

SPEEDWAY RADAR PIGS
James Vest, Scottsdale Community College
Second Place, Short Story

He looked across the classroom.
“Anyone?”

The sugar white piece of chalk was raised like a revolver, attracted to a kid in the back row.

“You. You wanna fuck with me, kid?”

“No.”

The student’s hand reached under his worn wooden desk, down to his safe house, a cold looking green backpack. It was an old army issue, with curling thick lines in permanent marker of exotic shapes that had dimmed over time. On the flap there was a military patch of an old key that still held up strongly, black and olive.

His hand felt around in a grab bag of useless shit. Things would fallout and disappear without him knowing. He felt a knife and pulled his arm back up to his waist, and examined the carving of the last supper on the worn bone.

“I’m so hungry,” he said with his eyes, fearing the man in the front of the class. The teacher said that if they didn’t need teaching he would have been home right now. The boy kissed the carved bone like a sort of uncle, quick and quietly, never took his eyes off the teacher, because that’s what psychiatrists do. The knife was brought back into the bag and put to rest next to his fork. His hand then continued to scavenge the bag, but what he needed could not be felt.

His arm rose out of the bag and flew high in the air climaxing erect in the air. He held it there as the teacher looked and paced and waited to permit him to speak like some strange torture.

“What the hell do you want?”

“I would like to go to my locker and get my notebook.”

“Get going. Two minutes-if you get caught by the hall monitors it’s your ass!”

And indeed it was. He wasn’t going to get caught.

2

Wandering the halls is what he did best. The walls and doors were dimly lit, and the shadows created their own dark paths to the unknown, that slowly was swallowing the entire school. There were people outside, some taking tests of skill, or just a test of endurance. There were some out on make-up work, but most of the time it was for being uncooperative. Life starts only after school. Those whose hearts couldn’t wait must forfeit school, which means they forfeit life, and stand in hallways. Some stood, some sat. The girls were dressed in scandal, turning tricks for those who walked by. The rest slept or begged for change for the vending machines hidden on the basement floor.

A girl with a halter top, a ripple of cloth where her chest should be, crept up upon the boy. Her thin black pants shimmered in many directions, like the material was made of thin black ants all bowing for their queen. She awoke the sadness that only a girl's face could arouse. She had a vulnerability the boy wanted soon to devour, a maze romance and memory under a sickly blue haze of skin like a protest in winter. She raked her cold fingers across his narrow face. She opened her mouth and bore a smile without teeth. Her smile began to sag on her face, like it's weight was just too great to suspend. Her smile would then refresh, thrust like rockets into heaven, setting her face in tune with the high culture. But she was not high society, and the boy knew it. He didn't have to do anything, and so her smile would be pushed back into desperation, like a bridge of fire reducing to a small flame of dirty laughter. She crawled back towards darkness, a victim again of being herself, the classless being the first to forget the classes, nothing there to contain the faults seething out of her dull skin.

Her quarters were a small doorway to an abandoned classroom; behind a locked door a light was shining, straggled by this thickness of its opaque glass. She lay down among numerous paperwork lying dead in the halls. All the messages were erased, like the names of the children. Homework, passes, "Don't Do Drugs" and other pamphlets lined her bed like a hamster's den. She adjusted her position frequently, uncomfortably urging him to come sit beside her.

"Sorry. I only have two minutes."

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She wanted him to stay with her for a while. To help her to help him to help her. A bond, something indecisive and fearful, he couldn't trust her because people like her would do anything to move up, even be convinced by false love. He felt his heart demanding something, and did not want to hurt her by leaving. But it was his ass. He 's not going to get caught. She would take his place he thought. She would steal his clothes and return in his place. He would be left naked in love.

"I'll come back for you," he said to no reply.

This did not hurt him; he knew the girl could not respond. To people like him, her word couldn't be heard.

3

He was near his locker. His sense of direction was obscured while walking the halls. All the lockers are identical. The halls were identical. Everything looked dark and symmetric. This killed incentives. There was nothing to explore. Just the task of locating what you already know.

He reached his locker and toggled the locks to open up, opening the door like he was throwing bones to reveal what waited for him. It was a dark colored door, burnt, with no paint on the interior, just jagged edges that called out to cut hands like sailors call out to the bars once on shore. He could tell how far back the locker went. A few books created cavities that were haunted by ghosts of the people who wrote them. Papers floated on junk oceans, all sending distress signals in one or another.

A picture of Ella Fitzgerald was pinched between the door's steel enforcement. None of this particularly interested the kid. He lifted out a peaceful looking revolver and skinny torch made of old newspapers. He lit the torch and shoved the loaded gun into his full pockets. History burned slow as he walked back to class.

His flame entranced the people in the halls, all of them reaching, like they understood. Others reached like thieves, looking for shiny things. Some danced for a prize begged for with showmanship. The student walked faster. He knew how a victim walked. When you are the victim, your first instinct is to run, through drugged waiting rooms where patients rarely speak to one another and sit quietly reading their personal visual magazines. Victims are always happy to tell you what they are and never speak of who they are. The flame was a part of himself. He had to protect it.

When the light passed the girl, her face was again reborn. Her eyes were captured in the dim glow like he shined for her and she shined back for him, a victim's folly, thinking that you can warm yourself with someone else's strength.

Her arms reached out to him but he pushed her away and kept walking. He was familiar with his vulnerabilities, though he could not remember who she was clearly enough not to push her hard. The clock in the classroom counted only days, but he knew if two minutes was a short time, then he had been gone a long time.

She reached out again and touched his chest. It was six months later. They both stopped, startled by visions of their times together, overwhelmed with emotion, then watching it roll back as expressions, their faces had changed slightly to one another. And they argued with their eyes, neither completely clear on what just had happened.

"Like I said, if you love me, you would stop worrying about the future." She finally stood up and spoke. He was confused that he was listening. She looked at him, like a fortuneteller that tells you the truth, but not what you came to hear.

"If you truly cared, you would stay here and let me love you."

She knew his weakness. Soon he would be undone with her fingers and his body grimaced at her words, like soldiers confused, throwing their arms over their face to protect themselves from the impact of a closely fired shell. His defense was useless. He reached out with his arms wide, grabbing her and pulling her close like the floor beneath them was sinking into water. He bent her back, so that she could only see his face and he said,

"What the hell! I tried so hard to make this work, and you won't let me succeed." His face was red but it seemed as if he only wished to crawl beside her and remain warm.

"You are responsible for my failures."

The halls were losing heat, which they normally did, only to change to sweat on the schools many radiators. The girl shivered with him, as she stumbled through her thoughts to see if this was true. She was on trial and had no evidence. Her face turned to the light, to remove the bane of emotion. Then staring at him before she faded away, if to say goodbye as darkness grew in the light's demise. He talked to her like a child to a child.

"If you truly loved me, you would understand."

"If you truly could love, you would understand."

"Okay," he said from behind his teeth, "We're breaking up."

He drew back, slipping into the darkness, the torch's flame roaring back, blinding her. She stood there dazed, holding her head with her small hands, cradling her wounds. She then looked up. Her eyes circled the hallway. She had forgotten what had happened.

4

"You little shit!"

He shut the door behind him.

"You stupid whore! I told you two minutes!" The instructor held the pass in his outstretched hand, showing it to the boy like it was a cross meant to frighten him back.

"And you forgot the pass!"

The instructor raised his arm into the air, but he wasn't going to ask a question. He was going to instruct. The pass, a dirty white wood block was the size of half a brick or more, flying through the air before striking the boy on the temple. He closed his eyes and raised his hands instinctually. The trauma stopped abruptly as the instructor turned to go back to his stool. The boy felt the revolver pushing his pocket as if knowing what was happening and wanting out. The boy stood there for a moment trying to remember where he was. Why he wasn't back in his seat. He had forgotten what had happened outside. He returned to his seat that instant, not wanting to know what happens to those who remain standing.

He stuck the torch into his bag, trying to pretend that he did not have it. Sounds of crackling could be heard through the thick silence. He could hear the instructor returning to his jumbled speeches, yet he was still trying to remain conscious, trying to remember where he had been when he was away from his desk. To him, the experience of being at the desk was the only clear memory that he used to keep time. The action of sitting for long periods had etched in him the constant sensation of waiting for something. This feeling would be so strong that boy could easily forget what had just happened while trying to erase what was happening. He was seated. Both hands on his desk, with his head curled down trying to remember. Why was he here? He needs to remember. Why did I go outside? Why did I go to my locker? His heart started to pump blood in a more choked fashion. Something called to him inside. Something was going to happen - his hands started to tingle, jumping as anticipation hinted at a change of tone. What am I doing here? His mind raced. Am I ever going to leave a mark in life? Am I ever going to leave? Can I get a chance to live? But how?

"Now!"

All at once, the boys jumped to their feet. Their weapons were revealed from all angles. Some used their pointer finger wrapped in a fist. The air was filled with all sorts of bullets and knives and fire and paper footballs and head butts...the instructor never had a chance.

5

The classroom was emptying. There were twin boys that were running around the room laughing at one another, not remembering what had happened. Their faces changed to match with everyone they stood next to. Two other boys were removing the last screws out of the chalkboard, leaning over the victim so that only his patent leather shoes were showing, in a scene from the Wizard of Oz. They had already forgot the names of their classmates. They were too busy thinking of names for themselves. The rest of the class was standing in a row near the door, the normal position for the class when school would end. But this time, it was finally over.

As the kids left, an older looking, blond headed boy was repeating the same message over and over to the exiting students, as if he was trying to memorize it for himself.

"Remember. It was an accident. The chalkboard fell on him. It was an accident. Remember..."

When the boy went to get his bag, all that remained were ashes. He removed his silverware that had not been burned. He left his gun in his desk for the next student, like he had found it so many lives before. The students like salmon were shuffling out the door at full force, down the hall, out on the streets, ready for the real world.

6

The boy was the last one to leave. The kid that had instructed the class was now walking down the hall, still repeating the same phrase. Yet now, he had amended his sentence to include one more line.

"May this never be allowed to happen again. Remember..."

Many students returned home to have babies and raise them right. In the hall, his friend, who had sat in the second row, walked beside the boy.

"Great job! Brilliant!" the friend exclaimed as he loosened the grip of the horizontal striped tie from around his neck.

"I wish I could have found someone else to go to their locker- you should have seen his face - he really got what was coming to him."

"Yes. He did." The boy replied, still not recovered from his blows to the head.

"I was there."

"Those were the days, man, those were the days. Look. I'll meet up with you later," the other boy said running up the stairs at full speed towards the light of day.

"We'll keep in touch. No matter what."

The boy looked back at the room. The lights had been turned off and the classroom started to look like the hallway full of the classrooms that students long ago had fought and broken free from. The boy walked over to where the girl was now asleep, seeing her warm, filled with emotion. He did not know why, but he took the silverware from his pocket and laid it next to her twisted body. The last supper still looking at him from the floor.

"You're going to need this to make it." The boy turned and walked down the hall, not knowing which direction he was he headed, walking towards the light, out the door, into the real world....

