

Scouting for the Reaper

..... *Stories*

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Black
Lawrence
Press

For Rosalie and Christina

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Choose Your Own Genetics

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Miss Stanley was new to the ninth grade that autumn, and we could all sense that she wasn't cut out for it. She was twenty-three years old and had been hired as a last-minute replacement for Mrs. Tubbs, an overweight black woman who'd shattered her pelvis in an escalator accident. "We're going to learn the ropes together," Miss Stanley explained that first morning, "so if you have any ideas for improving class, you shouldn't be afraid to share them. Science is all about experimentation." After that, she wrote her lesson plan on the chalkboard and checked off each item as we completed it:

- I. Laboratory Rules.*
- II. Why Biology is Exciting.*
- III. Personal Introductions.*
- IV. Historical Examples.*
- V. Homework.*

To explain why biology was exciting, she read aloud for twenty minutes from the opening pages of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. When the opportunity finally arrived for personal introductions, Miss Stanley confessed that she would be at Commodore Perry for only one year, while she applied to veterinary schools. She thought teaching would be a "rewarding" way to use her "year

off.” I introduced myself as Natalie—my middle name, although up until then I’d always gone by Louise. I explained how I’d spent my summer shadowing a grad student at Brown University, where my father ran the Genetics Department. Next, Jonah Driscoll told the class that he’d spent his summer studying Irish whiskey at Sullivan’s Saloon, where his mother waited tables. Miss Stanley did not smile, but I did. For me, Jonah’s voice—deep and cavalier—was as intoxicating as Sullivan’s liquor. Then Shorty Foust asked how Mrs. Tubbs had *really* broken her pelvis.

“Please, enough,” said Miss Stanley, turning her slender wrist inward to glance at the platinum sliver of her watch. “Let’s not get distracted.”

She took a deep breath, as though she might be counting to ten inside her head, and I could swear I saw a tear glint in the crook of her eye. That was the first and last time I ever felt bad for her. Not because she was floundering, but because she looked so incredibly lonely. Georgia Stanley, big-boned, not pretty, probably a virgin at twenty-three, was the woman I could so easily become—except I was smart. “We’ll do the rest of the introductions tomorrow,” she announced, placing a “+/-” alongside *III. Personal Introductions*. “Now I want to talk about how biology can shape history. Who can name the U.S. President who suffered from an infectious disease?”

A drowsy silence fell over the room. Miss Stanley paced between the desks, like a talk show host, her legs far too chunky for her high-cut skirt. I didn’t mind how long the class dragged on. I was thankful for each minute in the same room with Jonah.

“This isn’t a hard question,” said Miss Stanley, sounding more disappointed than frustrated. “You’ve all studied history, haven’t you?”

Shorty Foust muttered, “I bet Bill Clinton caught something from Monica.”

Some of the other boys laughed nervously, but not Jonah.

“Franklin Roosevelt is the answer,” said Miss Stanley. “FDR couldn’t walk because he’d had the polio virus in his thirties. . . . Now how about a genetic disease? This is a harder one. Which U.S. President most likely had a genetic disorder?”

My dad had already taught me about the controversy surrounding George Washington’s sterility, about how some biologists suspected he’d suffered from a condition called Klinefelter’s aneuploidy—but I was too busy sketching out my own genetic tree to answer. For the thousandth time, I drew the adjacent ovals for my twin cousins, and a square with a diagonal line through it, for my Uncle Jesse, who’d committed suicide. These pedigrees were an exercise I performed to amuse myself, like tic-tac-toe or crossword puzzles. I always etched a dashed box alongside my own dark circle at the bottom of the chart, indicating my potential marriage to Jonah Driscoll.

“Abraham Lincoln,” said Miss Stanley. “Many people believe President Lincoln suffered from a genetic disorder called Marfan’s syndrome that makes people tall and thin, but also damages their hearts—”

The lunch bell cut her short. A dozen notebooks closed simultaneously.

“Don’t go anywhere yet,” ordered Miss Stanley, ensuring our collective animosity. “Please take out a piece of paper and write two or three sentences about your impressions of our first class. And pick up your homework. *Then* you can leave.”

After only a few seconds of frantic tearing and scribbling, I was the final student remaining in the classroom. I wrote:

Dear Miss Stanley:

On the whole, I think things are going well. But you did say we shouldn’t be afraid to share ideas for improving class, so I just wanted you to know that many scientists no longer think

Franklin Roosevelt had polio. More likely, he suffered from an atypical form of Guillain-Barré syndrome. Also, while some people do believe Abraham Lincoln had Marfan's disease, they are probably wrong. The vast majority of men and women with long legs are perfectly healthy—what you might call normal variants. I do hope you will share all of this with the rest of the class . . . because anyone is entitled to her own opinion, but not her own facts. Good luck with veterinary school!
Sincerely, Natalie Limberg (Louise on your attendance sheet)

I slid my note into the pile beside our teacher's sickly African violet. I wanted to search through the other comments, to see what Jonah had written, but Miss Stanley practically yanked the stack of torn loose-leaf from my hands.

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That evening was my mother's therapy session, so my father took me to the Hogarth Mall to play Physical Diagnosis. It was a game we'd shared since my earliest childhood: during long road trips, and while waiting in line at the post office, and even on those rare holidays when my mother dragged dad and me to synagogue. It was also the *only* game my father ever played with me, the one occasion on which he allowed himself to be frivolous. The object of "PD"—as bizarre as I realize this will sound—was to identify genetic diseases in strangers. Some diagnoses were easy, like the elfin features of Williams syndrome or the truncated pinkies of Albright's osteodystrophy. But my father prided himself on being able to distinguish a child with an apparent toothache from inherited cherubism, and a harmless allergy from postprandial snatiation, a rare familial ailment in which the full stomach causes vigorous sneezing. As a young girl, I loved this game because it affirmed my father's genius. Genetic knowledge, in his hands, was virtually

X-ray vision. Later, as a teenager, I wielded this same wisdom as a weapon: No matter how unattractive I was—no matter how wide my hip bones grew—I could wander along Olney Boulevard and see a man’s heart defect in his eyebrows.

The Hogarth Mall was only five years old. I remembered when the space had housed a horseback riding stable and a “pick-your-own-pumpkins” patch, then the long months when it was an irregular mud plain patrolled by Caterpillar backhoes. (The mall was part of the county’s futile effort to revitalize an East Bay hard hit by the collapse of the domestic marine equipment industry; instead, its national chain stores rapidly drove most of Creve Coeur’s Main Street out of business.) My father liked to stake out a circular table in the food court, opposite the glass elevator. He’d pour a two-ounce package of maple syrup into his coffee, a habit he’d picked up from Grandpa Saul, and he’d ask me about my school day while his eyes scanned the passing shoppers for physical imperfections. Sometimes, middle-aged women would return his gaze—letting their eyes linger a moment too long on his strong jaw and handsome, thoughtful features. Even as a teenager, I was never embarrassed by him. He was far too serious and dignified for that. I had a difficult time understanding why he put up with my mother, who embarrassed me constantly by using words like “menstruation” and “orgasm,” and who regularly lost her temper in public. That night, my father pointed out a pair of achondroplastic dwarves, strolling arm-in-arm, and a janitor with a mild case of acromegaly. He jotted down these sightings in his notepad, and, without looking up, asked me, “So, ninth grader, what’s the news from the front lines?”

“I told my teachers I want to be called Natalie from now on.”

“You’re fourteen years old,” said my father. “I suppose you’re entitled to choose any name you want.”

That made me feel guilty. As though rejecting “Louise” was rejecting him. But I couldn’t imagine Jonah Driscoll kissing a girl with an old lady’s name.

“You can still call me Louise *at home*,” I said.

“Thank you,” said my father. “I think I will.”

He folded shut the notepad and tucked it into the breast pocket of his jacket. Then he removed his eyeglasses and cleaned them with a paper napkin.

“I learned something important today,” I said. “I learned that I’m smarter than Miss Stanley, my new biology teacher. The only reason she’s the teacher and I’m the student is because she’s older than I am.”

“That’s probably true,” he agreed. “But she’s *still* the teacher.”

My father’s tone suggested the weariness of experience—that he’d also known what it was like to have teachers of mediocre intellect. I was well-versed in the story of how he’d been suspended from M.I.T. as a sophomore for hacking into the dean’s private telephone line—and how he’d sent that same dean a newspaper clipping when he was named to the President’s Council on Science and Technology.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I have homework for you,” I announced.

“*For me?*”

“I need to find out ABO blood types. Yours. Mom’s. All of my grandparents.” I rummaged through my knapsack and retrieved the assignment.

I already knew that my father was a type-A. My mother was an O. That meant I’d have to be either one or the other. But Grandpa Saul was my sole surviving grandparent, and he lived in Boston with his crazy sister, Aunt Gertie, so I’d never had an opportunity to trace back any further.

My father skimmed over Miss Stanley’s questions, and frowned. “So much for maintaining a semblance of genetic privacy,” he said.

“In any case, I’m relatively confident that Grandma and Uncle Jesse were both type-B’s, but I can ask Grandpa Saul on Sunday, to be sure.” My father handed me back the assignment. “You’ll have to talk to your mother about her parents. That may be harder to find out.”

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The next morning, Miss Stanley phoned in sick, and an elderly substitute with sparse mauve hair showed us a film titled “The Secrets of Chromosomes.” In the grainy footage, a class of about twenty white kids and one black girl take turns asking imbecilic questions: *Why do I have my father’s chin?* and *My friend’s sister has Down syndrome. Can I catch it?* Then crude graphics of double helices and karyotypes flashed on the screen, while the narrator—who looked like Mister Rogers and sounded like Gregory Peck in “To Kill A Mockingbird”—unlocked the so-called “mysteries” of molecular science. In the rear of *our* classroom, beside the plastic skeleton, Becky Timms and Zach Dorsey conducted a biology lesson of their own, using their tongues. Two seats away from me, Jonah Driscoll shaded an unflattering portrait of the substitute teacher in his sketchbook. I watched out of the corner of my eye as his large, mitt-like hands virtually loped back-and-forth across the page, capturing the old woman’s dull, depleted eyes and tight-set mouth. In my imagination, I catch Jonah sketching *me* one afternoon, and I convince him of his great artistic potential. Eventually, he applies himself to his academic work and—with me as his model—he is admitted on a full scholarship to the Rhode Island School of Design. Of course, these were all fantasies. Jonah hadn’t said two words to me since he’d joined our class in eighth grade, when his father took a job as the district’s transportation and maintenance coordinator. When he looked up from his sketch of the old woman, I turned my head away quickly. At the end of

the film, Shorty Foust asked the substitute whether the black girl was Mrs. Tubbs' daughter.

Miss Stanley returned the following day, looking far too refreshed for a woman who claimed "an early bout of the flu." She wore a maroon leather skirt and matching, high-heeled boots, revealing two-inches of bare calf. On the chalkboard, she wrote: *I. Discussion of ABO Blood Types. II. ABO Blood Type Laboratory.* Then she passed down each aisle—now more like a drill sergeant than a talk-show host—demanding to inspect our take-home assignments. I displayed mine, with question marks beside the blanks for my mother's parents. "They're dead," I explained—not mentioning that I'd forgotten to show my mom the form. Miss Stanley nodded indifferently and moved along. She shrugged when Lori Beckwith revealed that she was adopted, but she had done the homework anyway. She sniffed when the Zorinsky twins, Mia and Tia, handed in only one sheet between them. But Miss Stanley stopped cold when Jonah displayed an empty page. "Science is a collaborative effort," she declared. "You'll have to meet me halfway, if you intend to learn anything *at all* this semester. I'm truly disappointed."

Jonah tugged at the cuff of his denim jacket, his gaze focused on his desktop. I could easily have let the moment pass. Instead, I blurted out, "Maybe his parents don't know what their blood types are. You didn't even give him a chance to tell you."

Miss Stanley ignored me. She stood alongside Jonah's desk, frowning, tapping her fingertips together. If I'd expected Jonah to be appreciative of my intercession, I was wretchedly mistaken. He turned to look at me—as though he'd never seen me before—and he threw me a glare as toxic as a venomous dart. I felt the scalding poison traveling up my arteries into my forehead.

"Did you even *try* to do the assignment?" Miss Stanley asked him.

Jonah said nothing. My legs trembled under my desk.

Miss Stanley shook her head twice, for emphasis, and stepped briskly to the front of the room, as though inspecting the final row of students' homework wasn't worth her bother. "What exactly is a blood type?" she demanded of the class. Meanwhile, I tried to make eye contact with Jonah—to apologize with my face—but he'd returned to sketching, this time a vicious likeness of Miss Stanley.

Becky Timms raised her hand. "My mother read this diet book that, like, says people with different blood types should eat different foods."

Miss Stanley scanned the class, refusing to acknowledge this effort.

"Blood types determine who you can give blood to," said Lori Beckwith. "I have type O blood, which means I can give blood to anybody."

"What else?"

None of my classmates had anything more to say, so the silence dragged on. From the open window came the shouts of workmen constructing the new gymnasium, and the scent of freshly-sawed wood. I didn't want to speak, but I also didn't want Miss Stanley to think she knew more than me. "Blood groups are determined by the presence of antigens on red blood cells," I said. "Antibodies to antigens A and B can lead to transfusion incompatibility."

"Very good," said Miss Stanley. "Did you hear that, Jonah? You could learn a lot from Louise."

"Natalie," I corrected her. She didn't hear me, or chose not to.

"We have only forty-five minutes left," said Miss Stanley, picking up her designer handbag. "Please make efficient use of your time in the laboratory."

We crossed the corridor into the lab room, which we shared with the tenth grade chemistry classes. The equipment for that morning's

exercise was already laid out like dinner utensils on the phenolic countertops, except for the diagnostic blood preparations, which were stored under the steel-coated fume hoods. Each work station had its own sterile lancet, stirring sticks and alcohol prep pads. All we had to do was prick our thumbs and mix our blood with the labeled samples. If we had type A blood, we'd form clumps with the B sample. If we had type B blood, we'd form clumps with the A sample. If we had type O blood, we'd form clumps with neither the A nor the B. It was all so simple, a well-trained chimp could have completed the experiment—except that she'd have the wrong blood proteins. Miss Stanley distributed a worksheet with problems to be filled out at the conclusion of the session.

“Any questions?” she asked.

“I've got one,” said Shorty Foust. “We never finished our introductions.”

Miss Stanley appeared surprised—she'd clearly forgotten her omission—but luckily for her, the rest of us had already started dispersing around the laboratory. I examined my reflection in the industrial sink, combing my hair forward to make my forehead look shorter. Then I dug my fingernails deep into my palms and walked straight up to Jonah, who was grinning while his friends played a shell game with three paper cups and a quarter. If he saw me approaching, he pretended that he didn't.

“Look, I'm sorry,” I said. “That was a really stupid thing for me to say.”

Jonah unwrapped a toothpick and let it droop at the corner of his mouth.

“Not a big deal,” he answered—sounding genuinely sheepish. “Say, Louise. You're the genius. How do we do this thing?”

Natalie, I wanted to shout. *Natalie!*

I could have strangled Miss Stanley for her earlier mistake.

“Yeah, Louise,” said one of Jonah’s friends. “You’ve got to help us.”

So I sat down between Jonah and Sean Fuccillo, with Zach Dorsey and half a dozen other popular boys crowded behind me. I could feel the heat of their bodies, their collective bulk hemming me in.

“It’s really easy,” I said. “The only hard part is sticking yourself.”

I demonstrated by pricking my finger and mixing the blood into the preparation with the group-B antibodies. To my surprise, the combination formed a thick, gelatinous clump. “The sample must be contaminated,” I explained. “Let me try a different container.” So I retrieved the ketchup-style bottle from a second fume hood and repeated the experiment, but the results came out identically. Every time I pooled my blood with the diagnostic preparation, the combined product insisted that my veins contained type-B blood. In the general population, this wasn’t a rare finding—and certainly not a cause for medical concern. It was merely a biological impossibility in the daughter of a type-A father and a type-O mother. Eventually, I gave up trying, and I told Miss Stanley I was feeling nauseous. She gave me permission to visit the school nurse’s office, but instead I climbed up the hill behind the high school and, my head spinning, ran down Meriwether Street until the Gothic dormers of Commodore Perry were no longer visible behind the heads of the molting beech trees.

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I didn’t want to return to school and I didn’t want to go home, so I roamed downtown Creve Coeur until the whitewashed cape coddors along Harpoon Street glowed orange and pink under the sinking sun. I realized my options were few: The courageous choice would have been to confront my parents with the damning clumps of blood and demand to know whether I had been