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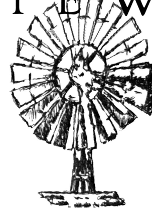

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The Motherless

by Mimi Seydel

Storybook orphans have pluck. They're free to go on adventures. They are loved by their millions of readers. Think of Madeline, the red-headed Parisian with the *bon chic bon gout* wardrobe. Able to impress us on the page with her brazen ways, such as saying "Pooh-pooh" to the tiger in the zoo, while also being adored as a doll, with a trunk full of accessories, she can both have her cake and eat it, too.

The children of the destitute, abandoned in fairy-tale woods, always find their way back. They outwit ogres and witches and reappear on their parents' doorsteps with enough treasure to ensure a proper upbringing forever after. Think of Perrault's *Petit Poucet,* or Tom Thumb. His parents leave him with his siblings to die alone in the woods, not once, but twice, and he channels all his resourcefulness towards getting himself and his brothers back home. He is too busy to be sad, resentful, or angry. Constant dangers keep him engaged.

In real life, these days, even unfortunate children have time to think and feel. Real life orphans look around and know that, to paraphrase Dave Eggars, they are *owed* and they get to take what they want. Too young and too short to see far, what they want might only be the new, sharp pencil on someone else's desk, a few of the candies out of the teacher's stash, the spotlight during math, or a good fistfight. Children missing mother love suffer from a vicious, insatiable greed that will cost them over and over and over again. They are not heroes; their grief is unbecoming.

In the public elementary school where I teach French, there are too many children like this, roughly ten percent, or two per class. Half of these have been rescued by the state and placed in the group home, a boarding facility on a lovely campus with round-the-clock house mothers, social workers, tutors and cooks. The others live with relatives.

Cezanne wanted to "astonish Paris with an apple" and painted still life after still life to get it right. I simply want to wow a few kids with some magic words, the kind that opens doors in the mind as well as in the world. The motherless children are not easily impressed. They have more to teach me than I, them.

Deandru lost his father, then his mother, then his grandmother before his eighth birthday. Now

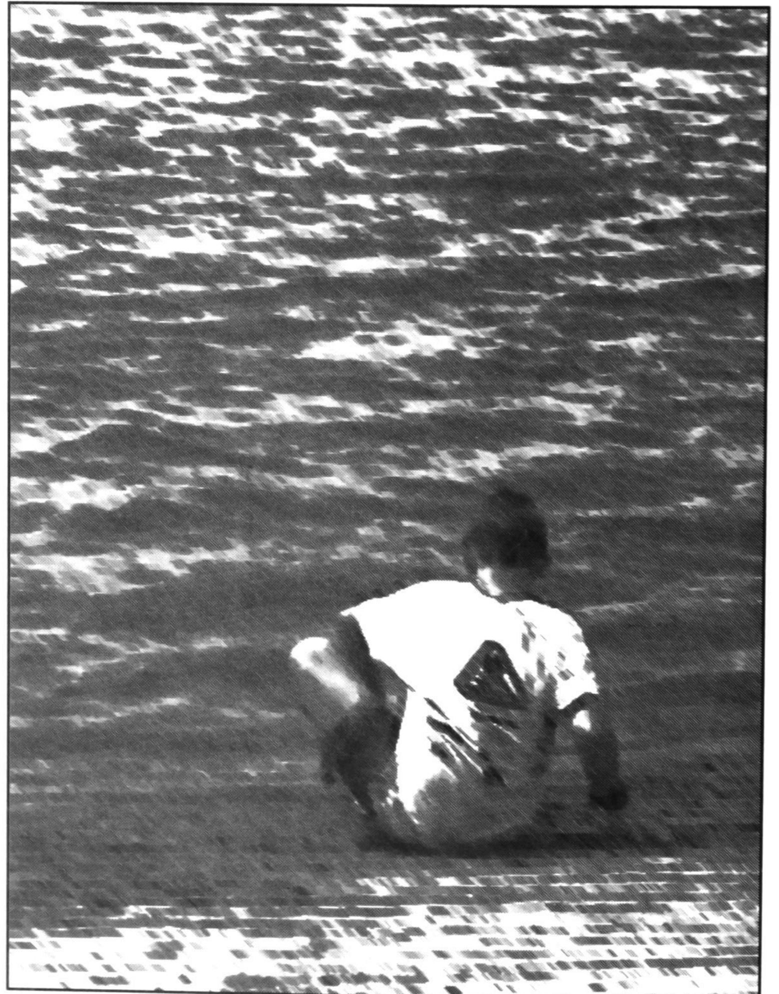

Photo (detail) by Kerri Bentley

he lives with his aunt and two older cousins. He comes to school every morning, arms folded against his chest, a scowl across his brow, dangerously loaded with leadership skills. His mind thinks fastest when it's challenged by authority. His favorite game is to snatch a small treasure, such as an eraser, a Pokemon card, or a barrette, from a fellow student and wait for the sudden but predictable look of dismay. Sometimes he pockets the treasure and sometimes he passes it on like a hot potato.

It's as if he wants to teach everyone else the lesson he was forced to learn early: that what you hold dear can go missing in an instant. It's a lesson that never fails to interfere with my own lessons on favorite foods, creatures of the forest, or birthdays, because it will always be more profound.

We're seated on the carpet in a circle. The students are claiming the toy animals they can name.

"Hey, gimme that!" goes the cry. "Madame, Deandru's got my *le serpent!"*

"No, I ain't." Deandru holds out his empty hands as proof.

"There it go," says a witness. "Tobias's got it."

"No, I don't!" shouts Tobias as he inches away from the rubber snake hidden under his thigh.

The clock ticks on. Everyone's concentration has been broken. As we continue the game, Deandru repeatedly raises his hand for a turn. If I don't call on him, he pouts. When I do, he can't name the animal he wants. He holds our attention as he hesitates. "Say, *'la grenouille,'"* another boy whispers. "Say, *'le tigre.'* Go on, say it," urges yet another. Finally he mutters enough syllables to earn a toy, but he plays the game grudgingly, and takes no pride in either earning a point or learning a word. As the year progresses, the less he will learn, and the more frustrated and disruptive he will become.

Sharita talks, and talks. She keeps her voice just above a whisper. Her eyes may look straight ahead, but she directs her stream of commentary to one side or another, towards one of her three friends. Sometimes, she bothers to cover her mouth. That's the closest she'll come to admitting she's breaking a rule. Last year she was a class star, recalling and storing new words at a prodigious rate. This year she has stopped learning, because she can't hear through her own noise. Her chatter is like an iron curtain, blocking the free flow of ideas. She's afraid to turn it off. Her speaking voice has become to her inner silence what the bathroom light is to the bedroom dark. Her granddaddy's senile and wears a diaper. Grandmomma's been to the hospital once already for her heart. Daddy drinks. Momma can't keep her. Tall for the age of eight, and clever, she's figured out just by how much she's on her own. Her grandmomma who takes care of her takes care of the other adults around her. If her grandmomma dies . . . better to keep talking than to think about that.

Meanwhile she can't, and she won't hear the words I say as I point to pictures of cherries, grapes and peaches, and neither can the people around her. Halfway through a lesson I become aware that my throat is tight and my voice has risen to adjust to her volume. But it's no use. Her English words are too easy for the others to absorb; they jam my messages. No one has learned enough to advance to cherry pies and peach ice cream, and the lesson becomes a bore.

"F***ing S**t!" six-year-old Teesha cries out, over and over, for no apparent reason.

"Make her stop!" begs another girl. Some children have covered their ears.

"You can only learn to say what you hear," I say, putting down my laminated shapes. "Someone said these words for Teesha to hear, instead of nice words, like 'I love you.'" The other children fall silent.

I walk towards Teesha and lead her away from the group. This little girl is a new arrival to the neighborhood group foster home; she has been rescued from some unmentionable, inhumane situation, and plunked down in the midst of socialized, albeit rowdy, children. She's equipped with very

Photo (detail) by Chad Martin

few tactics for connecting. Yesterday, to amuse the other children, she tried to pull the chair out from under her precariously balanced classroom teacher stapling work up on the bulletin board. There is some confusion about her name; I've heard her called Tisha and Tasha, as well as Teesha, but she answers to whatever. Her first day I caught her snitching a wad of discarded gum out of the trash. Her smile is wide, but superficial, not in her eyes. Today, she has managed to get what she needs for the moment: my full attention, a calming voice, a hand on her shoulder. Meanwhile, no one in this class gets a French lesson today.

Augustus colors detailed scenes. I've given him a special assignment to depict the seasons. This keeps him from spitting on the other children, sweeping his hand across the table to knock everything off, or pointing his finger like a gun at me, shooting repeatedly. When Augustus was five, his mother was fatally hit by a car a few days before Christmas. When he was six, his five-year-old cousin Jasmine, who lived with him, was fatally hit by a car while he was playing with her and other cousins in the front yard. Sometime in between those two accidents, his grandfather died of natural causes.

His image for summer depicts a shore that runs diagonally across the page. There is a figure in the water, surrounded by dark blue Vs of waves. There is a black line above the shore line that suggests a cliff. Beyond that line stands another figure. It is an unusually sophisticated composition for a child his age. If I didn't know his story, it's possible I wouldn't sense how far apart the two figures are, how the figure in the water seems to be drowning.

François Truffaut got it right. His portrayals of orphaned, abandoned and abused children tell the truth about the debt that is never paid. Not all of Truffaut's children are as happily resilient as the unattended baby in *Argent de Poche* who crawls to an open window and falls to a surprise soft landing, safe, thanks to not one of the horrified adults watching from below. Most of his children have to

work at their survival. At least one fails completely.

Au Revoir, les Enfants tells a story of betrayal. When a Catholic boarding school shelters a Jewish child during the German occupation, the headmaster is denounced. The Gestapo arrives in the classroom, looking for the boy. It's his friend's nervous glance towards him that gives him away. It's an innocent, accidental betrayal that has devastating consequences within the context of the greater, adult betrayal of the Holocaust. The Jewish boy will die; the friend will bear the guilt.

L'Enfant Sauvage tells the true story of the "wild boy of Averon." Discovered by hunters in the south of France in 1800, the naked, speechless boy with a long scar on his throat had been surviving alone in the woods for no one knows how long. He was sent to Paris for observation, and was taken in by twenty-six-year-old Dr. Jean-Marc Itard, a specialist from the School for Deaf-Mutes. Dr. Itard threw himself into the task of teaching the boy to speak, with the dedication of an Annie Sullivan and pedagogical innovations that would inspire Maria Montessori, but the boy was never able to master language. Though he was able to spell out words, his first word being *lait*, or milk, he remained mute. And he was never completely comfortable in the civilized world.

Victor, as he was called, provides the perfect example of how much we human beings have to learn from the very beginning of our lives, and what happens when there is no one to teach us. Victor drinks by putting his head in the water, until he learns to use a cup or a spoon. Wearing shoes the first time, he slips and falls. Given a bed, he sleeps on the floor.

But Victor lets himself be taught, and he is able to show love and respect for, as well as frustration with, his teacher.

Fed up with the constant cries for any kind of attention except the kind I want to give, I decide to show highlights of this story to my recalcitrant second-graders, in the hope that it will help them to see that, however soured they've been by circumstance, they've already managed to learn a lot of things from people who cared enough to teach them. And they would do well to learn more, while they have the chance.

First, I tell them the story, using the beautiful illustrations of Mordicai Gerstein in his book, *The Wild Boy,* to hold their attention while I give a simple rendering in French. They are intrigued enough to be quiet, so there is time to allow for an English version as well. The children practice their understanding of verbs by answering questions in French about what Victor can and can't do. The day after we view the film, the students make words out of letter cards the way Victor did. The word *lait* enlightens once again.

I will not say that the story of the wild boy has changed anyone's life, or set anyone on a new course. But when I begin the video of *L'Enfant Sauvage* it is Deandru who tells the others to shut up. Out of the ninety children who view the highlights of this movie, not one misbehaves for a second while it's playing. That sets a record.

When the overly ambitious Dr. Itard presents Victor with a too-difficult problem, and Victor responds by falling backward into a four-limb tantrum, we all laugh. I rewind and we watch it again. "Have you ever felt that way, when things get too hard?" I ask, and some of the children nod, still smiling. I'm smiling, too, able to recognize myself in the driven doctor, and admit to what can happen when my well-intentioned high expectations curdle into frustration. Dr. Itard has to discover not only Victor's limitations, but his own. I have to accept that there are needs I can only help a little towards filling, and that the little contributions of many won't ever make up for the love of one essential missing person.

I am satisfied that at least today I am able to give back to these children a lesson that holds their attention, that broadens their awareness, that is finally as profound as the one they've been trying to give me: that is, just how tragic a loss can be.