

*El Coda del Hombre*

## **Prologue - The McGovern Voter**

### **Herbert Hoover Elementary School Arcola, Missouri**

November-December, 1972

Arcola, Missouri - Fall, 1972. Population 639 - somewhat less today. Buses #1 and #2 roll to a stop aside a compact, squarish, deteriorating two-story edifice. Constructed by Great Depression-era labor under FDR's 'New Deal' program, the building originally served as the hamlet's combined junior-senior high schools. An unappealing structure, held together by weathered chestnut-colored brick and chipping mortar, the architectural anomaly stood out like a sore thumb in remote southwestern Missouri.+

+ The building, shuttered in 1993, now festers into decrepit ruins. Exposed to the elements by collapsed roofing and shattered panes; the lower-floor windows concealed under plywood sheets. Copper wiring long-since looted by early-2000s rural enterprisers, the structure's remnants encased behind twelve-foot-high razor wire fencing intended to dissuade methamphetamined congregation inside the collapsing, Asbestosized eye-sore.

By the early '70s, the building housed Hoover Elementary, educating Arcola's youngest scholars, grades K-5. The first Wednesday that November, a gray, wind-swept day, the school staged an exercise in democracy; a mock presidential election pitting incumbent Richard Nixon against challenger George McGovern, a United States Senator from South Dakota.

This otherwise foot-noted school event would haunt and confound 7-year-old 2nd grader Trystan Norris through distant decades ahead. In Dade County, Missouri, a Nixon landslide victory was assured. Despite Watergate's early rumblings, that extra-legal blight didn't yet concern the vast majority of America's voting adults, let alone the age six-to-eleven demographic of rural children, who, like their parents, were overwhelmingly Republican by default. And as the sitting president, the name 'Nixon' was at least familiar to most, if not all, Hoover Elementary students. Virtually none of them had even heard of McGovern. But Trystan Norris had.

The previous summer, the prodigious adoptee of farmer Greenely Norris and his wife Eudela, spent several hours of a largely sleepless night listening intently to transistorized AM radio coverage of a chaotic Democratic National Convention as intolerable warmth precluded un-air conditioned sleep. Any opened-window respite was out of the question; periodic breezes were unbreathably fouled by the putrid stench of hog manure.^

^The Norris patriarch banned modern household conveniences, which he deemed 'automated agents of evil,' thus the lack of air condition in the modest ranch home. [Greenely Norris *did* utilize mechanized farm equipment, however.] Consequently, when Catholic Salvage Charities recently allotted the growing family, having adopted a second child, a full-sized Motorola black and white television set, it remained unplugged and idle, except as a novel dais for two of Eudela's favorite ferns. Reception from down-state Joplin broadcast stations necessitated an unwieldy twelve-foot metallic antenna be affixed to the home's roof, working in concert with a 'rabbit ears' contraption, to be adjusted as needed atop the television during programming. Greenely Norris vetoed the rooftop apparatus, labeling it 'a lightning rod eye-sore.' The bored orphans occasionally staged imagined Martian invasions, putting the otherwise now- pointless rabbit ears to good use. Not all the Catholic Charities *largesse* went for naught, however. The children - eventually three - each poured through the complete volumes of *The Encyclopedia Britannica 1966*, from which the adopted trio acquired not only significantly heightened reading abilities but also a vast baseline of factual information as it existed in the mid-1960s. Accordingly, Deidre Norris, three years younger than her brother, began elementary school placed as a Second grader given her enhanced pre-school proficiency.

The late night radio coverage of the Democratic National Convention provided little comfort from the oppressive heat. Norris listened in confusion as George McGovern was lambasted mercilessly by one convention speaker then the next. The boy pictured McGovern as a Mexican *pinata*, being relentlessly pummeled by heavy wooden ball bats. Other delegates evoked a disgust for McGovern's chosen vice presidential running mate.\* Beyond that, eventual Democratic presidential candidate was painted as a dope smoking, poetry drafting, beatnik-deadbeat, who befriended lesbians, the Viet Cong, and the Weather Underground. And these attacks were by *members* of his own party.

\*McGovern had chosen Thomas Eagleton, a younger US Senator from Missouri, as his running mate. Eagleton was quickly forced off the ticket when his recurring depression and associated psychiatric treatment were revealed. Psychiatric care was stigmatized at the time, prompting a media feeding frenzy. As polling support for Eagleton plummeted among Democrats, he removed himself from the party's presidential ticket.

Understandably confounded, the young farm hand astutely deduced that George McGovern had but two chances to win the presidency: Slim & none. 'And Slim just left town,' as locals liked to say. Unlike almost every other student voter at Hoover Elementary, Norris had actually heard of George McGovern, and by inclination supported neither the Republican Party nor Richard Nixon, but felt leary of the reactions McGovern spurred during that tumultuous late-night radio coverage, not yet aware that such dysfunction often typified the Democratic Party.

The school's election process was rife with peculiarities. Kindergartners were denied the ballot, based on a belief that voting "might well upset [their] sensitive natures prior to nap cool-down time." Therefore, the *three* morning kindergarten attendees were unable to exercise the electoral franchise on Wednesday, November 8, 1972. The trio's reaction, if any, went unrecorded.

Strangely, the school scheduled its election for the day *after* the country had actually voted in droves to present Nixon with a second term. The dire intra-party outcomes forecast for a McGovern candidacy turned out as predicted. Nixon took 49 states, annihilating McGovern in the Electoral College by an astonishing total of 520-17. McGovern prevailed in only Washington D.C. and Massachusetts. Nixon even prevailed in McGovern's native state of South Dakota by a lopsided margin, adding further insult to injury for the hapless challenger.

In the immediate wake of Nixon's massive national landslide - which even the most apolitical and apathetic of students was aware - the school held its rather anti-climactic exercise in modeled democracy. Aside from the eligible voting rolls of the 48 students enrolled in grades 1-5; school administrators, faculty and support staff - including two cafeteria servers and both bus drivers - were also welcome to vote, adding a further 26 potential voters to the mix.+

+The adult voting sector served as a school version of the Electoral College. Should the students go rogue, voting, for instance, in support of a pansy poet, socialist Dakotan, the adults could temper such a result, righting the ship. No such safety net measures were needed at Hoover Elementary, as the results of this civic exercise would soon reveal.

A further electoral quirk involved the school's paper ballot specifics, reflecting the transparent preferences of its designer, Vice Principal Jeanette Orton . The mimeograph-inked document, roughly 5 x 7 inches, was "dittoed" onto flimsy mimeograph stock.\*

\*For those uninitiated to the ritual, the era of the ditto handout provided a highly anticipated and euphorically satisfying

olfactory hyper-pleasure for past student generations. The tell-tale purplish-blue ink having bled into the deepest crevices and pores of the pulverized parchment to which it was applied. The slightly damp, chemically-saturated document - freshly sprung from the manual, hand-crank ditto press - was imbued with a questionable concentration of industrial grade inks and bestowed with a sweetly intoxicating nasal treasure trove that induced unabashed document inhalation, paper pressed to nose, as successive students, row by row from front to back, received the fragrant elixir, unable or unwilling to resist its uber-addictive *aroma*. [A brain-cell killing aroma, no doubt. But one that delivered an aura of semi-wet, dreamy blue, sensually-laden inky indulgence for multitudes of Twentieth Century American elementary school students.]

In running hues of stain-dyed, low-resolution, purple-blue text, the ballot appeared as follows:

**NIXON, RICHARD M**  
**INCUMBENT PRESIDENT**  
**REPUBLICAN**

**McGovern, George**  
**Democrat**

\_\_\_\_\_ Mark 'X' here to vote for  
PRESIDENT NIXON

\_\_\_\_\_ Mark 'x' here to vote for  
this candidate

Students voted during a 15-minute window that Wednesday morning, and by the end of mid-day recess, ballots had been tabulated. Principal Rey Alexander took to the school's P.A. system to announce the results, first reprimanding male students that 'Smear the Queer'\* was not to be engaged in near the septic creek given its unsavory composition, but instead transacted strictly in the area in front of the old greenhouse. "Let's keep recess clean as well as fun," the principal intoned. "Mad mothers call me regarding muddied school apparel, believe you me."

\*A perennial playground survival rite of the era, pitting a roving horde of gang tacklers determined to inflict maximized malice upon a lone football carrier, lacking any blocking allies. In the early 1970s and well beyond, a public school principal in rural Missouri could freely utter "Smear the Queer" over a public address system with neither compunction nor irony.

The wiry principal then got down to business.

"Separating the mock election vote by groupings: Among the participating adults, the final tally is 23 to Nixon. Zero for McGovern. This election is truly for you students, however. To *socialize* you to our norms and privileges, unlike Red China or the Soviet Union, where no one may vote. Or are forced to vote for the assigned Communist party candidate in a sham election. We don't do such things here!"

Clearing his throat, "The student vote tally is 44 votes for Mr. Nixon." Pausing. "Two other ballots were 'spoiled' - they couldn't be counted because they included the voter's name. Voting is a strictly personal and anonymous matter. Never sign a ballot, people. Remember that." The principal clarified, "Both students had intended their vote for President Nixon, but signed ballots are voided. Voting is a private affair between you and your maker." The principal further announced that the school's two absentees would be statistically cited as 'non-voters.'

Second grader Wendell Clarke spontaneously broke into inconsolable wailing. Wendell was precisely the type, all acknowledged, who *would* sign his name to a ballot, thinking he should. And he had.

What the principal next said shook Arcola, Missouri, to its epicenter. Again, clearing his throat. "One student *actually* voted for George McGovern." Attempting a bemused tone, Rey Alexander

instead came across as dismayed and irritated. Shock waves traversed the archaic building.  
*Did he just say what I thought he said?*

"Of course, since we don't sign our ballots, we don't know *just who* cast *this type* of vote." It was painfully transparent that the principal desperately wanted known just which future Molotov cocktail wielding rabble-rousing degenerate had cast this single motherfucking vote for McGovern. Becoming aware, it seemed, of his ascending vitriol, Rey Alexander attempted a lighter tone, voice lowered and delivery slowed: "We *do know* that the single McGovern vote was cast into the 2nd grade ballot box. Voting tallies school-wide support that the vote was indeed cast by a 2nd grader." The prey narrowed, the principal switched the P.A. system off.

Circumstances then diverged diametrically throughout Herbert Hoover Elementary: A semi-placating facade simultaneously comforted yet angered all classrooms except Ms. Lear's. "Defiantly disagreeable orphan punk," the 5th grade teacher muttered, ascribing the rogue McGovern ballot to Trystan Norris. Her judgment reflected a vast consensus school-wide: 2nd grader; single vote; Norris' oddball, anti-social leanings. Case closed.

The furor sparked by Principal Alexander's announcement was thus momentarily blunted by a tranquilizing certitude of culpability. Rey Alexander himself waxed philosophically, feet atop wooden desk, fingers interlocked behind neck, to a consternated Vice Principal Jeanette Orton. "Ah, what are ya gonna do? That little rabble rouser! The scamp! He'd make Emma Goldman\* blush. Little malcontent." The principal evoked a relaxed air of magnanimity, tipping a cap toward the mischievous maladroitness in his midst.

\*Late-19th century Socialist lesbian labor movement agitator who refused to shave her legs.

Concurrently, Norris, awash in anguish, the full and sudden brunt of his inexplicable voting lapse hitting home, lamented his inability to recast his vote to join forces with what he termed "the boldly visionary, contrarian classmate who valiantly stood in support of both democracy and the forgotten American underclass. I salute you, Comrade. It is to my shame that I must bow to your honor." Suffice to say, the other second graders recoiled in stunned silence.

An adopted misfit from The Jayhawk Horizon Orphanage for Boys in far western Kansas, Norris intuitively championed every hopeless, outcast, underdog cause possible. The baffling conundrum of the fumbled *McGovern opportunity* would endlessly taunt him thereafter. Adults in the farming community who smeared McGovern as a "Socialist penis exposing, dope smoking, harpsichord playing faggot" *should have* far more greatly endeared McGovern to the young outlier. It was that perplexing radio convention coverage that occluded perceptions - McGovern disparaged, degraded and discarded by his very party colleagues. Norris never again allowed such factors to sway personal convictions.

Ms. Lear, for her part, bravely attempted a sanguine veneer for the sake of classroom cohesion, if not harmony, once the unexpected truth was revealed. She too had initially assumed that the dissident voter harbored within her classroom was undoubtedly Trystan Norris.

Norris' falsely assigned guilt became but a Potemkin Village whose derisive solace was exceedingly short-lived.+ Visibly wan and shaken, the 2nd grader posted the following "confession" - as he viewed it - in the hallway outside Ms. Lear's classroom door within fifteen

minutes of the principal's announcement:

"As much as I truly wish I could take credit for the valiant and visionary ballot cast for George McGovern, I am mortified in disgust to admit that I voted for Richard Nixon. It is to my unceasing discredit that I did so."

+**Potemkin Village** - Facade of structures constructed across Russia under czar Catherine the Great to create the illusion of flourishing towns where none existed.



Shuffling to return to his seat in utter defeat, Norris instantly convinced Ms. Lear that he was not the McGovern voter. An inveterate contrarian, he had no fathomable motive to lie, she reasoned. A dread-panic then dawned. An anonymous McGovern voter remained nestled among her charges. Ms. Lear scanned the class, experiencing a sensation akin to suspended animation. "I'll be a shepherd's shears! A second grade shadow revolutionary!"

While Trystan Norris and Wendell Clarke each languished in debilitating stages of voter's remorse, the remainder of not only Ms. Lear's classroom of 11 students,\* but of the entire school, excluding perhaps the three napping A.M. kindergartners, were now hellbent for exposure of and retribution upon the seditionist who *prevented President Nixon from a unanimous victory*. That sentiment echoed by faculty and students alike: Nixon had been deprived of a deserved "perfect score."

\*The 2nd grade class was large by community norms. Current enrollment figures for the remainder of Hoover Elementary: Kindergarten - 8 students between the morning and afternoon sections; 1st Grade- 7 students; 3rd Grade- 9 students; 4th Grade- 8 students; 5th Grade - 13 students.

Quickly fixated beyond a balanced clarity, Augustana Lear stewed: "Who in here, gazing back at me with a cleverly practiced dulled and vacant glaze, has the twisted nut sac - aside from Norris - to cast a McGovern ballot? Which princeling present dares break a butterfly upon a wheel?"

The ominous vexations of the lone 2nd grade female, Georgette Jovana - ensuring that the culprit was a boy - jolted Ms. Lear back to classroom management mode. Pledging grim repercussions, Ms. Jovana, a bright and mercurial bully who menaced all in class, including the novice teacher. Half a head taller than any classmate, Georgette had previously induced Wendell to vomit forcefully with only a fixed glare, and had quite recently terrorized Alan Sowards into chronic truancy following what was termed as "the pig petting episode." \*

\*Sowards, a slight, temperamentally meek albino prone to impromptu histrionics, had arrived to school emitting a horrendous fecal stench. With Ms. Lear momentarily out of the room, Georgette spearheaded a *Lord of the Flies* style group shaming. The rapid-fire accusatory barrage alleging that Alan Sowards "shit his pants for kicks then did it again" that very morning propelled the targeted patsy into a petrified spasm of humiliated panic. Malignantly browbeating the tow-headed scapegoat, Ms. Jovana repeated that Alan had "willfully shit his pants in premeditation, then shat them again." The frail dupe all the while frantically denied in a high-pitched wail through a veil of tears that he had self-defecated even once. Georgette savagely sustained her interrogation of the traumatized waif, but could neither elicit a confession nor a scintilla of contrition.

Returning to find a confusingly chaotic scene, Ms. Lear was hastily briefed on the particulars, and immediately subject herself to Alan Sowards' unabridged feculence. Attempting to defuse the situation, Gussie Lear escorted the hysterical lad to the nurse's station. There, stripped of mud-soiled jeans and formerly white briefs, now warmly urine soaked - a predicted side effect of Georgette Jovana's relentless browbeating. However, contrary to a shocked consensus, Alan Sowards had not otherwise soiled himself. Seemingly true to his word - he had desperately contended to the rabid pack of classroom naysayers that he had "petted pigs at his grandpa's farm before school." Regrettably, Alan had imported the swine manure's wretched pungency from his grandparent's acreage following an apparently vigorous spasm of pre-school hog adoration. Alan later accounted for one of the two absentees on the mock election day, shaken to a degree that he avoided school for the following calendar month.

Now Georgette waxed venomously, portending "a retribution most befitting" in a calmly hissed cadence. "The McGovernite will absorb my fisted knuckles," she paused before adding, "for a period of indeterminate length." Another terrifying silence effectively prefaced, "Begging and groveling for the chance to change their vote to Nixon. Only problem is that now," looking into the eyes of classmate Lenny Bledsoe, "it's both a day late and a dollar short. The chickens, as any farmer around these parts can attest, must eventually come home to roost." Whatever other flaws she harbored, Georgette possessed an undeniable oratorical prowess.

In hyper-sleuthing mode during the days that followed, Ms. Lear was tormented by scuttlebutt spreading across first the school and then the wider community, which irrationally assigned her responsibility for the reprobate McGovern voter. In a spiraling vortex of neurotically spiking anxieties, Augustana Lear fumed, fretted, and mused continuously in a vain attempt to clear up the mystery, which she reasoned would restore her good name. Within the balance of the class, minus the eliminated foursome of Wendell, Alan Sowards, Norris and Georgette, was concealed the vile culprit. Being retained for employment the subsequent school year largely depended upon her ability to quickly resolve this lingering crisis, the inexperienced teacher believed.

Unfortunately, Gussie, as Augustana Lear was commonly known to colleagues, was not being unduly paranoid. She was considered an accessory before the fact, both by her peers and, more distressingly, the school's administrators, who tend in times of troubled controversy for a vulnerable teacher to be fair-weather sorts who typically opt to reflect, rather than deflect, negative community opinion, warranted or not.+

+Rey Alexander's path is indicative of widespread trends that commonly lead to eventual placement as a public school principal, despite any lack of merited achievement for the position. A former phys ed instructor and later, high school varsity football coach, who made no waves, inspired or challenged few if any students, implemented no educational innovations, and whose sub-mediocre 12-19 won-loss record over three seasons ultimately prompted the district superintendent - who ascended administratively in a similar fashion - to kick Mr. Alexander 'upstairs' by pushing him to pursue a Missouri school administrator's license. This route excuses the superintendent from having to fire or demote a failed yet amicable crony, sparing both parties any associated discomfort, accountability or embarrassment while, in effect, rewarding a legacy of sustained incompetence.

Superintendent Haskell Edwards thus bestowed Rey Alexander a face-saving, unmerited income-and-status enhancing parachute into school administration. "As you pick up the needed course work to gain your [administrator's] credential, you'll have *no time* to coach football. We have two administrators [within the district] retiring soon. We'll move you into one of those posts once you are licensed." Administrative positions across the American education system are routinely filled in similar means, stifling the ascension of the capable, committed, and qualified into positions of educational leadership. The notion of the U.S. as a meritocracy may be commonly propagated throughout its schools, but is scarcely practiced professionally within them.

As the second week of McGovern mania dawned, Principal Alexander commented privately, "A rookie teacher is always a coin toss. Interviews and transcripts only tell so much. They don't reveal the human soul. The 2nd grade radical was groomed and conditioned by *someone*. They didn't just grow out of the western Missouri dirt." The principal added enigmatically, "Sometimes, scant forgiveness is afforded, justly or not."

Unlike Norris, whose self-flagellation persisted unabated, none of the "Seven Possibles" - as they became collectively labeled - emitted so much as a syllable of either bravado or contrition. Instead, they repeated emphatic denials and attempted awkward reassurances. Edsel Maupin, a pudgy lad in an era of scant obesity, embodied the trend, stammering, "I'm [with] Nixon, straight down the line! From the get-go. Pinky swear." The McGovern voter remained unexposed; unflappably determined, it appeared, to carry their deed to the grave and into the next life.

The teacher at the center of this maelstrom grasped little of the social fabric of her current surroundings. Augustana Lear erroneously believed that she "understood small town Missouri" when she'd accepted the position at Hoover Elementary. A Missourian herself, she hailed from far-northern Saline, a stone's throw from the Iowa state line, However, Saline's population of nearly 25,000 was 40 times greater than Arcola's. A sparsely populated rural outpost, Ms. Lear was discovering, welcomed neither outsiders nor change. They fear and distrust each instead.

An honors graduate from Branson Baptist Academy the preceding June, Gussie idealistically sought to positively impact Missouri's youth through teaching. At age 22, she was the youngest of five siblings, already viewed by her family as a lost-cause spinster who didn't so much as rate a sniff from any prospective suitors these days, and therefore, held no realistic marriage hopes. When Augustana accepted the position in Arcola, her mother asserted to family and neighbors, "Gussie needs me with her. She's not ready to manage a home along with a new career in a strange place all by herself."

The two leased a small, round-topped, shiny silver, late-1950s era mobile home located twelve miles north of town from farmer Oscar Breedlove, on whose outer property the trailer set. Lenora Lear had convinced her daughter that she would be lost without her mother's presence rather than nurturing an independent confidence in her capable but often insecure youngest child. However, her mother had deftly depicted one aspect of the equation - Arcola, MO was indeed "a strange place."

Cold War hysteria reigning, assorted faculty members theorized that the stealthy McGovernite was "a communist, fellow-traveler, running-dog lackey dupe stooge," groomed by the Kremlin, or, even less plausibly, a savant insurrectionist, operating undetected courtesy of Viet Cong hypnosis grooming - these attributes being ascribed to a septet struggling, often with limited

success, to accurately reproduce multiplication tables up through the sixes.

A more experienced and secure Augustana Lear two years further down the teaching road would have readily dismissed such conjecture as patently absurd nonsense. At the moment, bearing the weight of intense professional scrutiny, the rattled rookie fell prey to such far-fetched lunacy, feeding it further at times with warped conspiracy scenarios of her own.

In bunker mode, Gussie Lear took to portentous bouts of staring directed at her target *du jour* among the Seven Possibles. Sullenly gazing while seated at her desk without blinking for troubling spans, Ms. Lear was increasingly mired in webs of obsessively tangled theories, teetering ever closer to emotionally unraveling. Currently, fixated on the pleasantly bland Heathcoat Dodd as the likeliest McGovern mole, she cynically mused, *Yes Sir, Master Heath Dodd. You'd slit my throat with a crusted coffee lid razor and not give a flying fudge-sicle how it read in the state police reports, wouldn't you, clandestine comrade? Dull on the exterior. Ho Chi Minh's prized postulate down in the caverns, I'll wager. Covert scoundrel!*

As desperately as she pursued the ghost-voter, Ms. Lear made no traction, as she clearly dissipated, broaching the darker realms of her wounded, fragile psyche.

After school that same day, Gussie Lear uncharacteristically snapped in a spasm of exhausted agitation directed at the county's neophyte guidance counselor during the school's monthly faculty meeting. The counselor's inclusion on the agenda was designed to de-escalate mounting tension and anxiety in the building resulting from the mock election.

"A cry for help, in a tucan's bunghole!" Gussie unleashed to the astonishment of more conservative colleagues. "The McGovernite served his puppeteers with glee in his soul and a gleam in his eyes! A moment of doubt and pain? A plea for attention? On the contrary, that Beanie-wieners addled, epileptic fakir savored his mission, as his marionette masterfully controlled the strings." Troubled glances flashed among the faculty as the young teacher's garbled tirade unfolded.\*

\*The counselor had decreed that the vote for McGovern represented a "desperately unheeded cry for help from a morose and marginalized student whose fragmented soul lie in precarious, possibly tattered, states of disrepair." Impatiently scoffing, Ms Lear interjected. "That description *would* apply to Trystan Norris, who intensely regrets he *didn't* cast the rogue vote, never mind that his adoptive guardian would beat the slimy green snot out of him if he had. *Irregardless*, [sic] a cry for help is *ONLY* a plea if someone hears it, correct, Counselor? The same way a tree that falls out in the boonies away from any ears didn't really make a sound at all, now did it? As in, nobody *heard* it!" Furrowed brows again rose in response to Ms. Lear's jumble of non-sequitor, mixed metaphors.

The confined school kitchen provided a static weekly menu, Beanie-Weiners being Tuesday's fare. Heathcoat Dodd recently announced that Tuesday's lunch was his favorite, besting Monday's Salisbury steak, toasted cheese sandwich Wednesday, chicken or tomato soup Thursday, or Friday's dubious rendition of Turkey Manhattan. Furthermore, Heathcoat Dodd in fact was legitimately epileptic and suffered the occasional seizure, of which Ms. Lear had yet to witness.

By Day Nine of the crisis, the embattled rookie anxiously defended herself to parents and colleagues alike: "Nobody could unearth the McGovern voter! Believe me, I have diligently tried. Everything short of the rack! That specter is *cloaked*. I mean, a phantom's shadow. Disciplined. Practiced. A true believer. Our mountebank\* has toured The Kremlin, even odds on that! Likely



Peking+ too. The Great Hall of the People. Our *provocateur* has paid solemn respects at Lenin's embalmed tomb. Fluent in several "peasant in revolt" tongues - Burmese, Malay, and that Montagnard dialect from the upper Mekong Delta that even indigenous Gooks^ can make neither hide nor hair of. Dissolute. A loner's loner."

Oblivious to the disquieting facial cues of listeners, the contorted rambling continued. "He voraciously consumes subversive literature by flashlight at night - *Das Kapital*; *A Catcher in the Rye*, and despises everything about America to his very marrow, but has been so keenly sheep-dipped# that he effortlessly glides between the raindrops, remaining dry, even during a veritable monsoon, unsuspected of his myriad treacheries. A true Manchurian Candidate."

\*An archaic term denoting a masterful charlatan. Gussie Lear unwittingly fueled her detractors by using such phrasing.

+The former American title for China's capital, Beijing.

^ An appallingly ugly American slur of the era designating a Vietnamese person. The fact that Ms. Lear's statement emanated far more from neurotic exhaustion than overt bigotry does not excuse her indefensibly defamatory expression.

# Sheep-dipping: a spy-craft term describing a government's ability to utilize unwitting personnel for covert purposes. A potential operative will be unaware, thus, of their infiltration into a targeted spy network. Ms. Lear's obsessive quest for the elusive McGovern voter inspired the reading of the CIA's *An Introduction to Supra-National Methods of Deceit and Deception*.

Dubious colleagues challenged Ms. Lear's conclusions, pointing out that none of the Seven Possibles managed to pass the most recent application of the MIZKAT, Missouri's standardized testing battery of the era. Only Norris and Georgette had satisfied the comprehensive metric administered the previous school year. Poor Wendell had failed to accurately spell his own name on the exam's identification bubble sheet. His recent 'spoiled ballot' was, in that respect, a significant educational advancement. Incredulous cohorts couldn't fathom the germination of a revolutionary virtuoso from within *The Possibles'* seemingly limited genetic pool.

Gussie Lear brusquely deflected such nay-saying. "His handlers trained their covert asset impeccably. This child is a stealthy savant. Twenty-seven rumors and a cover story." Poor Gussie, certain colleagues thought. *She desperately believes her own bullshit.*

Chagrined by the naive tenor of such gullible myopics, Ms. Lear doubled down on her assertions. "Black is white and white is black," she'd read in *A Tradecraft Guide to Misinformation Techniques*. The 2nd grade instructor curtly countered skeptics with. "As if the McGovern mole is going to pass the MIZKAT. Hello! Use the working skull God provided you! It's called *detection aversion*. Plausible deniability, people!" Tapping her temple emphatically, Ms. Lear strode away in disbelief, muttering: *None so blind as those who refuse to glance.*

Occasionally, Augustana Lear indulged in the irresistibly moot lament: *If only it had been Norris, as it was supposed to be.* That notion lingered communally as well - a comforting escape, representing a simpler time before the McGovern voter marred Arcola's social order.

It didn't help Ms. Lear's tenuous mental state that certain colleagues made a thinly-veiled sport of mocking the novice instructor with mean-spirited invective, including such maliciously homespun epithets as *Amish Carpet Muncher*, *Bull Dyke Jehovah's Witness*; and *Mennonite McGovern Moll*. Decidedly, it was an inopportune era in which to practice homosexuality as a

sexual preference in remote mid-America, which, incidentally, Gussie Lear did not. She was neither gay, Amish, a Mennonite, a Jehovah's Witness, nor a closeted McGovern maven. The young teacher's unfortunate quasi-bowl cut hair style, courtesy the shears of Lenora Lear, and curiously ill-fitting, sometimes inexplicable attire, heavy on charitable Goodwill and Salvation Army castoffs, amplified the snide cruelty aimed her way. A beginning teacher's paltry salary necessitated such spend-thrift apparel, but additionally, Lenora did her daughter no favors in such regards. The backwoods Baptist matriarch lacked the social compass and maternal instincts to shield Augustana from many easily averted social *faux pas*. Lenora castigated flared hip-huggers, then fashionably appropriate for Gussie's age and dimensions, as "the tarted trousers of the common street trollop."+

The name "Gussie" didn't help either, but it's not as if the young teacher chose to name herself Augustana. Her status as a newcomer and outsider, unfamiliar with Arcola's norms and passive-aggressive social milieu, cast further aspersions on her judgments and worthiness to educate the town's young. Then, already in a precarious state professionally, the McGovern voter had come along to rear its ghastly presence, placing Ms. Lear in a deer-in-the-headlights posture of desperation, subject to unceasing suspicion and scrutiny, while lacking even a single teaching ally to mentor her through the trying ordeal. Harangued instead by insult-mongering colleagues, who should have known better than to heap tag-teamed derision upon a vulnerable cohort via disgraceful smear campaigns of giggled innuendo and spiteful body-shaming, detailing Ms. Lear's supposed "unsightly cellulose [sic] deposits" and "early onset 'cankles'," shared with amplified indiscretion down echo-laden hallways. Such cruelty made a challenging situation markedly worse for the inexperienced, shell-shocked teacher.\*

+Trollop: an outdated term for orphaned female teens of centuries past, forced into prostitution by poverty. Mrs. Lear further disparaged early '70s female fashions as fit for "strumpets, harlots and husband-stealing Sorceress Jezebels" - the first two terms, 19th century euphemisms for 'whore.' The latter phrase alluded to fabled "Gypsy" prowess whereby women in traveling entertainment caravans utilized "wanton feminine wiles, luring good men astray," Siren-like. Lenora's quaintly outmoded lexicon condemned her daughter to similar usages - see *mountebank* - further thwarting acceptance and inclusion in the new environment.

\*The least compassionate of Augustana Lear's detractors was an embittered shrew, former Catholic nun, Velma Jean Dawkins, known ubiquitously throughout Hoover Elementary as Sister Jean. Relieved from clerical duties for reasons unclear, Sister Jean offered the school district to teach for half salary. Assigned the 4th grade class, Sister Jean's malicious gossip proved an enticing elixir enthusiastically gulped by the veteran 5th grade instructor in the adjacent class room, Opal Lovelace. The pair routinely wagged acerbic tongues at Gussie Lear's expense.

**Samples of the pair's vindictive witticisms:** "I'd sooner hem the inseam of a pariah's pantaloons than be inside Gussie Lear's feeble mind for even five seconds." Another morsel from the pair's spurious blather: "By Neptune's knickerbockers if this Amish lesbian social leper butch dyke isn't a shit-all, outhouse variety witless imbecile!" Mrs. Lovelace slanderously imparted to Vice Principle Orton that Ms. Lear had "likely recited passages from Karl Marx and that Che Guevara [to her class] till one took the cheese-bait on election day." Adding with a wink, "Illuminated by a cloudless night's Harvest Moon, Gussie Lear couldn't locate the county square with Magellan at her side! Just look at them [sic] widely parted, fetal-alcohol-syndrome eyes smacked clear across her face. They don't blink at quite the same instant, either."

While Norris and Georgette each occasionally challenged Ms. Lear, exhibiting little patience with her idiosyncrasies at times, both had grown fonder of their unorthodox young teacher as the school year progressed. Although the two hadn't conspired a premeditated show of support as Ms. Lear's well-being clearly suffered various hits, several incidents in the post-election period hinted at a circling of wagons around their beleaguered instructor.+

+The two rarely directly conversed but weren't adversarial. Early the previous school year, Georgette informed Norris, "You are

the smartest *boy* in our grade, but I am the smartest *person*, period." Norris wasn't troubled by the assertion, tending to agree. Georgette Jovana, he recognized, was an exceedingly bright and mercurial powder keg.

Georgette came to Ms. Lear's aid one afternoon a couple of weeks past the election, after detecting tear stains drying upon her teacher's ashen face. Ms. Lear remained seated vacantly behind her desk, apparently oblivious as several boys squabbled boisterously during the post-recess transition back to class, Georgette assumed control.

Rising, she fixed the offending duo with a patented *look*, snapping her fingers twice in brisk succession. As a local saying went, one then could have heard a gnat fart a county over, as an instantaneously catatonic silence befell the class.

In calmly seductive, yet authoritatively beguiling tones, the 2nd grade boys were instructed to "Shut up, sit down, and act right." Georgette wielded an undeniable ability to intimidate and frighten, but the added novelty of her actually speaking *to them* hypnotically transfixed the guilty parties. The offenders - Winston Kennisaw and Conrad Wolfla - were utterly ill-prepared for Georgette's unforeseen charm offensive. Consequently, they were susceptibly enamored - "ensared," Winston later contended - by her captivating aura. The pair froze, standing as when they squabbled, but were now open-mouthed and wide-eyed. Neighboring boys to each side of the chastened duo pulled them into seated compliance, grasping a pocket and belt loop, respectively, to guide their waylaid brethren downward.\*

\* Then and in subsequent grades, classmates would confide along the following lines in hushed tones, cloaked by attic or basement darkness during weekend sleepovers when discussing the exotic dominatrix in their midst five school days each week: "I think about what it *might* be like to kiss her. Then I nearly phone [Georgette] to apologize. She'd beat my ass into last week for even *contemplating* such things."

Classroom order restored, Georgette turned to face Ms. Lear. Having captured her teacher's attention, Georgette winked and Ms. Lear smiled, initiating a newly-forged enduring peace between the room's two female inhabitants.

Georgette reinforced that nascent alliance the following week when her teacher again appeared listlessly defeated. Turning in the day's arithmetic assignment, Ms. Jovana gained her instructor's startled attention, whispering, "Do you know what Sister Jean and 7-Up have in common?" Curiously caught off guard, Ms. Lear shook her head no.

"Never had it. Never will." Ms. Lear spontaneously giggled, pleasing Georgette.^

^That punchline from 7-Up's well-known ad theme of the era referring to the soft drink's lack of caffeinated food coloring. Although Georgette understood the punchline's full implications more completely than did her rather naive teacher, Ms. Lear nonetheless enjoyed the joke enough to share it with her mother that evening.

For his part, Trystan Norris embarked on an informative mission the Tuesday preceding Thanksgiving, approaching Sister Jean outside her classroom to apprise the former Nun of the Jesuit Order of eminent changes pertaining to personal title designations.

"Should you become my teacher of record in the future, I will never address you as 'Sister Jean.' This is a public school, not a parochial religious institution." *The cheek of this haughty urchin!* Bile rose in the Sister's esophagus. *The unmitigated temerity of this impertinent snot-nosed mutt.* Abhorred by the brat's unparalleled "turpitude of morality," the ability to respond vocally

momentarily escaped Sister Jean. She remained mutely livid as Norris promulgated.

"The fact that you formerly served the Roman Catholic [Church] apparatus as a cleric holds no relevance here. I will dutifully address you simply as 'Ms. Dawkins,' as is appropriate for *any* unmarried female public school staff member." Having imparted what he came to, the student abruptly turned, exiting in haste to change for gym class.+

+The 2nd graders were amid a two-week square dancing unit. Donovan Dillard, whose name was truncated from middle school-on as 'Doe Dill' - a reversal of the male phallic implement - and Norris were paired as "start-up partners." With Alan Sowards' lingering AWOL traumatism from the 'pig petting' incident, the 2nd grade now comprised ten students, who divided into five "start-up" sets. Georgette, assigned to begin each dance with Leonard Bledsoe, sashayed through each partner exchange with the regal air of a ferociously prized yet abjectly unapproachable priceless heirloom/ feral bobcat. She did, that is, until crossing the path of Cranston Cutchaw, the touch of whose clammy hands revulsed Ms. Jovana to instantaneously shove Cutchaw's chest with sufficiently enraged velocity that the flung square dancer hit the tartan gymnasium flooring only to bounce half a foot - again airborne -before achieving a final landing position.

Grizzled gym instructor Gwen-Ellen Bertold, a stout, a no-nonsense matron who smoked Marlboro 110s throughout P.E. class, lifted the portable record player's needle, angered by Georgette, "One day some hilljacker gonna punch your face right back, Natasha Diamond Drawers! And where will ya be then? In a fair fight, won't ya, Peachcake Britches?" Music re-cued, the dance began anew, as Cranny Cutchaw fastidiously wiped his sweaty palms across school-issued, unabsorbent plastic green gym shorts, desperately attempting to curry Georgette's implicit tolerance.

Sister Jean had previously observed the Norris clan attending Saturday afternoon mass at St. Patrick's parish in Greenfield, the county seat. Locating the family's preferred pew the following Saturday afternoon, she attempted to take the measure of the 'Anti-Christ,' as she commonly referred to young Norris. "I'm surprised by your presence, given your pronounced heathen leanings." Sister Jean commented. Presumably, she hoped that the staunchly Catholic Greenely Norris would mete out disciplinary vengeance once home for the brat's numerous provocations.

Her tormentor obliged. "Through the authority of my legal guardians, I am coerced to attend services. But I bow to no Vatican authority and hold no use for its dogma or doctrines. Jesus interests me, not as a Messianic figure, but as a revolutionary force, opposed to Roman empirical rule and capitalism." Hatred consolidated from within Sister Jean's deepest core.

A fairly disinterested Trystan Norris added, "I think he" -referring to Our Lord & Savior - "should have courted Mary Magdalene myself." Sister Jean's mouth agape, she looked Greenely Norris' way. The patriarch was dutifully preoccupied scanning the weekly *Missalette*.

"Here [at St. Michael's parish] I *will* refer to you as Sister Jean," Norris tactfully conceded. As the corpulent and perpetually sweating 30-ish priest, Father Sweeney, along with a duo of flanking altar boys, who were unsteadily tasked with large wooden crosses, prepared to stride up the center aisle to begin the ceremony. Norris played to his hostile interlocutor once more, stating casually, "By the way, I'll get to the bottom of the McGovern mystery before any of *you*. But I won't reveal them. I come to condone, not condemn."

Greenely Norris completely ignored the interchange between his quarrelsome adoptee and the ousted nun. Sister Jean's temperament spiked, yet she held her tongue inside the church.\*

\*Although she had repeatedly proclaimed that "No sawed off, ill-mannered, demonic, piss ant orphan would ever dictate [her] actions," Sister Jean retired two weeks before Trystan Norris entered 4th grade, citing flagging health and diminished stamina.

The first week of December, Trystan Norris was summoned late in the school day to the main office to meet with the school district's guidance counselor - a position created that very school year, staffed by a 28-year-old counselor named Rhonda Krenwinkle, who, for a pittance stipend, traveled remote spans to advise the troubled youth of Dade County, Missouri. Gussie Lear had periodically noticed Norris' left hand trembling when she returned graded work to the students. The young teacher decided to utilize the new counseling resource, reporting what she'd observed.

Dispatched to meet with a counselor he hadn't known existed and held no inclination to divulge candid details to, the now-surly youngster, feeling betrayed and blindsided, concocted an alternative agenda. The dismal imagery awaiting Ms. Krenwinkle was not for the squeamish.

Noting that Ms. Lear was concerned with his bouts of trembling, the counselor inquired whether the young student was "concerned, troubled or worried" and, if so, by what?

Being lobbed a slow softball over the plate, Trystan Norris hit it hard and far, embarking into a stark discourse detailing specifics of the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal: the 46 inter-continental ballistic missiles, "each hauling destructive atomic payloads seven-hundred times the force of the Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombs, with a maximum range of 3,000 miles, targeted squarely at every U.S. population center of 300,000 people or greater."

Ms. Krenwinkle, suddenly pale, was rendered extraordinarily squeamish as Norris forged on.

"Kansas City will vaporize in a flash," snapping an index finger for emphasis. "The resulting radiation fallout will rapidly spread to the hinterlands by wind and waterways. Out here, we'll wish we'd been atomized instantly like those fortunate urban masses, but we will instead perish in agonizing fits and starts - some in days, others weeks, and a month or so for the most hellishly damned moaning nuclear zombies. Hair, teeth, organs and skin going by the wayside all the while." The counselor considered assuming a 'duck & cover' position under the nearest desk.

Norris concluded with a *tour de force*.

"Given all this, Ms. Krenwinkle, the question isn't why am I trembling. It's 'Why aren't you?'" Check and mate.

A discomforting silence enshrouded the dimly lit room, and not quite knowing what else to do, the novice counselor reached to retrieve a Tupperware bowl of Dum-Dum suckers she typically offered to younger students upon the completion of a counseling session. Now, Rhonda Krenwinkle readied to depart for her next assigned school in awkward retreat mode. She had no therapeutic advice to impart to the spooky oddity seated across from her. Ms. Krenwinkle couldn't fathom that this particular counselee, with his haunting visions of nuclear annihilation, would be the least bit interested in a low-quality, high-fructose corn-syrup treat.

As she maneuvered to relocate the container of Dum-Dums in preparation of exiting, Norris interjected hopefully, wide eyed.

"I'd like a lolly. Two if you can spare it."

The counselor duly forked over three Dum-Dum pops to the crafty little trembler before her.

Returning to class from the office counseling session as the bell ending the school day sounded, Norris dejectedly approached Ms. Lear.

"If *you* want to know something, just ask me privately. You're my teacher. We spend five days a week together. I'll tell you. Why send me to some stranger?" Departing for the bus, he placed a lime flavored Dum-Dum on Ms. Lear's desk along with the following hastily fashioned note.

MY BIRTH PARENTS DIDN'T WANT ME. I HAVE NO IDEA WHO THEY EVEN ARE. OR WHERE.  
THAT'S WHY I SHAKE.

[PEOPLE SAY I'M LUCKY TO HAVE BEEN ADOPTED. IF I WAS LUCKY, I WOULDN'T HAVE NEEDED TO BE.]

The following day, Wendell Clarke bore the fresh brunt of residual abuse for signing his name on the ballot.+

+The class had recently completed a month-long cursive writing unit, and Wendell took every opportunity afterward to practice his signature. He had recently added a flourish of curved embellishments to the upper case W.

That morning, Wendell's dad had assessed the boy as a "hopeless retard," while his mother pondered aloud whether her son was "permanent shit-all variety stupid or just a beat-his-ass-some-more slow learner."

Norris suggested Wendell forget all that.

"I shit my pants far worse than you ever did - the rest of my life when I look into a mirror, a Nixon voter will be taunting me back." Wendell felt bad for Norris.

"You can take my vote for Nixon," Norris said. "It's all yours." Wendell felt reassured. Ms. Lear overheard the exchange and smiled, as the two planned for the upcoming weekend.

"After I get my work done Saturday [on the farm], I'll bike over. We can go crawdadding."

Wendell perked up. "We'll head all the way back to the Samuel Clements Creek and track *The One True Crawdad*" - a mythical crustacean that Wendell Clarke alone placed existential credence in. Norris nodded.

Augustana Lear ceased all sleuthing efforts that afternoon, no longer concerned over who The McGovern Voter was or wasn't, or if others blamed her for the anomaly. She would teach her students as well as she knew how; retention for the following school year be damned. She drove home to the rented silver trailer, falling into Lenora Lear's arms. Crying and emotionally drained, she felt burdened by nothing for the first time in five weeks.

"Mommy, I'll be fine. I *don't* want to talk about it. Just know that I love and appreciate you and Dad, even though I don't show it enough."

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