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Pull Out All the Stops

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CHAPTER ONE

ABSENT FRIENDS

Dear Class Three

How are you? Aint life grand? Last week we playd Nuorleens. More cokrowches out back than faces out front but foke seemed to lyk us. Leestways they did not thro things like in Toosson. Dearest Everett says not to wurry when they thro things cos some times they thro the most yoosfull obqeckts – suspenders and froot and reel munny even. Says one time a lady throde a cat at him and it was in kitten and the Company kept it and soled the kittens and raysed a good prys.

Torking of wich some one of your akwayntens is also in a interestin condishun. What do you no?

Little Annie May (she plays the pritty

herroins if you recall?) is leeving us to marry a bank tella next munth. We wish her well naturly. Still it leeves a hole in the Company. A pritty ingenoo is hard to find. Dearest Everett says wors things happan at sea. O Lor if you coud just see him playin Cyrano rite now! He is ~~magin manqif magnee~~ sub lime.

Sorry to heer how Sara Waters is sick. Give her a kis from me and say hunny and wisky is best for a bad throte.

Will rite from St Paul. Hope Miss May March is still makin moovs to improov on wot God made you.

Your everlovin

Loucien Shades Crew

Cissy folded the letter and gave it back to Miss March whose thin white face, like a tea towel resting on a puddle of wine, had grown pink round the edges.

'Thank you, Cecelia. You may return to your seat.'

Miss May March did not approve of the letters Class Three

received from their previous teacher. To give her her due, she never actually binned them, but she did not dwell on their contents either. Talk of cockroaches and 'pretty ingénues' and 'interesting conditions' were not on her curriculum.

One year earlier, 'Miss Loucien' had taught the children the sum total of everything she knew. But she had married a travelling actor and left Olive Academy for a life in theatre. Miss May March was well aware of the mark her predecessor had left on Class Three, but to her way of thinking it was the kind of mark that should have been quickly washed away, like the soap ring round a bathtub. There was something shocking about the woman, with her chaotic handwriting and her creative spelling and her gypsy existence. Her mis-spelt letters always put the children into a restless, contrary mood. This very minute Miss March knew perfectly well they were comparing her with Miss Loucien . . . and marking her a very poor second. Knowing this sometimes made her spiteful.

'Take out your slates and write the following proper nouns: *New Orleans* . . . *Tucson* . . . *St Paul* . . . Fuller Monterey, pray tell me: what does a proper noun have?'

She knew he would not know. (The Monterey boys had less than one brain between the two of them.) Miss Loucien would not have known either. Perhaps this was a chance to impress on Class Three that Miss March alone had the power to make of them literate, civilized citizens. Fuller Monterey drew in his tortoise-shaped head and refused to answer. He looked even more sullen than usual.

'Habbakuk Warboys, then. What does a proper noun have?'

Kookie, however, was quite equal to the challenge. 'Panache!' he said.

'Hexclamation marks!' said Tibbie Boden, sticking up her hand.

'Clean linen!' said Barney MacKinley.

'First use of the washroom!' said Fred Stamp.

Cissy Sissney took no part in this. Her soul was still held between the folds of Miss Loucien's letter. She was imagining the footlights, the gilt mouldings of the opera boxes, suspenders and kittens flying through the air, the noise of applause . . .

Cissy lived for the days when a letter arrived from her old schoolteacher. Miss Loucien's letters were an Event, an Occasion almost. Cissy was always given the honour of reading them out because her reading was best. And afterwards she liked to sit and savour what she had read—to imagine she was there, on the road with the Bright Lights Theatre Company, seeing all those charlatans and celebrities, seeing all the big cities and out-of-the-way settlements, singing for her supper.

It was so long since the Bright Lights had left town that she could barely remember the pretty Annie May. How would the Company manage without someone to play the helpless, screaming heroines? Cissy wondered if, at twelve, she was old enough to audition for the job of ingénue. Perhaps she and Kookie could run away to Nuorleens (wherever that was) and join the Bright Lights Theatre Company and star in *The Perils of Pauline* and see Miss Loucien and Everett Crew again. Oh!

Beyond the window, a great tidal wave of Boredom rolled in from the eastern horizon, broke over the school roofs and Main Street and the silo and the umbrella factory before rolling on to the western horizon. Cissy knew the colour of Boredom; it was the colour of prairie. It was the colour of north-west Oklahoma. It was the colour of term-time afternoons. Sometimes she thought

the sky had been nailed down on Olive Town like a crate lid and that she was suffocating on Boredom.

Then her eye fell on the empty space left by Sarah Waters along the school bench, and suddenly Cissy's eyes felt hot and swollen. No amount of honey and whisky would ease Sarah's throat now—but then how was Miss Loucien to know that? Since the last exchange of letters, Sarah's sore throat had proved to be diphtheria and she had moved up to the cemetery, to be planted there like a melon seed that was never going to grow. Surely, if Miss Loucien had stayed, Sarah would not have died.

Though the school bench was crowded, no one had yet slid sideways to fill the empty space. Fear of infection or just pure superstition had saved a place for Sarah Waters. Everyone was hoping there had been a mistake and that she would walk back into school one day, good as new.

'Kookie,' Cissy whispered to the bristle-haired boy beside her. 'What's it mean: "interesting condition"?'

Kookie gave a superior kind of snort. 'Interesting condition? That's slang, that is. Means someone's 'specting a baby. Ma's been "interesting" so often now she says she just ain't interested in bein' "interesting" no more.'

'Expecting? No, but . . . '

'The ingenoo must be 'specting—now she's marrying the bank teller.'

'No, that can't be right,' Cissy insisted. 'She doesn't even get married till next month. So she can't hardly be expecting a baby now.'

Kookie gave this some thought. 'Maybe the letter got held up in the post,' he said.

'Cecelia Sissney! Habbakuk Warboys! Go right this minute and sit in Fool's Corner and write twelve times on your slates: I must not talk in class. Next time we receive a letter, Cecelia, perhaps someone else had better read it out,' said Miss May March, still pink around the edges.

They were planning to move the grain silo. The speculator who had built it (back when the town itself was being built) had gone broke before the first harvest was in. The Town Committee wanted to keep the silo, but somewhere else, so that the station buildings could be enlarged. They wanted it moved up Main Street and down West Road to the new railway sidings. There the grain could be funnelled directly into trucks while they awaited a locomotive. The Town Committee were also of the opinion that there were enough willing hands in Olive to get the job done free.

Suggestions were invited from anyone with a pencil and a bright idea, and various citizens of Olive submitted diagrams full of arrows, ropes, and pulleys. Virgil Hobbs was of the opinion it could not be done at all, whereas Charlie Quex, the barber, knew a man who had won $50 one time by moving a barn, intact, from one side of a river to the other.

'How did he do it?' Sheriff Monterey had asked.

'Beats me,' said Charlie. 'I only shaved the guy. He didn't have time to go into detail.'

As Cissy ran home from school that day, she ran through the long black shadow cast by the big metal tower. It chilled her as though she had run through a brook.

'Gonna lower it on to its side and move it on rollers,' her father

was telling his wife, as Cissy burst into the grocery store and ran through to the back living rooms. 'Poppy! Poppy!'

'Hope Chad Powers knows what he's doing,' grumbled Mrs Sissney. 'Be a first if he does.'

'Poppy! Poppy! A letter came from Miss Loucien today! They're in Nuorleens, wherever that is, but Annie May is marrying a bank teller and leaving a hole, and someone's expecting, but we can't guess who!'

'*Well!*' said her mother, stuffing the one word cram-full of outrage and disgust. Hildy Sissney loaded her words like other people loaded cannon.

'That's nice, chicken,' said Hulbert.

A sixth sense warned Cissy that all was not well. When her mother began banging the pots about and her father hugged her tighter and longer than usual, she knew something bad was in the air. She wanted some comfort for the humiliation of Fool's Corner and her dreadful loss of letter-reading privileges, but dared not mention either in front of her mother.

'Was a delivery on the morning train,' said Hulbert. 'Help me check it on to the shelves?'

'Sure, Pops,' said Cissy warily.

'Best get in the practice,' said Hildy Sissney under her breath, and Hulbert turned and glared at his wife.

A terrible foreboding flooded Cissy. She went through to the shop to check the new stock of tins and packets and cartons, but though her father coughed several times, and rubbed his bad leg and seemed about to break some news, his courage failed him. Cissy had to wait till suppertime for the axe to fall. Then, she found it had more than one blade.

'We thank the Lord for feeding us, body and soul,' said her mother in a huffy tone that suggested the Almighty had been shirking lately.

Cissy opened her eyes and picked up her fork, but there was more to come.

'We pray for the soul of poor Sarah Waters and for Gaff Boden's ranch hand and for Sheriff Monterey if it comes to it. Lead him not into drinking, leastways. Amen.'

'Sheriff Monterey? Why? How come we're prayin' for him?' said Cissy.

'His boy Peat. Looks like diphtheria, same as Sarah,' said Hulbert. He had forgotten to open his eyes after grace—or perhaps he found things easier to say that way. 'So your mother and I have decided to take you outa school, chicken . . . '

'Hotbedda germs,' said Hildy.

' . . . just till the sickness has passed through,' said Hulbert.

Hildy jabbed her fork accusingly at her husband. 'Now don't you go doubling back on me, Hulbert Sissney. We agreed. Twelve's plenty soon enough for her to start pulling her weight. She's got reading. She's got her numbers. What more does she need to work in a grocery store?'

The newspaper with which the walls of the living room were papered suddenly seemed to be shouting their headlines into Cissy's face: **DENVER'S FIRST WOMAN DOCTOR . . . OKIE CENTENARIAN NEVER LEFT HOME TOWN . . . MEDFORD SCHOLAR ENTERS HARVARD . . . DIPHTHERIA KILLS THIRTY . . .**

Through the window, the problematic silo cast its shadow across the street and in at the grocery door, like the index finger of Doom.

So. She was to leave school and work in the Olive Town grocery store, selling beans to cowboys and gingham to their wives. She was to spend her life reading the *Olive Morning Star* for news she already knew, about people she saw every day. The Medford State Fair would be the highlight of her year, each passing year. The rolling prairies would crush her days, the prairie moon pull faces at her each night.

Cissy loved Olive Town: she had lived there since the first train dumped its first handful of settlers on an empty wilderness: Claim 3048–9. She loved all the odd, desperate, varied people who had come there in search of a new life. But keep shop there? For ever? Abandon geography and history and day-dreaming and playing 'stones' with Kookie in the lunchbreak and reading the books Miss May March lent her and writing essays entitled *My life: a Plan . . .*?

'Don't sit there moping. Go fetch in a dozen carrots, Cecelia, thanking you,' said her mother sharply, and Cissy gladly bolted out of the back door. She disturbed several rabbits that had been feeding on the vegetable patch, and she watched their pale shapes speed away across the prairie, passing far out of sight: lucky rabbits. In between the failed squash and the aphid-covered lettuces, Cissy gave herself up to crying—for Sarah Waters and Peat Monterey and Gaff Boden's farmhand—and for the end of her childhood.

Her father came out to help her tug up the puny, blunt-nosed carrots.

'I don't want to leave school, Poppy!' she told him.

'I know, chicken. I know. But your ma wore me down. She gets fearful tired serving in the shop all day, you know . . . and if

diphtheria's got loose in the schoolroom, school'll be shut down soon anyhow . . . Oh. And Gaff Boden has asked us to take in his girl Tibbie, till the sickness is past. Your mother said no. Had to reach an accommodation with her, didn't I? *You take Cissy outa school*, she said, *and I'll take in Tibbie Boden*.'

'Tibbie Boden is coming *here*? To *live*?' Another blow.

'Sure is.' Her father smiled broadly. He thought he had saved the good news till last.

Not Tibbie! Golden-haired, blue-eyed Tibbie off the Boden ranch! The girl Kookie had vowed to marry. The one girl who made Cissy invisible in Kookie's eyes.

'You like Tibbie?' Hulbert said cajolingly. 'And she needs somewhere safe from the germs up at her place. You *do* like Tibbie, don't you, chicken?'

'Sure,' said Cissy, thinking: I like her right where she is . . . way out of town, on her daddy's ranch. Cissy's sole advantage had been in living a few doors away from the telegraph office where Kookie lived. Now even that advantage was gone, and she would lose Kookie. He and Tibs would marry and move away to Yale and study astronomy or taxidermy or something with a future in it.

A wave of self-pity washed over Cissy. 'If I catch diphtheria and die, Poppy, I don't want you to telegraph to Miss Loucien in St Paul. She would be too upset. She was hoping I would join her in the acting business one day, you see.'

'Ah!' said Hulbert. 'I see!' And his heart ached for his little girl whose life had suddenly shrunk in the wash from a costume gown into a shop-girl's apron.