



The Girl With The White Pen

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Mike hated doing homework. It made no sense to him, spending all that time in a closed room trying to figure out the unfigurable. At the moment a plane was trying to get to point A, while the wind was blowing from point B. After an hour the plane was supposed to arrive at a mysterious point C, where an observer was looking up from point D. Buried in all of this was a question about an angle of elevation and a distance.

Mike gave up on the plane in the wind and turned to a story he had to analyze. It was about a bunch of people riding in a train. They entered a tunnel and never got out of it. But no one noticed.

“What’s the matter with them?” he thought.

He turned on some music, kicked back in bed and daydreamed. He was on a tropical island, sitting on the edge of a cliff looking out over the ocean. The next thing he knew his mother was shaking him.

“Get up, you sleepy head. It’s time for school.”

It was a two mile walk to school, during which Mike took his own sweet time, breathing in the scent of the pepper trees and the hanging magnolias. When he got to class the teacher was handing out exams.

“We’re having a test?” he asked.

Mike was unprepared, which was nothing new. He’d left everything at home—his lunch, his notebook, his books, something to write with.

“Got a pencil,” he whispered to the girl beside him. She was pretty and sat very straight in her chair. Mike had never seen her before.

“I have this,” she said, handing him a white pen.

“Matches her dress,” he thought.

He thumbed through the exam. It was a fill-in-the-blank test, lots of questions about the Stamp Act and Cornwallis and the Articles of Confederation, things which Mike knew nothing about.

“Who needs to know this stuff?” he thought, filling in the blanks with the first thing that came to his mind.

But something odd was happening. As he wrote, words appeared that were sometimes different from those he was writing. For instance, when he wrote that Cornwallis was a disease, the pen wrote that Cornwallis was a British general.

“What?” he thought.

When he finished the test, he offered the pen back to the girl.

“That’s all right,” she said. “You can return it later.”

“She’s got a nice smile,” thought Mike.

That night he cracked open his history book. He looked up the answers to the questions the pen had answered. They were correct.

“Am I going crazy?” he thought.

He had a lot of homework to do, the same, old boring stuff, this time a play about Romeo and Juliet written in a strange, poetic language, two-thirds of which he didn’t understand.

“I’ll just knock it off in the usual way,” he thought.

He grabbed the pen and began to write. But what came out wasn't at all what he was thinking. It was something about love and jealousy, about anger and intrigue, about plans that went awry and overwhelming sadness. Soon he was writing and writing, long into the night, wondering what he'd discover next, until he felt a tugging at his leg.

"To school, you sleepy head," said his mother. "Hurry. You'll be late."

This time he hustled. For once in his life he was on time. He handed his paper to the teacher, grabbed a seat and looked for the pretty girl in the white dress. She wasn't there.

"Your exams," said the teacher, passing them out.

Mike looked at his. He'd failed.

He flipped through the test. Over half of the answers were missing.

"I am going crazy," he thought.

After class he met with the teacher.

"I don't understand," he said. "Someone erased my answers. See there? It should say 'Cornwallis was a British general.'"

“Mr. Evans?” she said. “I’ve heard a lot of excuses in my life, but never this one. I can give you an A for originality, if you’d like.”

“But they were there. Honestly.”

His teacher rubbed an eraser over the answers that remained.

“You see? Ink. It doesn’t erase.”

That night came another paper. Mike sat up in bed, his back propped against the wall, and let the white pen fill the page. It was the tale of the last Tsar of Russia, of his people and of his children, of Tatiana and Olga, of Alexei and Maria, and of the mystery of Anastasia. Mike became caught up in the story and soon found himself wanting to unlock the secret about Anastasia.

Morning came again and with it another tug on his leg.

“What’s going on with you?” his mother said. “You fall asleep with your clothes on? You don’t set the clock? Get cracking or you’ll be late.”

He was right on time, sitting in his chair, wondering why his teacher was giving him a strange look as she walked around the class, handing back papers.

“What’s wrong this time?” he asked, as she gave him his.

“You must be kidding me, Mr. Evans.”

Mike looked through the pages. All ten of them were blank. In a panic he checked his paper on the family of the Tsar, which was due at the end of class. It was also blank.

“What’s happening?” he thought.

For the rest of the hour he wrote madly, trying to recall everything he’d learned about the Tsar. The ink flowed from the white pen like water from a rain-swollen river. At the end, he had written twenty pages, pages which he asked his teacher to inspect every ten minutes, just to be sure that at the last second the ink wouldn’t evaporate into thin air.

After class he wandered madly through the halls.

“Who’re you looking for?” asked one of his friends.

“That girl. The one in the white dress.”

“What girl?”

“The new one.”

“I didn’t see any new girl.”

Mike felt for the pen. It was still in his shirt pocket.

“She gave me something,” he said.

He found an empty classroom, sat down and took out a piece of paper.

“Who is she?” he wrote. He followed with a few more words, hoping the pen would reveal the answer. But the pen went dry.

“Why won’t you tell me?” Still no answer.

“Shoot,” he thought.

As the days passed, the mystery of the girl and of her pen deepened. He learned that if he used another pen to recopy what he’d written with the white pen, the ink would immediately disappear. But if he expressed in his own words what the pen had written, the ink would remain on the page.

“I’m happy to see you’ve solved the problem of the disappearing ink,” said his teacher, commenting on his marked improvement in the class.

“I just have to press down more firmly,” he said.

She smiled. “I see.”

Days turned to weeks, weeks to months. Winter gave way to spring and to gorgeous days where the temptation to lay everything aside was enormous.

It was on one of those gorgeous days that Mike had to take his final examination. The air was warm and the sweet smell of strawberry sage wafted through the open window.

The teacher handed out the exams, a monstrous thing that looked as if it had been written by Dostoevsky. Sighs and gasps went up throughout the classroom. This was not going to be a pleasant experience.

But Mike had prepared. He'd used the pen to study and had even read all of the books, which was a first for him. His head was bulging with thoughts and ideas, all his own, just waiting for a chance to get out.

“Bring it on,” he thought.

Then he heard a voice, a familiar voice, a girl's voice.

“May I possibly have my pen back?”

He turned to his left. Sitting at the desk beside him was the girl in the white dress.

“Sorry. I didn't see you,” he said. “Where have you been?”

“Mr. Evans!” said his teacher. “No talking.”

The girl pointed to the pen. “May I have it, please?”

Mike handed it over. He took another pen from his notebook, a green pen that he'd never used before.

"Now what?" he thought.

He was sure that his mind would run dry. Without the white pen he was a dunce. Nevertheless, he read the first question and began to write. The girl also began to write. And when he stopped, she also stopped. And so it went, the stopping and starting, in perfect synchronization, until Mike was overwhelmed with curiosity.

Out of the corner of his eye he read what she was writing. It was exactly what he was writing.

"Don't copy me," he whispered.

"I'm not," she whispered back.

"Mr. Evans!" shouted his teacher. "Keep your wandering eyes fixed on your paper."

Mike buried his head under his left arm and wrote like crazy. If he was going to go down, at least he would go down in flames. He wrote all that he knew about the mad King Lear and his three crazy daughters, about an old fisherman who fought with all his being to protect his catch from a hungry shark, about a man trying to build a fire in the freezing wilderness, about the Capulets and the Montagues and the wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Not once did he look up, not until he heard the teacher's final call, like a work whistle at the end of a long day.

"Time's up! Put your pens down."

He sat up and looked to his left. No one was there.

"Your paper, please, Mr. Evans," said the teacher.

Mike gave it to her, expecting the ink to evaporate as it left his hands. It didn't.

He walked home in a daze, blind to the pepper and magnolia trees, blind to the oleanders and the palms and the strawberry sage, wondering what was happening to his mind.

"Hello, Mike," he heard.

She was standing beside an oleander bush, beneath a tall palm—the girl in the white dress.

"You?"

"You did well."

"Who are . . ."

A gust of wind came up, hurling dust and leaves into his eyes. He covered them with his hand. When he took it away, she was gone.

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That summer was a lonely time for Mike. He wanted so much to tell others about what had happened, but he knew what they would think. So he buried himself in books, entering other worlds in which his own story would seem quite ordinary, worlds where people believed what couldn't be believed in the ordinary world.

One day, on the night before school would begin again, he decided to set down his story. Though he used the green pen, it flowed from his mind as if it were the white, as alive and as real as the sound of his mother's voice in the morning.

"Get up, you sleepy head," she said. "Time for school."