

Dreamer

Another clockwatcher afternoon. The antique clock in the corner agonised, ticking at last with a wrenched stammer every two minutes at best, or every hour at worst. Some bizarre relativistic phenomenon was taking place in schools, whereby once you went inside, time slowed inexplicably. Thomas believed they kept a black hole inside the school because he'd heard in the scary space TV-show that time slowed down around black holes. School certainly seemed like a big horrible black hole when you were there, because it pulled you in and never let you go. He didn't like to think about it because he knew that if it realised he knew it would never let him go.

Worried he was thinking too much, Thomas broke loose of the clock's gravity and sought for a new focus. The blackboard, dull and scratchy. Farms in Wales. He'd never been to Wales but Dad said people were funny there and put on a funny voice and he had laughed. Thomas smiled, wondering when school would end so he could see Daddy again. He looked at the clock again. A long, long time away, thirtyfive minutes, if the clock ticked honestly.

The blackboard bored him already, and so did Mrs. Horsley's talking about it. He looked down to the neatly arranged items on his desk. His pen was mucky and not smart like Christopher's. His book was red but he'd spilt ink on it yesterday. His attentions settled on his ruler.

Not his ruler, really - the school lent it to him and told him to Look After It. He'd been using it every day for years. But with the new eyes only children have, he saw it afresh and alive again, coming alive, transforming, a sword perhaps, a stick. Or a cane. He had seen many teachers use rulers like this to slap naughty boys' hands very hard. He hoped it wouldn't happen to him. These rulers could come alive. He peered at it, with the fascination only a child can find in the mundane, losing all sense of time.

'Genuine polished Boxwood', it boasted. Brown like a mucky orange crayon came out brown. It read in inches only, the imperious measure for cauterising the palm. 'MADE IN ENGLAND', like everything was, once. The corners chipped with studious care; slabby, high sides to crane your pencil fingers around. A few blotches of ink, odd scratches, but no graffiti, no John 4 Mary: this was a good school.

"Pay attention, boy!" the shrill teacher suddenly trilled, a choirgirl's lilt turned to a siren by the years. Thomas looked up, keen to see who had fallen foul this time. Alan Donnelly, the naughty boy, surely. No. It was him. The bottom suddenly fell out of his world; the black hole had eaten up the floor.

"Rulers are for ruling!" Mrs. Horsley squawked. "And that one'll be ruling your palm if you don't pay attention! It'll hurt me more than it hurts you!"

Thomas struggled to find the right chant to break the spell. "Yes Miss. Sorry Miss." He wondered if those Important Words were ever said sincerely, or if they were just said because grown-ups had decreed they ought to be.

“You should be.” The lesson resumed. Recovering, Thomas felt his feet again, pressing his toes down. The floor was still there. The black hole had pulled away, only threatening him this time. He had learned his lesson. Little boys couldn’t mess with black holes like brave space pilots could. He would be an astronaut when he grew up, and save children from school. If it would let go of his time so he *could* grow up.

He looked at the clock again. Still thirtyfive minutes to go.

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