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an excerpt from a short story inspired by a Polish legend

5760 words

*This happened forever ago, so far back people only whisper about it. Mrs. Marasek sold her orphan boys to the mining companies to help dig coal. What do they call that? Indentured? Anyway, some of those boys never returned. A fall into a shaft, a pick axe accident, a spark exploding into a fire ball. Once, a tunnel collapsed and trapped a crew of boys and their shift boss. No one could reach them. Eventually, because they were starving, the man suffocated the weakest boy and ate him! Later, hungry again, he turned to the others.*

– Aastha, sixth grade

### Marasek Middle

During breaks between classes, students crowded around the caged rabbit in Mrs.

Weelee's room. Some slipped shreds of lettuce through the wire mesh. Others touched Bigwig's fur with their dirty fingers. Some posed with Bigwig for selfies. Girls used apps to plump their lips and twinkle their eyes, then posted their photos on MySmile.

Sometimes students used those same apps to give Bigwig googly eyes.

Jacob Kuzma did not do these things. He visited early morning, before anyone else, even earlier than Mrs. Weelee, and he did not take selfies with Bigwig. Jacob owned no phone. Those things damage tender, developing brains, his mother had told him. When you turn eighteen, she promised. He complained: That's six years. She corrected him: Almost five.

Instead, he brought to Mrs. Weelee's classroom his sketchpad and colored pencils, and he sat with fluorescents flicked off. That way he could see past Bigwig through windows, across parking pavement to distant woods, piney, dense with mountain laurel—so littered with fallen limbs and trunks as to be impenetrable even by small children.

Those mornings in Mrs. Weelee's classroom, Jacob sat with Bigwig, distracted by dawn's orangeade light poking herky-jerk through those branches, and he sketched. He could hear wind gusts, but he could also hear his sharpened, colored drawing pencils scratch across the paper, and he could hear Bigwig nibble clover that Jacob had pushed through to that teensy mouth. Jacob drew many versions of Bigwig, always starting with Bigwig's face and its sans-serif Y (bunny nostrils and philtrum), then to Bigwig's glistening charcoal eyes. If asked, Jacob would not have been able to say why he found it necessary to sketch version after version of Bigwig any more than he could have explained hunger. His need to draw had something to do with that day when Mrs. Weelee brought the rabbit to school, momentous because this was Marasek Middle's first-ever class pet. He kept thinking of how Mrs. Weelee sat that morning in a molded plastic chair at the front of the class, not behind her desk but exposed, soft rabbit in lap, at rest on her skirt. Call him Bigwig, she said, then explained about a heroic character in her favorite novel (Mrs. Weelee taught reading and writing). Bigwig nibbled pellets she'd set on her skirt near his mouth, ears laid back. Mrs. Weelee said nothing else, just stroked Bigwig's ears as Jacob looked on, confused. Would Mrs. Weelee call attendance? Would she collect homework? Minutes passed, then tens of minutes. Jacob expected someone to say something, to raise a hand, to ask for a hall pass. But like him, all the students seemed unwilling to break the silence. Jacob pulled his sketchbook from his backpack and began

to draw. Mrs. Weelee's facial expression had reshaped itself. Its daily chirpiness, which all students recognized as false, had vanished. In its place was a dull, ongoing something.

*Despondence* might have described it. Jacob had seen that expression on his mother's face each day she sent him off to school.

I just never know what's going to happen, his mother once said, answering his question about that look, and she smiled as if to console him but that only deepened his confusion. And that first day, when Mrs. Weelee brought Bigwig and sat in silence until the class bell? That also made no sense and so fascinated him.

For weeks after, he sketched in Mrs. Weelee's room, colored pencils scattered under his chair until other students arrived for Bigwig selfies. Then he put away his drawing tools and headed for the cafeteria to meet Jennifer and Aastha so they could all three share what videos they'd watched on WorldStream the night before. Jennifer and Aastha's parents let them have cell phones. For emergencies, Aastha explained, to which Jennifer added: Like when I forget my lunch bag. Jennifer wore berets, and she chose each beret to match that day's outfit or eye shadow. Orange, sand, turquoise, gray, bubblegum—variety that rivaled Jacob's colored pencils. When Jennifer looked at anything, including his drawings, her overbite and sharp nose suggested that she leaned forward with great interest. When she spoke to their friend Aastha, she often ended sentences with the phrase, You and your Teddy Bear eyes. Would you like to share my banana bread, she might say, you and your Teddy Bear eyes? Aastha did see life through gentle brown eyes though she herself was not gentle. She wore fingerless gloves, an inch-high spike at each knuckle. Middle school isn't for the meek, she often said. Go sharp or get fucked.

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