



Night Skool

ABBY FRUCHT

WEEKDAY MORNINGS, Marla drives her son to daycare before starting work on her feet all day at her waitressing job, where on coming through the door beneath the saggy striped awning, she finds Penelope at the specials board awaiting her arrival, fan of chalk sticks in hand. “Chickens Flexed with Balsamic and don’t smudge, please,” Penelope says, way too polite no matter the message, her bid to finally be awarded the local Women’s Business League Awesome Boss trophy. Marla chooses purple chalk, since that’s the color of the aura of the flavor of balsamic, and squats before the board to write, in the swan’s neck lettering for which she was hired, *Chicken Flecked with Balsamic*. She slides the chalk back into Penelope’s hand to await her boss’s mild scolding, her boss’s harmless, daily frown and incorrect corrections.

“Not Flecked. Flexed. Thank you, Marla. *Chickens Flexed.*” Penelope makes a show of exaggerated patience, succeeding in her efforts not to roll her eyes at what she thinks are her employee’s mental impairments. She swipes at the board with a waffle weave towel that once it’s rinsed and hung to dry will be the same shrunken size as the much wept-at pictures Marla painted last month in adult ed class. Cloth Art for New Moms. Her first showed an owl perched inside an egg cup, the same egg cup she used in all of her paintings. She hadn’t intended to make people cry, and then, when she finished a new picture she found downright hilarious (same owl upside down in same egg cup, its nubby feet in patchwork air) two of her schoolmates ran sobbing from class.

When delivering the specials to the tables today, Marla devotes a few

seconds to tipping each plate slantwise, causing chicken parts to flex amid threads of dark vinegar, so that no lies will have been told by the name of the special and none of the diners feels shortchanged. Every day her job is like this, the ferrying of perplexing menu items among tables of flummoxed customers, mostly college profs sucking up to visiting scholars who look to Marla, of all people, for reassurance.

“How is it a sandwich when there isn’t any bread?” a poet with stricken eyebrows asks, while his tablemate, the elaborately dreaded Fulbright, queries, “Is this the Softball-Stage Bisque or the Fire-Roasted Charred?”

“Stages are nothing but concepts,” says Marla. “Also guess which hyphen,” she gestures at the chalkboard, “doesn’t belong.”

“Only with adverbs,” the Fulbright says.

“Huh,” says Marla, put in mind of the best waitressing tip she ever got, an Old Rose safety matchbox with no coins, and not even one match, inside. She liked the vintage rose so much she still has it years later, which is more than she can say of the quarters and dimes she’s dropped through the holes in her apron pocket.

“No third to fifth position please when you’re chatting with the customers,” Penelope instructs. “It’s nice that you’re friendly, but no spirochete-ing around with bowls. Thank you, Marla.”

Marla bows, not by way of obedience but to exercise decorum in hopes of someday landing a salaried job and reaching the next *faze* of life, as Penelope might call it were she to have Marla write it on the specials board. Water sprays in all directions as Marla wrestles with the nozzle to fill up the pitchers, reminding her the battery still needs replacing in the smoke alarm. If only she smoked, she’d be permitted two five-minute breaks a day. There’s no break for drinking tea. The teas aren’t real, she reminds Ben, the cashier as he circles the tearoom peering into the cedar barrels for inventory. Marla keeps the labels—Jasmine, Rose hip, Harry’s purple crayon tea—looking just stylish enough for Penelope, who once, with a lip pencil, changed Cinnamon to Simenon.

“They’re supposed to be teas, but ever since we reopened, they’re really just leftovers she scrapes off people’s salad plates and minces and dehydrates and adds flavors and things. Every night she conjures new flavors, please,” Marla says to the slender, well-dressed Ben as he stoops so near the open barrel of Source Arendelle tea as to practically inhale it. Ben doesn’t smoke, either, so he

takes his daily breaks by squatting for extra long at the barrels, in which he once found a doll's acrylic eye and didn't so much as lose his balance.

"I know that," says Ben, reaching what seems an impossible distance to pluck a fleck of fake tea off Marla's brow, although of course he can't know it, because it isn't true. Penelope doesn't really stay hidden in the kitchen past closing hour to make Red Zinger tea out of finely minced radish peelings, does she?

No matter how tired her feet at the end of her shift, Marla almost never takes the car across town to pick up her son from daycare. Instead she pulls the stroller out of the hatchback and untangles the mobile of dogs and balls that hangs from the canopy. She'll leave the car in the lot to come back for it after. Her dumpy old Pinto might serve as a lesson in squashed triangles. Is geometry even a subject anymore? How's she supposed to know? In addition to painting, she bombed domestic science, animal behavior, and letter to newspaper editor writing, although who would have guessed you could fail adult ed? Maybe Needs TLC would be a nicer way of putting it. Marla un-tilts her sunglasses, the better to survey today's damage to the Pinto. Tarry sneaker prints climb the windshield from when one of the skate dudes messed up an ollie. They give the car a phantasmagorical aspect, as if it's prowling the roads in a spirit world. She only wishes the sneakers weren't so hulky, preferring shoes like Ben's Allbirds. And how do the footprints go up, but not down? Not to mention, where's the skate dude? Did he kickflip away? Or is he up in the air in some hole in his mind, like that man who stole an aircraft off a runway in Seattle in hopes of finding a moment of tranquility up there, except the sights flew by too fast?

The best way to reach daycare is to sneak as best she can through the lingerie shop, whose owner ought to pay Marla for stepping out the front door in such fine postpartum form, then wheel the empty stroller along College Avenue. What a dumb name for a street, thinks Marla, like you might come to understand stuff just by walking back and forth on it too many times. You would think they'd come up with something much smarter, being a college, filled with cutting edge philosophers like the long-skirted person who lives in the house with the wraparound porch on College and Pleasant. She often closes her laptop as Marla walks past, a prayerful silence in the air as if it's pop quiz time on the lawn that day except with just one laid-back, easy question, such as "How

'bout I pour you a nice Chianti, lady-pushing-empty-stroller?"

"Why not?" Marla nearly pauses mid-step to answer, except the prof never asks, only gestures with her glass on which her fingerprints show, waving Marla on instead of beckoning her nearer than she's allowed. Careful not to glance at where the roof of Early Childhood slides into view, Marla watches a goose steer free of its flock. Her boy adores these daily walks, especially if they detour two blocks north to pick up things for supper at IGA. His "first complete sentences," as all the profs like to boast about their kids' verbal skills, would be spoken in the not-so-spotless grocery aisles as she wheeled him past shelves of hard beans and millets, bags of frozen summer squashes, foods no toddler on earth should crave.

"Buy *thattt*," he'd say, the hard *t* emphasized.

"We don't have enough money," Marla would confide.

"Then go to the bank and get *ittt*," he'd say, scattering pretzels to the floor from a bag he pulled straight off the shelf and tore open. She'd never guessed he'd be so sweet in his disobedience. The worse he behaves, the more delectable her shame. Plus, it isn't disobedience. He simply doesn't know the rules, like sometimes she doesn't either, like of the pretzels on the floor of the grocery aisle. Should Marla pick them up or leave them sparkling there? Do other mothers know such things, or do they simply join their babies on the mat to practice Tummy Time and let the kid's first bowl of solid food cook itself? Soon he'd learn how to smooch up his mouth for love. If only he napped every once in a while, for a minute or two in the middle of a Sunday, enough for her to brush her hair.

Some of the trees show buds on their branches, and soon that math-y looking, Alberty-Einsteiny type gets behind his whining hedge trimmer. When an Outback slows to the side of the road, Marla knows exactly what the driver means to tell her. Kids on bikes swivel backwards to tell her this. People lope toward her barefoot through clots of mown grass. Albert Einstein waved her down once, and so did a cop.

"Ma'am, your stroller's empty," some seem to accuse, as if her baby tumbled off it hours ago and she just hadn't noticed. Marla used to play along with this absurd delusion, throwing out both arms in mock dismay and racing backwards in a frenzy yelling out her son's name, but ever since the cop leapt out of the

cruiser, she doesn't anymore. She's done with indulging the mistakes people make of her, the panicked kindness they muster when she puts them in mind of the Twin Peaks Log Lady.

"Just in case you don't know this, ma'am, but there's no baby in your stroller," the Outback driver rolls down his window to say.

"I'm on my way to pick him up," Marla answers curtly, adding, once the Outback has driven away, "*Idiottt.*"

But then she feels again as always that thunk in her chest as she takes in the sight of the dent in the stroller cushion from how upright her son has a habit of perching amid the whirl of dogs and balls, and soon it seems as if the knocking of the wheels along the sidewalk means to spell out her rights to the preemptive swells of grief shared by all other moms, moms lamenting in advance all the sad parts of life—breaking up, for instance, dying—that will surely be faced by the kids delivered into it. In other galaxies, thinks Marla, the moms won't have evolved the same as here. They won't be all wrapped up in babies, like earthlings are. So if a kid falls off his stroller and hits his bare, tender head on the sidewalk, someday, his other-planet-non-earthling mom might remark, on rushing backwards to find him lying silent on the ground, "Darn. Who woulda thunk it?" before carrying on with her stroll across town as if nothing more had happened than she'd left a favorite glove on a spaceship somewhere. While here on earth even cows and maybe spiders love their babies and would grieve them if they died, an interplanetary mom might mourn her lost boy like he was barely more important than a misplaced shoe. She might say to herself, that nebular mom, "What a shoe that was! Too bad I can't find another just like it," and throw away the matching shoe, and then, next lunar cycle, as she wheels the recycling out to the curb, she won't steal a last look at the shoe in the bin or even speak its name aloud, since like children who perished on wagon trails, shoes are given no names, so there'll be no name to speak, no name to mourn. And soon enough she'll forget it and be on her way, though she'll ask herself every once in a while, "Now what was so special about that shoe? Was it the sole I so loved?"

Overhead, the lone goose slides in with the flock. In which direction are they flying? And is the evening late in starting, or is the day just veering to an early close? The beginnings and ends of things confound her, but Ben likes to tell her that's how it should be, and surprisingly enough, so does Penelope.

“It’s like eating an apple,” Penelope once said. “Before you put it on the plate, there’s no fruit at all, and then after you eat it, it’s gone again.”

“Penelope’s right,” Ben had added. “It doesn’t matter how you spell stuff. Just tell people what’s going on with you.” For how secure on his own two feet is Ben, who never squanders moments of tranquility, who has no screws loose, who sharpens chalk sticks with the veggie peeler, who when he plucked the doll’s eye from the drifts of red tea blew dust from the orb with such fond concentration he might have been a wine maker out for a morning appraising his grapes. He then affixed the doll’s eye to the ring on Marla’s keys, tilting the ring in Marla’s direction to make the rods and cones wink. The eye had looked like it could see her, could gaze inside her at stuff she’s unable to see, herself.

“Here’s to looking out for you, kid,” Ben had said. He went off to change the battery in the smoke alarm, where even standing on his toes on top of the ladder, he would be well grounded.

Surprised not to see her toddler race up to greet her as she steps into day-care, Marla wheels the stroller aimlessly, hoping to draw the boy out of his hiding place. He’s not at Blocks, nor at Sinks with the ladles, cup measures, skimmers and strainers. She parks the stroller near Plants and starts for the landing leading out to the play yard, where some empty swings list in a sideways breeze. She often pauses to wonder what to think, such as, “What am I thinking?” or, “What was I going to think about next?” but today, like on others, the dumb staff member, Kati, cuts her off.

“But all the photos remember we sent them to you in March,” Kati says, in her worried, solicitous, finger-flapping manner. Kati’s mom works for the dean at the college, so Kati’s first complete sentence was probably this: “But all the photos remember we sent them to you in March.”

Next she’ll tell me it’s time for the boots to go home, thinks Marla, since that’s often the next string of nonsense syllables to come out of Kati’s mouth, as if the boots might march home across town by themselves, cops braking to warn them, “Hey, boots, you’re empty, there’s no kid in you.”

And now here comes Mrs. Gupta in her director’s skirt and pumps, running a nervous, elegant hand along the page of instructions attached to her clipboard. She carries the instructions wherever she goes, even into the bathroom. There’s always some Kleenex clipped to the top, since like on other afternoons

the director is weepy, a phalanx of children spread out behind her in preparation for consoling. Kati flaps them into a wide singing circle, their arms outstretched between them out as far as they'll go with the fingers not touching. Mrs. Gupta wants Marla, no one but Marla, to sink with her to the carpet, wailing and sobbing. Or maybe she does this to all of the moms, but Marla's the only one who gives in. Whatever's eating the director has been happening for months. You can see it in the wear of the finish on the clipboard from when it cartwheels to the ground, and you can hear it in her cries, the dug-in sobs from some catastrophe that must have went by so fast it'll go on forever. What's wrong with that sentence? How's Marla to know? She likes the wrong sentence better the more she repeats it, enjoys even the noise of her own keening as she joins the director supine on the carpet thrashing at eddies of tears and sorrow, the two of them raking their hands on the nap, which isn't as durable as it appears. In less than four minutes, they're upright again, Marla mopping at her tears with a wad of sopped Kleenex while Mrs. Gupta tugs and stretches as she does every time, rearranging her Silk Reflections Wicking Cool Comfort Tinted \$9.50-pantyhose, of which she keeps a spare package clipped to the clipboard.

"Thank you poor Marla for your concern," she says, the pencil skirt smoothed, the children's weightless singing voices—"it's okaaaay to be saaad"—flattening a little where trapped by the ceiling.

"You children are such good comforters," Mrs. Gupta concludes.

On the stroller near Plants sit the Rosie the Purple Steam Engine boots Marla hasn't seen in months, amid the nearly forgotten drooled milk smell of the sherpa blankie Kati must have tucked around them. A spill of Sweet Pea flowers have been planted in the boots, which Marla pauses a moment before reaching to touch, then startles when a blossom breaks free in her hand. She decides to leave the stroller just where it is, so when she walks back through town, no moron brakes to tell her the stroller is empty or even reminds her to fetch her car. The geese are gone from the sky but if Marla listens hard enough she hears the tips of their wings faintly tapping each other so as not to be wrested far apart.

At home she stands for a moment jiggling keys, wondering if it's really necessary for her to step inside.

“I know it hurts sometimes,” she remembers Ben saying, “to reach that next phase or faze or whatever you call it,” and soon she opens the door to the room filled with photos: photos on chairs, photos on tables, photos lined up along windowsills. Sebastian with another child at Blocks, Sebastian gumming a cookie, Sebastian wearing funny glasses reading *Please, Puppy, Please*. Still the house remains quiet, stars salting the glass, her steps making no sound, Sebastian asleep or becoming contemplative in his young age.

She won't call out his name. She won't fall to the floor. She won't let herself disturb him. Some evenings she wonders what to think, but this evening she doesn't. The doll's eye on the keychain blinks into hers, like some geezer emeritus in the tearoom tomorrow waving his spoon, certain his soup is really a salad.

“I like to know what things are,” he'll say.