms, but that also could have been more baby imagination." Darrell looked smug. "She walked past these trees, into the clearing where she saw the big black crows sewing their bodies through the sky. Then, as she walked along further, she saw the farmer's horse cantering along the edge of the clearing."

I scratched *cantering* lightly onto the cover of my notebook.

"Finally she saw the schoolyard full of children."

"Sounds like a nice walk," said Janine.

Miss Pointy wrote the word *idyllic* on the board. "It was so nice and gentle and full of country charm, it was *idyllic*. But after twenty-five years of this walk, she started to get a little jealous of the things she *encountered*, or came across." I wrote these words down, too.

"What you mean, 'jealous?'"

"She would see the birds and think, 'Why can't I fly?' She would see the horse and think, 'Why can't I run?' She would see the children and think, 'Why can't I play?'"

"That's goofy," Larry remarked.

"To make matters worse, there was a boy in her class—"

"Was his name Raphael?" asked Raphael.

"Was it Dominique?" asked Dominique.

"Was it Ernie?" asked, guess who, Ernie.

"Oh, no, I can't remember his name," said Miss Pointy, with her mint-in-the-mouth smile. "I just remember he was a bad boy."

"Was his name Darrell?" asked Veronica. We laughed.

"Shut up! If he bad, that mean his teacher bad," snarled Darrell.

"You're right, Darrell!" Miss Pointy pounced. "You're exactly right! This boy was bad, but he was the same bad as his teacher, for different reasons. At home, he was beaten. He was poor. When he walked to school, the trees didn't talk to him. When he came to school, the children didn't talk to him. After some time, he started feeling jealous, too. 'Why can't I read? Why can't I write? Why can't I have friends?'" We became quiet.

"He couldn't act angry at his father, or he would beat him," Paris suggested.

"He couldn't act angry at his classmates, or they'd beat him," Kiarre added confidently, like she'd be first in line.

"So, who was left? Every day, he'd be angry at his teacher. It was old times. She could have beaten him. Those were the days!" Miss Pointy sighed. "But in twenty-five years, she hadn't beaten a child. She didn't want to beat him."

"She had to love him," said Rashonda. "Teachers are paid to love children."

"Teachers aren't paid much, so they don't love us much," said Larry. Miss Pointy stared at Larry, surprised. "Most don't love us much," he corrected himself.

"That's silly, Larry. Teachers aren't paid to love children. You can't legally pay someone to love you," Miss Pointy explained. "Loving children is what teachers do for extra credit. It's not the main assignment."

"Seems to me that the extra credit is more important than the main assignment," observed Cordelia.

"You're right, smart Cordelia," said Miss Pointy, taking out the Happy Box. Cordelia looked surprised, and took a long time to choose a star. "Extra credit is done of your own free will. Work and love given out of free will is always more joyous, better-quality stuff."

Raphael gagged. "Quit talking about love! Get back to the boy who got beat."

"Okay. So there's this boy and this teacher, neither of them working for extra credit. The boy being as mad and mean as he can to the

teacher. Puts a tack in her seat, chalk in her eraser.”

“Old-fashion mess,” grumbled Darrell.

“And the worst part is, he talks back. Talks back like crazy. He won’t do a thing the teacher says. He stands up on his desk and beats his chest and shouts.”

“Like King Kong!” breathed Ernie.

Darrell stood on his chair and demonstrated.

“Thank you, Darrell. Like that. Well. The teacher doesn’t know what to do. Every morning she walks to school, she thinks so hard about this bad boy, she doesn’t see the moon or the sun or hear the trees talking. Her mind is so full of the hard day ahead.”

“Girlfriend needs the trouble basket,” observed Kiarre.

“Uh-huh.” Janine and Kiarre slapped hands.

“She sees the birds and the horse and the children, and her heart starts to crack. Things that made her happy as a younger person were the very things that made her sad as the days wore on.

“Every day, the boy wouldn’t do his work.

Every day she felt the lashes of the boy’s words, like a whip against all her years of service.”

“She should beat his ass!” Rashonda exploded.

“School language,” reminded Miss Pointy. “Rashonda, do you think that would really work?”

“Nah. But she’d feel better.”

“Yeah! Make her beat his ass in the story!” urged Raphael, also forgetting school language.

“Yeah, he beating *her*, you said so! ‘Words like a whip!’”

“Make her whip him back!”

“Let’s vote! Who says, ‘Whip his ass?’”

“We are not voting,” said Miss Pointy, her arms crossed like she does when she’s waiting. “Stories are not a democracy. Thank God.” Finally, we quieted down.

“I’m disappointed in you,” she said finally. “She didn’t beat him. I told you. She hadn’t beaten anyone in twenty-five years, and she wasn’t going to give this boy the satisfaction of breaking her record.”

“You go, girl!” whispered Kiarre.

“One day, she gave the children an

assignment. 'What I wish.' They had to write in their journals."

"They had journals back then?"

"She was ahead of her time. After she gave the assignment, she realized she gave it because she wished someone would give it to her." *Like when I ask Rachel a question*, I thought. "The teacher took out a blank piece of paper. The teacher wrote simply, 'I wish I were a bird. I wish I were a horse. I wish I were a child.'"

"Three wishes. She greedy," said Leon.

"She should of wished that boy out of her school," grunted Tanaeja.

"Well, at that very same time, the boy wrote his wish down. He wrote, simply, 'I wish she was not a teacher at this school.'"

"Why he write that? He could have written anything. He could have wished for a million dollars."

"He wrote that because he knew his teacher would read it. He knew it would hurt her. He wanted to hurt somebody, because it felt like somebody was always hurting him.

"That afternoon, at the end of the day, the teacher collected the papers, took her bag of books and left the school, walking back past the schoolyard, the clearing, and into the woods.

"The next day, when the boy came to school, his teacher wasn't there. There was a substitute. He felt a little scared."

"What for?" asked Cordelia. "It was just a wish."

"Then he felt so sorry and wished her back and they lived happily ever after, and all the trees sang and danced, tra-la," said Darrell.

"If you think you've got a better ending than I have . . ." Miss Pointy said, sighing.

"Be quiet, Darrell," warned Dominique.

"The replacement was mean. He beat the children, he beat the boy, too, first time he opened his mouth. This new teacher would have none of that. The children didn't defend the boy, they were tired of the way he acted in class and were glad he was being controlled. The new teacher saw the boy couldn't do much, and he didn't call on him. It was nice at first, but then the boy started to feel invisible

and empty. He worried that it was his wish that made this happen. But he had nobody to ask about it, no one to assure him that his fears were silly.

"One morning he was walking along the path, and he heard something that he had never heard before. It seemed to him that the trees were talking, in a language he had heard all his life yet never had come to understand. He stood still, between the school and home. Frightened, he ran off the path, and when he stopped running, he saw an apple tree. This cheered him up, and he forgot his fear. He pulled some fruit from the tree, and ate on the way to school, the hungry knot in his stomach unwinding slowly.

"When he arrived at school he was so satisfied that he skewered his last apple on the fence post.

"Out the window, he could see the apple being visited through the day by a little bird. He watched as the bird flew in wide circles, around and around the school, alighting now and then on the apple to eat and sing. The boy felt another knot unwind within him.

"Time passed. Every day, he picked apples

from the tree and stuck one on the post for the bird. One day, he decided to see if there were any other trees in the woods. That's when he found his old teacher's bag, sprawled on the ground, and under his teacher's damp books was the last assignment he had done for her. Reminded of his terrible wish, he wondered if wishing it had made it so. But he only wondered for a moment, because he was older."

"Had more sense," said Larry.

"Did he? Well, he took the books and dried them out. Every day after school, he studied them on his own."

"Why'd he do *that*?" Raphael laughed.

"It beat going home," said Darrell. I looked at him, maybe everybody did. Miss Pointy, too.

"Now a horse started visiting the post where the boy put his apple. He'd gnaw it off in a bite or two, and then gallop around the clearing. Can you imagine how nice it was for the boy, watching that beautiful, free creature?"

"More time passed. Do you know what happens when time passes?"

"People get old," said Sakiah.

"People die," said Rachel.

"Both those things happened. The boy got older. His father died, and the mean teacher retired and moved away. So the superintendent came in, the boss of the schools. He drilled the class with review problems. The boy who had been so bad shone like a star. The superintendent asked if he would like to teach at the little school when he graduated that spring. He said yes.

"When the leaves began to fall," Miss Pointy said, picking up some dried leaves from her desk and letting them somersault on to the floor, "the doors of the schoolhouse were open, and behind the desk sat a young man with the start of a beard and a mind full of knowledge. No one could have guessed that he was once a hungry little boy who stood on his chair and thumped his chest and was beaten with a strap by his father, no one could have guessed that he had wished his teacher away, or that for all that evilness and sadness, he still remembered to stab an apple on the post every day for his bird and his horse.

"He stood at the door and rang the bell, and the children who were playing in the yard came running to the door and filed inside. In came a little girl with brown hair pulled tight, and freckles and sunburn and a smile so wide you would think her pigtailed were stretching her face."

"The third wish!" gasped Angelina.

Miss Pointy smiled. "The little girl had in her hand a big red apple. She handed it to the man.

"What's this for?" he asked the girl.

"This is for all the days when I was a bird, and all the days I was a horse. You gave me an apple every day, and now I will give an apple to you." Miss Pointy took the apple off of her own desk and put it on Darrell's desk. Darrell just watched her face, and pretended not to notice the apple.

"Every day the little girl gave her teacher an apple, paying back the small favors of his boyhood. The other children saw this and thought she was trying to be the favorite, and they started giving the teacher apples, too. But in his heart, the little girl who had once been his teacher was indeed his favorite. And as the days wore on, there was no

little girl happier to be a little girl and no grown-up happier to be a grown-up than the two at that school, and their satisfaction was such that there was never a need for another wish. The end."

"What kind of story is that?" asked Darrell.

"I made it up," said Miss Pointy. "From a dream I had. You like it?"

"It's not a real story if you just made it up, is it?" wondered Leon.

Yes, it is, I thought. It will be real as soon as I write it down. It will be a real story about a girl who wished it were real.

"I like it," said Sakiah.

"You would," said Darrell.

"It's a fairy tale," said Angelina.

"Ain't no fairies, or royalty," said Veronica.

"It's a *pourquoi* tale," said Paris. We had learned that *pourquoi* means "why" in French, and *pourquoi* tales explain why things happen. "It tells why teachers get apples."

"Maybe you're both right," said Miss Pointy.

"Maybe they're both wrong," said Sakiah.

"Sounds to me like a fable."

"A fable's got to have a moral at the end," Ernie reminded her. Sakiah wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue.

"So if this is a fable, what's the moral? The lesson?" asked Miss Pointy.

We were quiet, thinking, and watching other kids think.

"What goes around comes around," blurted Larry.

"Tit for tat," snorted Raphael. Dominique snorted, too.

Miss Pointy ignored them. "Hmmm, I don't know, Larry. Try to put the moral into your own words, not a cliché, something people have said before."

We thought some more. "Wishes come true," said Luz.

"Good try," said Miss Pointy, "but I don't know if that's a lesson that is always so. What else can we come up with?"

"Wishes are powerful," said Dominique.

"Good," said Miss Pointy.

"Things change. They don't always stay the

same," said Cordelia. "Like, you don't have to stay a kid."

"That's a good one, too. Anyone else?"

"School is a powerful place where things change and wishes come true," Paris said slowly. "It's a place where you can grow up, if you let yourself." It sounded like a kiss-up answer. It also sounded right.

Miss Pointy took out her Happy Box. We all looked on jealously as Paris chose a sticker. "Anyone else?" We all looked at each other. Paris's answer seemed good enough; it got the Happy Box, didn't it? "What's the lesson?" Miss Pointy insisted. We were all quiet. My wrist twitched, and I started to raise my hand.

The bell rang.

"Oh-oh," said Miss Pointy. "Put away your leaf books and let's go."

"You spent all that time telling us a story," accused Cordelia.

"Do you want me to apologize?" asked Miss Pointy. "Fine. I'm sorry we didn't have time for our journals today. Write in them tonight, if you like.

What you would wish for." We stood up and gathered our things. I imagined what everyone would write:

I want a castle of stickers with a special sticker room, no, a hundred rooms all filled with stickers and a real unicorn that I could ride . . .

I wish I was invisible so I could walk home without anybody bothering me . . .

I wish I didn't have to watch the baby after school, I never get to go out . . .

I wish for a robot that looks just like me who would take my tests . . .

I wish I was a superstar in the WNBA . . .

My file, I thought.

I wish for the letters in my file.

Miss Pointy yelled over the scraping and clonking sound of us turning chairs upside down, putting them on our desks, and the noise seemed to wake me up from my daydream. That's a silly wish, I thought. Of all the wishes! Wish for a million dollars. Wish to look in Miss Pointy's closet and get to choose any dress I want. Wish Daddy would come home. Wish for something silly like that. . . .

Quick, I wrote a P with a line through it over what I had scribbled.

Miss Pointy stood at the door and said good-bye to each of us. Rachel stayed behind and started making her watery stripes across the board with the sponge.

Miss Pointy grabbed me by my jacket hood. I hung behind. "I saw your hand. So what do you think that story was about?"

"Paris said it."

"Really?" Miss Pointy leaned against the

threshold and crossed her arms. "Stories mean different things to different people."

Should I tell her? I looked at the floor. She waited. I waited, too, but I *wanted* to tell her. "People thought that boy was one way, but . . . inside each person, I think there's a secret person," I said.

"Huh," she said. "That's interesting. Do you have a secret person inside of you?"

"No . . ."

"Yes she does," announced Rachel, from across the room, not looking up from her chore.

"Yes," I corrected myself. I could not look at Miss Pointy. "But only you know my secret. You and Rachel." Rachel kept on wiping the board, but she had that same mint-in-the-mouth expression that Miss Pointy wears.

And there was Miss Pointy, wearing it too. "I don't know if that's true," she said. "Secret people are hard to keep inside. Especially if they are wonderful. You, for instance, are leaking." I looked up, feeling shy. She was smiling, but her eyes were serious.

When I left the room, the hall was empty, but Paris and Luz were leaning against some lockers. They looked up when they saw me. They cast long shadows in the afternoon light that came through the exit. *They're going to beat me up, I thought. They're skinny, but there's two of them. If they're wearing rings, I'm done for.* I walked and could hear my footsteps clicking.

"Hi," I said as bravely as I could.

"Hi," said Paris. She looked nervously at Luz, who looked nervously back at her and stuck her thumbs in the straps of her backpack. *Well, this is a very polite way to start a fight, I thought. Oh, my God. I'm going to get beat up by the nicest girls in school.*

"We were wondering," Paris said. "We're thinking of starting a club."

Oh?

"For people who like books," she went on.

"And esteekers," added Luz. "Do you like esteekers?"

I looked at Paris, who pursed her lips. "I guess," I said.

"And I know you like books. So we were wondering if you'd like to be in it," said Paris.

"Who else is in it?"

"Just us," said Luz.

"For now," said Paris, then added quickly, "but anyone who wants to join can, though, right Luz? We don't like to leave people out." Luz seemed to both nod her head yes and shake her head no at the same time, in total agreement. It was contagious. I shook like a bobble-head.

"When's the first meeting?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Paris. "Let's talk about it while we walk home. We go your way. Can you be at the library this Saturday?"

"Sure," I said. "You know what? My mom works at a restaurant, and after the meeting we can go there and eat all the pancakes we want for free."

"Wow!" they said.

Yeah, wow! I thought, as we walked out the door together.

Ⓟ

My wish by Darrell Sikes

Ok ok I am a orfin! I wish for
a friend.

a. You are not an orphan, you live
with your mother and

b. You already have a friend.

a. your not supos to Look wen I write
p at the top and

b. dont gimme that teecher mess

a. Sometimes I snoop and

b. I'm not your friend, I'm your
ally.

a. My moms not my friend shes my mom
and

b. I dont have anthin to write for Let-
ter b

a. You've got a friend in this

classroom right now and you
don't even know it. Why don't
you keep your eyes peeled?

b. I also don't have anything to
write for letter b.

c. Wait, I just thought of a b. See
me, I need to help you with your
punctuation.

How is it Im posed to keep my eyes
peeled

No id never be able to peel my eyes
and Look for a friend oh no no no cant be
helped so wood you mine peeling my eyes
for me sins you are kine enough to show
consern in that ragard

HAHA