

EDITING IN FICTION: A CASE STUDY
OF THE WRITING AND REVISION PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents relevant research on accepted practices for writing and revising short fiction, applies the advice to an original piece of short fiction, and analyzes the results of this application.

The following presents an original short story from “germ” to final draft. Four drafts are presented with commentaries on how the research informed the development of each draft.

Specific changes to each draft are discussed and contextualized within the wider body of research. The result is a thorough documentation of how a young fiction writer may utilize relevant, significant resources to develop effective short-story writing via presentation of the advice’s results on an emerging text.

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The genre of short fiction receives frequent attention and commentary; original short story anthologies are published regularly, as are guides, textbooks, and manuals for writing and revision aimed at hopeful or struggling writers. However, the overlap between these (original fiction and fiction manuals) is often sparse. While manuals often reference the invention and revision processes of authors and include blurbs from said authors, the direct analysis of how manuals can be applied to their readers' pieces of fiction is lacking. This thesis sets out to compile research on accepted practices for writing and revising short fiction, apply the advice to an original piece of short fiction, and analyze the results of this application.

The initial part of writing a short story is developing an understanding of what exactly a short story *is*. Rust Hills's book *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular*, considered a seminal work in the field, argues for a focus on showing an event or sequence of events that “cannot happen again” (2). Though a short story is by nature a more concentrated medium than a book, leaving far less room to convince readers of the unique nature of the events within, something about the characters within must be concretely changed. Rather counterintuitively, this change does not have to be a change in character personality or situation—for Hills, the change could simply be that “at the end...there's no longer any possibility for him [the character] to become otherwise than he is” (13). This idea is closer to the sort of action at the center of the story developed in this thesis, as discussed later in the Commentary on Character and Theme following Draft Two.

MLA Style Manual

Several influential authors, chief among them Flannery O'Connor, argue that a story's inception and construction are mysterious processes only successfully achieved by the select few who have an elusive, innate "it" factor. O'Connor also condemns writing with thesis in mind, preferring instead an organic process of story construction. As an example of this practice, she references her own short story "Good Country People." O'Connor says that "when I started writing that story, I didn't know there was going to be a Ph.D. with a wooden leg in it. I merely found myself one morning writing a description of two women that I knew something about" (100). She proceeds to relate the development of the story, which occurred "before I [she] realized it"; she had no plans for the story, and it emerged as she wrote. This practice apparently worked quite well for O'Connor: she claims that "despite the fact that this story came about in this seemingly mindless fashion, it is a story that almost no rewriting was done on." Editing, for O'Connor, is something internal—the need for it can almost be banished through the cultivation of "what Maritain calls 'the habit of art,'" something inherently first-person and intimate (101).

For a somewhat different example, Karen Burke LeFevre argues from the perspective of a rhetorician in *Invention as a Social Act*, claiming that organic emergence in the style of O'Connor (what LeFevre discusses as "Platonic rhetorical invention") ignores the crucial interaction between author and audience:

It limits our understanding of invention in several important ways: it leads us to study the individual inventor apart from sociocultural contexts; it depicts invention as a closed, one-way system, and the inventor as an atomistic unit,

abstracted from society; and it fails to acknowledge that invention is often a collaborative process. (32)

Development of a text must happen with acknowledgement of *context* and the influencing systems around that text, author, and audience. Fiction such as O'Connor's, though she may have written it in something of a solitary rush, still must consider subject and audience.

O'Connor wrote from a firmly southern, Catholic perspective, and her attitude toward good short stories reflects this. She says that

Much of my fiction takes its character from the reasonable use of the unreasonable...The assumptions that underlie this use of it, however, are those of the central Christian mysteries...there are perhaps other ways than my own in which this story ["A Good Man is Hard to Find"] could be read, but none other by which it could have been written. (109)

O'Connor argues for reliance on authorial intent over audience reaction here, an argument which conflicts with LeFevre's on attention to rhetorical context. While O'Connor's reputation as a prolific short story writer is strong, recognition of rhetorical context is essential for a new writer wanting to produce clear, effective fiction. O'Connor's well-developed "habit of art" allowed her to produce stories like "Good Country People" with little to no revision, but her own comments regarding the common reactions of her audience show the limitation of producing singularly Catholic-centered texts for a wider audience.

After the definition of what a short story is, exactly, we may move to analyzing what it *does*. The English author E. M. Forster writes on the distinction between story and plot; though he is specifically discussing novels, his argument can prove relevant to short stories as well:

We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. “The king died and then the queen died,” is a story. “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. (62)

Forster’s works often stray closer to espousing theses than O’Connor’s; *Howards End*, though ostensibly following the intertwined *stories* of the Schlegel, Bast, and Wilcox families, has a *plot* using these stories as allegory for the changing socioeconomic climate of England. Neither the Schlegels nor the Wilcoxes are entirely vilified or praised, and the Basts are largely pitied. Instead of choosing a family to unequivocally champion, Forster blends the families’ lifestyles together in the marriage between Margaret Schlegel and Henry Wilcox and the child between Helen Schlegel and Leonard Bast. This intermingling is the result of a clearer sort of pre-determined thesis than O’Connor would allow. As a short story, though, *Howards End* would be far more difficult to adequately develop without resorting to pure allegory. *Howards End* can succeed as a novel because a novel allows for a length of exposure that the author can use to develop characters from allegory into characters in their own right.

A short story must be far more succinct; O’Connor argues that “when you can state the theme of a story, when you can separate it from the story itself, then you can be sure the story is not a very good one,” advice that shows how Forster’s analysis of story and plot can apply more directly to short stories (96). O’Connor’s use of “you” here, though, allows for some ambiguity: is “you” the author or the audience? It would seem to be the author, since she later says that “when anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell

him to read the story.” However, as we saw earlier with LeFevre, no piece of writing can exist in a vacuum, devoid of context or rhetorical intent. If an author can state the “theme” of her own story separately from the details of the story itself, this could simply indicate that the author developed a solid understanding of her goal in writing the story. O’Connor’s own difficulties with audience reactions could stem from a misunderstanding of fiction’s interplay with authorial intent and audience interpretation.

In researching for this thesis, I consistently found myself in awe of those authors who received visits from the Muse, like O’Connor, and wrote freely without prior planning. In addition, the sources I found often gave interesting advice, but the direct application of that advice was often absent from any presented examples; the exception to this was in Alice LaPlante’s *Method and Madness*, when she includes three drafts of a published short story, “The Company of Men,” by Jan Ellison. The first draft is a very short “germ”; the second is a “full” draft, and the final is the published version (439-455). Even so, however, these drafts are included to show the extent of revision stories go through. They do not include commentary on how Ellison decided to develop a character in one place, remove a particular sentence, and so on. The drafts do not reflect an application of the guidance offered by LaPlante and other advice-givers in this field.

So, how can hopeful writers consume these handbooks productively? How can they see the applications of the accumulated literature-on-literature? The following thesis presents an original short story from “germ” to final draft. The development of the story is directly reliant on the research presented here, though more sources are referenced when my commentary moves toward more specific concerns like characterization and language. The result is a thorough documentation of how a young fiction writer may utilize relevant,

significant resources to develop effective short-story writing, independent of any visitation by the Muse.

First, I found a topic: in an attempt to replicate the organic inspiration O'Connor describes, I spent some time paying attention to my passive thoughts to catch a potential short story topic straying through my mind. One night, as I drifted to sleep, I shot up and scrambled for the pen and paper beside my bed. I scribbled down the phrases "kids take over a daycare" and "old woman and well." I'm not sure what the latter idea was, as I went back to sleep as soon as I wrote these down. However, I kept the former idea, since I have prior experience writing stories about kids, and I enjoy the subject. John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction*, revises the advice of "write what you know" to "Write the kind of story you know and like best," referring specifically to genre, though this is applicable to topic as well, since the two are closely connected (33). Given my experience as a writer, this was an area where I might have some insight that many others lack: I pay attention to children and have spent significant time around them as camp counselor, sibling, fellow kid, and daycare teacher. I began writing with only this short phrase in mind. The resulting "germ" was unsatisfactory and needed significant revision, but I had a five-year-old, who I later named Taylor, the fact that she was horribly socially inept, and the knowledge that some form of daycare coup was forthcoming. A textbook-perfect start.

The second draft is essentially "full," as I worked from an outline to complete it. In an attempt to keep it simple, though, I omitted the final events listed on the outline, which take place the day after the other events. Janet Burroway, in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, says that "even if you begin with an outline, as many writers do, it will be an outline of the action and not of your 'points.'" You may not know the meaning of the story

until the characters begin to tell you what it is” (346). When writing this draft, I knew the points of action. Taylor goes to daycare one day, excited to make friends in a new classroom. She fails to make a friend before breakfast, then gets in trouble for talking in line, but a sympathetic classmate, Sam, decides to play with her regardless. An older kid, Julian, hatches a plan to break everyone onto the bigger playground during recess, but Taylor turns him in. However, I wasn’t sure what the story was *about* in the sense that Gardner and Burroway discuss themes in short fiction. For this reason, Draft Two ends after Taylor tattles and ruins the coup, seemingly losing her new friend as a consequence.

After allowing Taylor’s character to develop over the events of the first day, I was able to get at the nugget at the center: what the story was *about*. Taylor is a little girl who desperately wants friends but who fundamentally misunderstands the nuances of social interaction. The other people in the story (Sam, Miss Valerie, Julian, even Taylor’s father, to an extent) attempt to bring Taylor into the social system which they navigate so freely, but they do so in ways Taylor herself cannot understand. This fundamental disconnect between a person who wishes to understand and people who interact as if she does understand is the core of the story. Burroway argues that “in order to engage our attention and sympathy, the protagonist must *want*, and want intensely” (251). Taylor wants nothing so much as to learn this dance everyone is constantly performing around her, but she can do nothing but stumble as they drag her along.

That discovered, the story needed revising so that this nugget would be comprehensible to someone besides the author. Draft Three adds the events of the second day, in which Taylor attempts to create her own coup and is betrayed by her classmates the way she betrayed them, more clearly showing Taylor’s fundamental lack of ability to

socialize herself. More analysis of this addition is discussed in the Commentary on Character and Theme. The final way of getting the theme across was in the line edits, presented in Draft Four with callouts justifying particular changes.

METHODOLOGY

I began the first draft of an original short story by writing for content and leaving concerns about the niceties of prose for later drafts. Once I came up with a complete draft, I conducted a round of global edits looking at characterization and plotting; then, after the events of the story were nailed down, I examined the story with a microscope looking for out-of-place diction and syntax. Each draft is presented below with in-line commentary on specific choices and changes made based on the research discussed above. The final draft also includes Track Changes to better indicate where changes have been made.

An author's connection to her work can often be a significant obstacle when the time comes to revise. To mitigate this issue, I used an observation from Joseph M. Williams's *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*; Williams makes the point that "as you reread your own writing, you usually aren't reading; you're just reminding yourself of what you wanted to mean when you wrote it" (63). My ownership of the text undermined my attempts to read it impartially as my audience would do. So, as a workaround, I left the text alone for at least a week after writing. I didn't look at the draft at all, and I tried as much as possible to avoid thinking about it. I allowed myself to develop a temporal and mental distance from what I had done and my goals for the story.

This exercise was made easier by the method I used for writing: I wrote quickly, without stopping for reflection or rereading. The near-frenzy of creation contrasted well with the cool impartiality required for self-evaluation. Paula LaRoque recommends this strategy, saying to "stifle the impulse to edit as you write. You'll lose momentum if you do. Can't think of the right word? Use the almost right word—or just a couple of X's—and move on" (178). The time for reflection is during revision; the initial writing process is a vehicle for

plonking ideas on paper just to have them concretely written. LaRoque also recommends that writers “devise a beginning, middle, and end so you know where you’re going” (175). However, in the interest of following the more short story-centered advice of Flannery O’Connor (discussed in the Introduction), I first wrote without a plan in mind. The following false start is a direct transcription of two handwritten pages I forced out of myself prior to following the advice of LaRoque and others.

The picture shown here is a schedule I wrote once I had a “full” draft to work with. Of course, the strict one-week schedule left some weeks at the end of the semester open, so the exact dates often varied by a week or so, but the order of the work was the same. I waited a week to read the story after completing Draft Two. During that week, I researched global aspects to focus on. Alice LaPlante and John Gardner, among others, influenced the

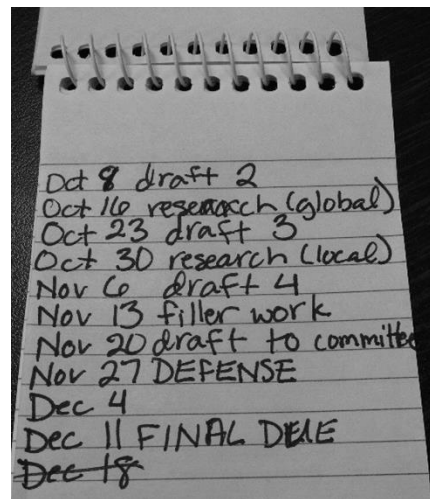


Figure 1: Preliminary Timeline

changes I made in the global-revision draft (discussed in “Point of View and Plotting” and “Character and Theme,” respectively). After discussing my research with Dr. Dalrymple, my thesis advisor, I applied the advice to my own story; this resulted in Draft Three. Next, I left the story alone for another week to research local, language-level advice. Joseph M. Williams and William Strunk and E. B. White, among other authors previously mentioned, significantly affected the changes I made for Draft Four, the final draft of the story.

FREEWRITING: FIRST ATTEMPT

“Are you sure you’re alright, honey? You were pretty sick yesterday. You can always stay home another day—it’s okay, I still have some sick days left,” Momma said. She pulled my long-sleeved shirt over my head—she was making me wear that *and* a short-sleeved shirt today since I had a cold all weekend and Monday. I didn’t like it because they were both a little big and they stuck to each other instead of me and made me feel like I was trying to wear a blanket while walking around at the same time.

I kept my arms down so she would have to lift them one at a time and work for it if she really wanted me to wear both shirts.

“I’m okay, Momma; I feel all better,” I said. Really, I was still all shaky inside, but Tuesday is ice cream day at daycare and Momma never lets me have a whole ice cream bar at home.

She finished putting on my second shirt, and we drove to daycare. I got to have a blanket in the car since it was getting cold outside and Momma’s car’s heating didn’t work that good. When we got there, I went into the big kids room downstairs and Momma went in the office to talk loud to the office lady about money and stuff. I waved bye to her and hurried downstairs.

I used to go into the room across from the office, but last week I got to move downstairs to the big kids and pre-k room. We have a lot more toys there and we get more food for lunch since we’re big growing kids.

I went downstairs and hugged my arms around myself since I was cold even with two shirts on. I hadn’t been doing that around Momma because I didn’t want her to make me wear three shirts. A lot of the other kids were already downstairs playing, so I hurried over

to the toy chest to see what I could grab. All the good toys were already taken, but I didn't want to try and join the other kids playing with them. The other kids still didn't like me too much. Momma said it was because I was new to them, but I thought they were new to me and I wanted to be friends. They should want to be friends too.

I walked to the toy cabinet and looked to see if my special toy was still stuck between the cabinet and the wall, behind the big funny LEGOs that no one liked. It was, so I pulled out all the pieces and sat down to try putting together the ramps and tubes to make a giant path for my marbles to fall down.

COMMENTARY: POINT OF VIEW AND PLOTTING

The first draft was written without any prior planning; I had only a premise of children devising an adventurous plan to take over their daycare center and an idea that the main character needed to be someone a step removed from the real action whom readers could relate with themselves.

The first-person point of view is useful when the narrator is a relatively ordinary person who provides a sense of stability in stories with otherwise fantastical action. An everyday narrative voice can provide grounding and a stable point-of-entry into the fictional, possibly topsy-turvy world of a short story. However, in the case that the protagonist would be an unreliable narrator in some way, the use of the first-person narrator becomes either central to the thesis of the story or a distraction from it. Alice LaPlante argues that “sometimes-unreliable narrators can be used to get at deeper truths” (238). After I wrote this page and a half, though, the character who emerged was too young to notice important details about how everyone else in the story reacted to her. The language a five-year-old has was also a limitation for trying to write a compelling, comprehensible story. She had no idea how to make friends, something most children know without being conscious of knowing. Later, in the Commentary on Character and Theme, I discuss what exactly the story does focus on and how the main character fits with the developed theme.

I then considered keeping the first-person point of view and simply writing from a strongly past tense perspective in which Taylor (the narrator and protagonist) tells a story from her childhood; obviously this needn't have been explicitly established with a frame, only implied via first-person statements of reflection from Taylor regarding how she acted in the past, but this idea of a fully self-aware Taylor didn't sit right with what she had become.

Though I had written a five-year-old, the five-year-old didn't seem to have much potential to grow past her social limitations, at least not enough to later reflect on this episode in her life. Taylor, as Wayne C. Booth says in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “has inadequate access to necessary information” to effectively convey the story (150). For these reasons, I decided to move to a third-person perspective. For the most part, the story keeps to third-person limited with the direct focus on Taylor, but I allowed semi-regular flashes away from her. These flashes serve to illuminate more than an entirely Taylor-centric narrator can—without them, readers are almost as in the dark about what's actually going on around Taylor as they were with a purely first-person narrator.

Booth's analysis of several types of narrator provides some solidity to my choice. Booth primarily concerns himself with “distance” in narration, considering focus on designators of “person” to be “overworked” (150). The narrator I develop is closest (distance-wise) to Taylor and presents her reasonings and actions as she sees them. However, the “flashes” I also include are a movement toward the other characters and the audience: the average reader of a short story is more likely to have some level of social ability than not. The illuminations of Sam's and Miss Valerie's (and, in later drafts, Julian's) reactions to Taylor make the audience share far more closeness to these characters, though the narrator is able to bridge the gap of understanding that Taylor cannot cross. The other characters are unable to cross to Taylor's systems of understanding because they do not understand that she is functionally separate from them in this sphere; without a narrator able to bridge the gap, the audience may never have the wherewithal to notice that Taylor is trapped on one side and sympathize with her. A protagonist must be sympathetic in some

way, as argued by Burroway, and the audience cannot sympathize with Taylor if they do not understand her plight.

For this first draft, I also attempted to keep the development as organic as possible. Aside from the bare bones mentioned at the top of this section, I tried to allow the story to emerge as I wrote it. Though I prefer writing with clear, pre-established points to follow, this system of emergence is one Flannery O'Connor advocates. Since I am an editor at heart and she was a renowned short story writer, this advice was a valuable starting point.

The attempt went terribly. I found myself almost unable to write a single word, even after dedicating myself to the task. Part of my difficulty was the first-person point of view. Inventing action at the same time as developing a problematic, wonky first-person perspective didn't flow easily for me. After that miserable failure, I fell back on John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* to develop an outline for writing the next draft. He never explicitly endorses or decries the methods he discusses, unlike O'Connor, instead analyzing different ways an author might develop a given story. Of the three primary ways he presents—backwards from a climax, forwards from a situation, or borrowing from tradition—the first option matched this process best (Gardner 165-179). My climax was, at least from the “germ,” the audacious takeover of a daycare center by its daring students. Working backwards from there, an out-of-the-limelight main character should give my audience adequate perspective to believe the story. However, as Rust Hills argues, “point of view also controls a good deal of the style and language used, the nature of the perception in passages of description” (126-7). Taylor's vocabulary and syntax are extremely limiting when trying to tell a cohesive story. For example, here are two versions of the same event in the story, written from the first- and third-person, respectively:

All the good toys were already taken, but I didn't want to try and join the other kids playing with them. The other kids still didn't like me too much. Momma said it was because I was new to them, but I thought they were new to me and I wanted to be friends. They should want to be friends too.

Taylor was sad when she realized everyone had migrated to relative stations in the class; she didn't think she could approach them directly, assuming instead that others had to approach her to officially adopt her as a fellow.

The first-person here is awkward; I had to communicate that the other children did not accept Taylor while also implying it was her (unintentional) fault. Incidentally, I believe the last few sentences of this excerpt are the strongest in the entire draft, but they still struggle to express the same idea that the third-person is able to show far more naturally. The wording, of course, is still awkward, but the finalized wording in Draft Four smooths out the blunt *telling* of “Taylor was sad” into *showing* that “Taylor’s shoulders slumped”; since the goal of revising into Draft Two was to provide adequate space for stylistically-and thematically-consistent language, the change in point of view shown above was effective.

After abandoning the first-person possibility, I decided to begin my story in much the same way as before, rewritten for a third-person narrator—the opening line even remains the same. Thinking backwards, I constructed the events that needed to occur for the main character to have any bearing on the climax. Though the brief sketch presented above didn't amount to much, it did develop for me (as the author) who exactly Taylor was; she was no longer a simple fringe-dweller but a character in her own right with numerous flaws and a strong motivation to do well. Because of this, I couldn't allow her to simply watch the events unfold. She needed motivation and an opening to participate. I created an outline of plot points, presented below, to guide my next draft:

Daycare: Outlining Document

- Setting
 - Winter: during school break, so several kids in daycare big room are six or seven, stuck there while their parents are at work
 - Daycare: attached to an elementary school, playgrounds are only divided by two fences with a few feet of space between (balls are often lost on one or the other side of the fences)
- Events
 - Taylor goes to school, still sick
 - Taylor plays with marble run set, hidden behind Duplo
 - Kids are rounded up in line to walk to breakfast; Taylor gets in trouble for trying to talk to her neighbor and is told to move her ball to the yellow bin after breakfast; Taylor forgets. Introduce more children during breakfast.
 - Julian, most talkative, older, and loud one, proposes a game upon returning to the classroom: spreads by natural magnetism of the loud kid: let's break around the fence to get to the bigbig kid playground during outside time before lunch
 - Taylor is drawn in but only watches—teacher interrupts to confront her about not moving her color, insinuates it was on purpose
 - When the plan is in motion, Taylor tells the teachers—trying to avoid more trouble in being implicated in such a dastardly plan
 - Trouble for everyone—no ice cream at lunch

- Next day: Taylor tries to organize a take over (lock the teachers out of the big kids/dining room for ice cream and no nap time?)
- Kids all pretend to play along, then turn her in

DRAFT TWO: A “FULL” DRAFT

“Are you sure you’re alright, honey? You were pretty sick yesterday. You can always stay home another day—it’s okay, I still have some sick days left,” Taylor’s mother said. She pulled a second shirt over five-year-old Taylor’s head, lifting one of her child’s limp arms at a time to guide them through the arm holes. Taylor was clearly still feverish, but her mother simply couldn’t afford another sick day—especially when she was also paying for daycare service by the week.

Taylor fiddled with the two shirts, trying to make them lay flat against each other rather than bunching up in awkward places. “I’m okay, Momma. I feel all better,” she said. Taylor didn’t believe this any more than her mother did, but Tuesday was ice cream day at daycare and she was never allowed an entire ice cream bar at home.

Taylor’s mother gave her a close look: her nose was still running, but that could blend in with most of the rest of the perpetually-running noses at the daycare. She was pale and swayed while she stood, but her mother knew she preferred to play while sitting down, so that likely wouldn’t be noticed by the daycare staff. Her eyes lacked their usual brightness, but Taylor hardly ever looked anyone in the eyes. She fidgeted with her second shirt, trying to make it lay flat against the first.

Taylor’s mother picked up her daughter, wrapped her in a blanket, and took her to the car. Taylor hugged the blanket around herself, more aware of the blanket’s warmth than the cold surrounding her in the rickety vehicle.

When they arrived, Taylor jumped from her car seat and attempted to bolt for the daycare’s front door with the blanket still wrapped around her shoulders. Her mother caught her as she sped around the car to the front door, neatly plucking a loose corner from the

blanket and pulling it off her daughter. “No, no, no, we’re going to be in enough trouble if the teachers notice your runny nose, let alone your runny self,” she said. She threw the blanket into the back seat and shut the driver’s door, then took Taylor’s hand and led her inside.

Taylor immediately ran past the office door, down the stairs, and into the big kids room, which she had only graduated to in the previous week; she was still very excited to make friends, and she believed that the collective early-morning distribution of toys was the best way of doing so. As she approached the doorway leading into the room, she slowed, then came to a stop—she wanted time to survey the state of the room prior to entering. Several kids were divvying Legos by color; others were competing to stack wooden blocks as high as possible. Julian, one of the older kids spending their winter break days at the facility instead of first and second grade classrooms, was organizing a secret game of hide and seek, since the teachers only allowed hide and seek outside, not inside.

Taylor was sad when she realized everyone had migrated to relative stations in the class; she didn’t think she could approach them directly, assuming instead that others had to approach her to officially adopt her as a fellow. Last week, she had hidden what she considered the best toy behind what she considered the most off-putting: the modular marble run set was wedged between the wall and the box of Duplo. Regardless of everyone else, she wanted to play with the set, so she pulled down on her bottom shirt and marched to the hiding spot, hoping some other kids would see her resolute walk and remember they had neglected to recognize her presence as the new friend in the classroom.

The set was still there, so she removed all the pieces one by one and laid them neatly on the ground, organized by color, length, and function. She began connecting the pipes

together, beginning with the longest and trying to create the longest possible path for the marbles to take, but soon the teachers rounded up all the children to file into line and walk to breakfast.

Taylor was jostled backwards to the end of the line—they organized themselves by age—and she tried to jostle herself along in the same direction in an attempt to ingratiate herself. As she passed each classmate, she tried to recall their names and ages. Once she arrived in her place, she addressed the child ahead of her, Sam, aged five and a half. “What do we do for breakfast on todays?”

“Iunno, I think cereal,” he whispered back.

“What kinda cereal?” Taylor asked again. She tried to alter her voice to match Sam’s, but it was a child’s whisper, one that changes only the timbre of the sound, not the volume. She knew the rule was to be quiet in line or forfeit dessert, but she thought the rule didn’t apply to breakfast since her mother said big kids didn’t have desserts at breakfast.

She was wrong. Miss Valerie had expected the new girl, so selectively quiet or rowdy, to speak in line, so the instant Taylor’s rough whisper reached her ear she pounced. “Taylor, you know the rules: There’s no talking in line, sweetie,” she said with saccharine sympathy. “Since you did it today and on Friday at lunch, that’s no dessert for you today.”

Taylor’s reaction was almost entirely inward—aside from a slump in her shoulders and a slight widening of her eyes, Miss Valerie could hardly know she had registered the reprimand. Inside, though, she felt her chest tighten and burn; she realized she had been wrong about the rule, though she didn’t understand how. “Okay, Miss Valerie,” she replied, still whispering.

“Ah-ah-ah, that’s still talking, honey. Now you’re going to move your color ball to the yellow box when we get back from breakfast. Understand? Just nod your head if you understand.”

Taylor nodded vigorously, then slowed the movement of her head; the shaking hurt due to her continued sickness, and she wasn’t sure if Miss Valerie would consider the strong shaking as bad as talking.

The other teacher in the room, Miss Diane, had watched the exchange from the front of the line with a small frown, but she did not intervene; now that it was over, she ushered the children forward into the cafeteria.

Each child filed into their seats, which were organized in the same way as their line; this was to promote camaraderie between kids in the same developmental stages. Of course, this also placed Taylor on the edge of the final table, sitting directly next to only Sam, who now avoided looking at her lest he get in trouble the next time she did. Not that he had anything against her; she seemed nice enough, and he would have been perfectly willing to play together or talk during breakfast, but the incident with Miss Valerie made him unconsciously rule Taylor out as a potential friend.

Valerie’s reaction was far from Sam’s; she was not conscientious enough to keep the admonishment in mind for too long without an immediate consequence. As a result, she spent her breakfast period trying to coax Sam into talking until one of the older kids, Julian, who was seven and three quarters and only visiting the class for the few weeks of winter break, began a whisper chain at the top table. Taylor noticed the slight change in the pattern of noise in the room as a small, two-person-sized pocket of silence made its way through the tables, snaking through everyone in the room.

When the chain made its way to Sam, he hesitated, holding on to his worry about associating with Taylor before passively waving it away in the way children can do for each other. He leaned over and almost hit his face on the side of Taylor's head; she was excited to hear the message that had circulated so excitingly. With his hands cupped around his mouth and her ear and a tickly, warm whisper that required frequent breaths to maintain, Sam delivered the communiqué: "Julian says we are gonna all do a fun thing outside before lunch."

Taylor screwed up the side of her mouth and furrowed her eyebrows the way she had seen confused people do in picture books. She motioned for Sam to turn his head so she could whisper back to him. "But we always do a fun things outside, that's why it's a *playground*," she said. She used the same breath-intensive whisper as Sam.

Sam pawed at his ticklish ear, then motioned for Taylor to turn her head again. "It's a special thing for together," he said.

"Is it a special day?" This time, Taylor forgot to whisper; it didn't matter, since they were allowed talking at meals, but Sam shushed her anyway—they were engaged in a top-secret, kids-only conversation.

"Shh," he whispered into her ear. "Iunno what Julian wants'ta do, but there's something." After that, Taylor and Sam spent the rest of the meal time talking and stealing dips of each other's maple syrup using their French toast sticks.

They continued talking, pausing only when in line to return to the big kids room. Sam joined Taylor in constructing marble runs, though when they raced their courses Sam always won, since Taylor had claimed all the longer, more twisty tubes for herself.

Soon, Julian and two of his second-grade friends, Ben and Chelsea (both seven and a half), made their rounds through the room, gathering everyone by virtue of his spoken fluency and superior age. They all gathered in the corner by the bathrooms in a rough circle around Julian; Taylor followed Sam to the circle but stayed on the fringes. She was mistrustful of him, since he had begun the tradition of lining up by age and systematically pushing younger kids to the back of the line, though the teachers hadn't noticed since some jostling was standard for these young children when they attempted organization.

Taylor felt she should voice her distrust of Julian despite the fascination his advanced age held for her; she also felt she could now that she had an established playmate in Sam. "Why's a plan from you good?" she asked, almost too quiet for Julian to hear; it wasn't on purpose, but she was still stuffy and her mother had hammered into her how loud she normally was when stuffy, so she tried to regulate her volume.

Julian responded matter-of-factly: "Because seven and three quarters is better than five." Then, he continued detailing his plan to his enthralled audience, quietly, so they had to gather closer to hear him. He held an open book he was pretending to read from so the teachers wouldn't suspect anything; he was old enough to read this book, and the kids young enough to belong in the class weren't.

Taylor frowned but couldn't protest the logic; not only did it seem sound, it had come from a more reliable source than she. She kept to the fringes of the group, unwilling to lose the chance of wider acceptance.

Meanwhile, Miss Valerie had spotted her in the room and walked toward her in a violently nonthreatening manner holding Taylor's ball with the picture facing her target. She

came to a stop in front of Taylor, standing partly between Taylor and the crowd to give a modicum of privacy. “Where do you think I found this, sweetie?” she asked.

Taylor gazed up at Miss Valerie with furrowed eyebrows, wide eyes, and puffed-up lips—all expressions she had seen on the faces of confused people in her picture books at home.

“The balls bin?” she responded, attempting to raise the pitch of her voice on the last word in the manner of a serious, genuine question. She had no desire to get in trouble for noncooperation with Miss Valerie, and she hadn’t yet remembered the edict from before breakfast—so much had happened since then.

Miss Valerie’s lips puckered in an expression of well-meaning disapproval. “*Which* balls bin, cutie?”

Taylor’s eyes widened as she remembered—she never moved her ball from the green to yellow bin to show she’d been naughty in line. Miss Valerie, however, took this expression as one of realization of being caught rather than plain realization. “Ah-ha, that’s right, hon. You know what not moving your ball means, right? It means moving it to red and calling your momma if you do anything else bad today. Understand dear?” Taylor nodded and fidgeted with her shirts again. “Then take this over to the red bin, Taytay,” she said, handing Taylor the ball.

Taylor disliked the moniker, but she tried not to make any more faces around Miss Valerie since they always seemed to be the wrong face. She took the ball, letting her arm fall limp at her side as she walked at a measuredly-slow pace to the ball bin. Miss Valerie watched, almost annoyed enough to intervene and tell Taylor to return and walk back to the bin faster this time.

During the exchange, no one but Sam noticed the incident. They were all focused on how Julian explained his plan: to play on the big big kids playground at before-lunch recess, they would pretend to accidentally throw several balls over both the fences separating the daycare playground from the elementary playground next to it. The teachers would let kids through the gate and escort them to the balls and back the first few times, then get bored and leave the latches open so they could retrieve balls themselves. Julian had snuck some zip ties to daycare with him that day, so halfway through the recess he would lead everyone in throwing every ball over the fence, then moving to retrieve them, then using zip ties to close the gates so the teachers couldn't get through to bring them back.

While Miss Valerie was hovering and watching Taylor return her ball to the bins, Julian had actually read from the book, but after, he finished explaining his plan. Sam filled in Taylor when she returned. "We get to play on the huge slide and play pirates on the big ship!" he quietly squealed; he had once played on them during an open house at the elementary his family had attended for his brother, and he was excited to share the secret passages he had found in the ship with his new friend.

Taylor simply fidgeted with her bottom shirt, her eyebrows furrowed in a more genuine, unconsidered expression of conflict. She couldn't afford to be in trouble again today; her mother would be called to take her home for the day, she would miss ice cream lunch next week as well, and she might lose her new friend if she had to leave so early into their friendship. But he seemed so excited; she couldn't decide what to do, so she simply stood as the illicit meeting ended, then followed Sam when he pulled on her arm to lead her back to their marble run set. They stayed there, Taylor slowly coming out of her stupor as the immediacy of the problem fell away from her, until it was time for recess.

The children gathered into a line facing the other direction this time to head outside. Taylor and Sam were still jostled to the back, but Taylor resisted limply this time; she felt more secure now and no longer felt the need to ingratiate herself to everyone when she had an assumedly stalwart friend in Sam.

After an inspection by Miss Valerie and Miss Diane to ensure no children were trying to sneak inside toys outside, the door to the playground was thrown open and the children tried to remain as calm as possible walking across the threshold, only breaking into gleeful sprints once they were well and truly past the door frame. Sam pulled Taylor along to claim one of the better, bouncier balls for them to play catch or keep-away with each other. She stumbled a bit, then hit her stride; despite her discomfort at how the two shirts laid against each other, they did help her keep warm in the chilly Southern winter midmorning. The pair retrieved a respectable rubber dodgeball, narrowly avoiding being stuck with a foam one, which were lousy for bouncing—an especially important factor that day, given the plan in motion.

As they ran toward the repurposed trash can (now a ball storage), Julian ran past them, having already claimed the best three balls by virtue of age, long legs, and being the plan-maker. He removed his jacket as he ran, claiming he wasn't cold, though he snuffled quite a few times as he said this. As he threw the jacket against the building wall, the two zip ties landed peeking out of his jacket pocket. Taylor noticed, but Sam called her forward to the fence area; he had gathered two other five-year-olds to play monkey-in-the-middle together. Lured by the promise of more friends, Taylor ran over—she was perfectly fine with starting the game as one of the monkeys.

She saw how everyone had balls today—Julian and a few others had already begun accidentally chucking them over the fences—and knew the abundance was suspicious. Not a single child from the big kids class was playing with a hula hoop or on the swings; the teachers hadn't noticed, since they were mainly concerned with surveying for injuries or overly-rowdy behavior. The younger kids were also outside at this time in their smaller side playground, so the teachers had plenty of fallen-down three-year-olds to take care of.

Taylor felt a hard, cold lump in her abdomen despite her two shirts. She knew that if the plan went through, she would be sent home and so would Julian. She knew where the zip ties were to show the teachers and not be implicated with the rest of the class in the debacle. She knew she had to tell on Julian.

As she had been reflecting on this, her playmates had taken pity on her never managing to catch the ball even when they tried to make it easy for her, so Sam switched with her so she could throw. She was still lousy at focusing, however, and soon returned to the middle; she excused herself, saying she needed the potty, which happened to be right next to Julian's jacket.

She jogged over, wiping her runny nose on her sleeve (though mostly smearing it further on her face). She made a show of noticing her shoe was untied once she arrived next to the jacket, holding her leg out and shaking it a few times even though she wore ballet flats. Taylor knelt next to the jacket and made what she thought were shoe-tying motions in the air above her shoe with one hand and reached for the jacket with the other. Having grabbed it, she looked around and made a beeline for Miss Diane.

She held the jacket out from herself, trying to add distance between herself and the offending object, as she walked. Miss Diane was busy giving a magic band-aid to one of the

three-year-olds, so she was across a fence. Taylor had to reach a skinny arm through the chain link and tug on Miss Diane's oversize floral shirt to get her attention, but once she had, two things happened at once: she began to cry and Miss Valerie came up behind her, snatching Julian's jacket from Taylor's hand.

Miss Valerie quickly composed her face into something resembling polite confusion to avoid scaring Taylor. "What are you doing with another child's jacket, sweets?" she asked.

Taylor's nose was now running in earnest, and she sobbed stressfully. She refused to look towards Miss Valerie, instead trying to speak between sobs to Miss Diane, who now calmly looked between her and the relatively junior Miss Valerie.

"You take your time, child," she said simply.

After a moment, Taylor developed hiccups from the strain, but she was able to calm herself enough to speak between them. "Julian—hic—made a plan with the big—hic—kids to—hic—cheat over to the big—hic—big kids playground over there," she said, pointing over the fence, where several of the big kids were already on the elementary playground retrieving their balls.

"How was he going to cheat?" Miss Diane asked. She walked around to come closer to Taylor and Miss Valerie rather than attempting to hold a conversation across a fence.

Again, Taylor took time to ready an answer. Miss Valerie moved to grab her arm and take control of the situation, but one stern look from the older woman made her stop, albeit momentarily. Noticing a smidge less hostility coming from Miss Valerie, Taylor risked reaching out for Julian's jacket and pulled the zip ties from their pocket. She handed them to Miss Diane, who now knelt beside her.

“They were gonna all throw their balls over and make the gates stay closed with them but I was gonna be in trouble too since I was in trouble and everybody did it but I didn’t wanna go home early cause my momma will be mad and I won’t get ice cream lunch dessert ever again and—” At this point, she broke down again, though she kept trying to continue to plead her case between sobs and hiccups.

Miss Diane took her into a hug and stroked her hair, then, after she had calmed down, stood her back up and straightened Taylor’s shirts smoothly against each other. “You’re okay, honey. You did the right thing and told us about a problem. You’re not going to be punished, and neither will anyone else unless they try to cheat, okay, sweetie? Now go to the potty and clean your face off and calm down,” she said. She gently spun Taylor around and nudged her in the direction of the restroom.

For one moment, Taylor was elated; she wouldn’t be in trouble any more today, and her plan had totally worked. She felt the cold spot in her tummy warming back up as she thought of how she could tell her mother about what she did. Then, as she pulled open the restroom door, she saw Sam looking at her with a morose expression. The lump returned as she entered the restroom and closed the door behind her.

COMMENTARY: CHARACTER AND THEME

Though I included events on a second day in my planning document, the draft above ends with the first day. Before adding extra, possibly-unnecessary scenes, I needed to decide who, exactly, Taylor was, and what, exactly, happened to her that “could not happen again” (in the words of Rust Hills) and hinted at a deeper meaning for the story than a simple relation of “what happened.” Hills points out a central distinction between plotting short stories and novels: in short stories, “there is just not room for a lot of action for the sake of action” (84). In the case that the events on the second day of the outline could be there “for the sake of action,” they should be removed from the story. Hills even claims that “the more superficially ‘exciting’ a story is—the more full of shooting, window smashing, and fist fights—the less likely it is to have any real consequence or meaning,” so it was almost likely that the end with Taylor turning in Julian could be functionally the same as one that went further to see Taylor construct her own doomed plan.

However, the difference between these stories, once in practice, was enormous. John Gardner argues, after developing a similar example in his book, that

...the sketch we’ve worked out...will be no more than a persuasive imitation of reality. It shows how things happen and may imply certain values, but it does not look hard at the meaning of things. It has no real theme. (176)

Ending “Daycare” at the end of the first day simply relates the story of a time a child told on her classmate. Extending the story to the second day, however—giving her time to reflect on her situation, decide on a course of action, and have it crumble—creates a story about a certain child’s fundamental incapacity to effectively socialize herself and the often well-meaning attempts of others to draw her into the social realm. The story investigates those

characters who are competent in social systems and their priorities regarding assimilation into the system via the perspective of one firmly outside but always, always trying to join in.

With the added scenes in Draft Three, Taylor develops away from “awkward new girl” toward being a character in her own right; she is far more complexly realized with fleshed-out desires, flaws, and thought processes that don’t rely on stereotype. In the same way that O’Connor claims much of her fiction deals fundamentally with “the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil” (118), the story I’ve developed deals fundamentally with how mysterious the inner workings of a system are to one outside it, even while those inside the system barely notice the system at all—they look easily through it while those outside look at it with incomprehension.

The final paragraphs of these two endings from Drafts Two and Three, though they are similar in focus and action, have very different effects:

For one moment, Taylor was elated; she wouldn’t be in trouble any more today, and her plan had totally worked. She felt the cold spot in her tummy warming back up as she thought of how she could tell her mother about what she did. Then, as she pulled open the restroom door, she saw Sam looking at her with a morose expression. The lump returned as she entered the restroom and closed the door behind her.

Miss Valerie stalked toward Taylor, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her to the back of the lunch line, nattering about the trouble she was in after lunchtime; Taylor didn’t register her words, but her tone harmonized with the sound of the kitchen door as it swung squeakily shut behind her. As she passed Sam, she tried to reach out to hold his hand. She wasn’t sure, but she thought he squeezed it slightly before knocking it away and swinging his head around to see who had noticed the exchange.

We take into account Hills’s claim:

Whatever ‘resolution’ occurs at the end is not so likely these days to be brought about by some final development of the plotting as it is by the

introduction of some thematic note...or by a bit of dialogue or description
indicative of a new attitude. (107)

Both of these final paragraphs show Sam reacting to Taylor's actions. Both have negative aspects. Both even feature a closing door. However, the first ending is far more final; the door closes behind Taylor as she walks inside, and Sam simply looks at Taylor with "a morose expression" without doing anything, seeming to indicate that their friendship is over. The second ending allows for more of a thematic ending than a plotted one; the door squeaks as it closes with Taylor and the others still outside, and Taylor has the opportunity to interact with Sam—it's somewhat unclear at this line whether he has noticed and bridged the gap between their disparate social systems, but the strong possibility is there. This is "indicative of a new attitude" on the part of Sam that hints at a development of the theme, which has thus far been strict demarcation between Taylor and the others, into a blurring of the demarcation and a signal of hope that these barriers may some day fall.

DRAFT THREE: AN EXTENDED ENDING FROM DRAFT TWO

The rest of the day passed with hostility that faded into automatic aloofness from the other kids to Taylor. As she attempted to rejoin her game on the playground, the other kids let her join but forced her into the middle and hit her with the ball, hard, one too many times to be accidental. When she caught the ball, they insisted she hadn't and forced her to remain in the middle. She eventually walked away, and all thought of her left the memories of her classmates.

She spent the rest of the day back on the fringes of every activity, trying to find ways to edge back into someone's good graces. She tried sneaking an extra piece of fried okra to give to Sam during lunch, but he turned it away; she tried showing a few classmates how to use the marble run set, but they played with it the wrong way, making short tracks. She tried to tell them their mistakes, but they had become absorbed in their play and ignored her.

Julian had been taken into the office after recess to talk with the office lady, but he only had to sit in the corner until afternoon snack and get no ice cream dessert since he was a big kid and he didn't actually do anything. After he left time out, he and his big friends pretended to play with Taylor for a while but slowly stole the toys they were sharing until Taylor had none and she returned to the background.

Taylor was quiet the rest of the day and night and into the morning. Her mother didn't notice; she had left Taylor at home, seemingly asleep, to pick up a shift. It was alright; Taylor had the phone number for her father, the police, and the neighbors. In the morning, they rushed to daycare; Taylor's mother had another shift to catch.

“Be good again, honey,” she said, ushering Taylor out of the car and into the building. “Don’t feel bad, they’ll forget all about it. No one’s gonna remember yesterday after a while, and you did the right thing.”

Taylor didn’t respond, but she leaned forward a bit, interested in what her mother said about forgetting. She didn’t want everyone to forget. Before yesterday, they had all ignored her—what if they always ignored her if they forgot? She had to do something to make them remember her. Her mother evidently took this lean as an invitation for a kiss on the cheek, as she leaned forward with lips puckered, but Taylor turned and walked decisively into the building, down the stairs, and into the big kids room.

As she walked, she thought: *Sam liked me. But not now. I told. I never knew stuff before yesterday to tell. I didn’t have friends before yesterday when there was something to tell. They like Julian. Julian has something to tell. But Julian doesn’t tell. I need something to tell but not tell so Sam will be my friend again.*

She had this final thought as she came to the threshold of the big kids room, and she came to a halt like she had yesterday, surveying the room for something to tell. She could glean nothing from her classmates’ activities, nor from their toys; however, as she searched, her stomach rumbled.

This was no surprise in itself; Taylor had been unwilling to eat the bowl of beans her mother left her last night or the lunch from the previous day, as she considered eating a social activity. But it did remind her that she had not gotten her ice cream dessert yesterday, nor had Julian since she told on him. Since everyone listened to Julian, she decided to have Julian listen to her so he would make the others do so as well—she knew he could, and ice cream was a universal motivator, after all. She located Julian and his friends where they

were playing hide-and-seek again, then approached. She walked resolutely as first, faltering as she came closer and closer to the older boy.

She came to a stop in front of him. “You do stuff that you can tell on all the time.”

Julian and his friends looked between each other and Taylor. Julian answered suspiciously: “uh huh.”

“You wanna do more stuff you can tell on?”

“Uh huh,” he answered again, perking up.

His friends glanced between themselves, confused. Chelsea tapped Julian on the shoulder and whispered in his ear with her hand cupped; since she was older, she had nearly mastered actual whispers. The only word Taylor caught was “friends.” Julian’s face briefly flashed fear, then switched modes. He nodded at a second question Chelsea asked, then turned again to look at Taylor. “What do you wanna do?”

“I wanna get everybody ice cream dessert,” she said. She sat down with the group, criss-cross applesauce, and began to outline her plan; the rest of the group smoothly moved to include Taylor in their circle with some overlap to protect her plan from the teachers.

They all stood in line, completely silent and still; Miss Valerie’s eyes lingered on Taylor, who stood at the front of the line, and widened slightly, but she had been admonished by Miss Diane the previous day for targeting Taylor, so she moved on.

Taylor was only a few feet from the door. After Miss Valerie stopped scrutinizing her, she tapped her feet nervously and twisted her shirt in her hands. The rest of the class watched her from behind, not quite sure what would happen when she tried to enact her plan. They kept still regardless of Miss Valerie’s scrutiny; no one wanted attention while this event

was gearing up, and they wanted to see everything that happened in such a novel situation as this.

As soon as Miss Valerie arrived at the end of the line, where Julian stood, Julian made to ask a question as they had planned. Miss Valerie turned to him, either to admonish or address, and Taylor acted. She sprinted forward, not bothering to listen to Julian's words—the sound of his voice was enough indication that it was time to act. She reached the large, heavy door that lead into the kitchen and pulled against it with all her strength. After a moment, it swung open with a loud squeak, and she spun to face her classmates, the better to watch them eagerly rush forward into the kitchen and close the door quickly once they were all inside.

They all stood. No one moved to follow. Their eyes flickered between Taylor and Julian, who stood on opposite ends of the room.

Julian repeated his question, louder, though Miss Valerie was no longer listening to him and he was looking at Taylor. “Am I in trouble because Taylor's in trouble?” He seemed a mixture of anxious and smug; the corners of his mouth twitched downward in uncertainty even as he smiled at Miss Valerie.

Taylor didn't understand; she motioned for her friends to follow her through the doorway to ice cream, but they didn't move. Miss Diane came down the stairs and looked at her sadly, while Miss Valerie alternated between looking at Taylor and Miss Diane. Sam did the same as all the other children and looked mainly at his shoes, sneaking a few glances he thought were discreet at the major players in the room.

Miss Valerie stalked toward Taylor, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her to the back of the lunch line, nattering about the trouble she was in after lunchtime; Taylor didn't

register her words, but her tone harmonized with the sound of the kitchen door as it swung squeakily shut behind her. As she passed Sam, she tried to reach out to hold his hand. She wasn't sure, but she thought he squeezed it slightly before knocking it away and swinging his head around to see who had noticed the exchange.

COMMENTARY: AESTHETIC UNITY OF STORY AND LANGUAGE

While I did abandon my efforts to write the entire story without an explicit plan, the unedited writing style remained for this draft. I wrote the events but allowed mistakes to remain and ignored, as much as possible, the urge to match the voice and sentence structure to the content of the story. I wanted to establish what happened before deciding what voice would best accompany the as-yet indeterminate story.

Once I wrote the story and finalized the contents, I stepped back for a time to reflect on what voice would best fit. Because the story most heavily features children, the most obvious choice is a simplistic narrator who uses short sentences. Unfortunately, this had very similar limitations to my original first-person attempt at writing the story. While I didn't need to use the foreign construction a child uses, complex ideas were still clunky. If the story had been focused on themes of simplicity or innocence, it would have benefitted from a simplistic, innocent narrator. However, the story actually focused on the disconnect between Taylor and those comfortable in social spheres, so a narrator with complex syntax recounting a story about children compounded that theme nicely.

However, this does not mean that I kept the original, unrefined voice; my unmodulated writing did nothing for the story, and several passages contained repetitive wordings. I did, though, decide to keep the tone of voice. It lent itself well to displaying a multifaceted situation impartially. I wanted to be able to show the reasons the characters behaved the ways they did without fighting against the voice I chose. To do this, I kept the more complex sentence structure, broke up dense passages, and chose very carefully the moments my narrator could break the general third-person limited concentration. I used the

advice found in Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* to guide my specific edits; above all, I have used the following guideline:

The best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric. When they do so, however, the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation. Unless he is certain of doing as well, he will probably do best to follow the rules. (Strunk, qtd. by White xvi-xvii)

Adherence to convention should inform the ordinary, average sentence; every so often in a work, though, the author may find a rule needing violation to accomplish a goal she otherwise could not. Every sentence cannot be this way, unless we are attempting to write the next *Finnegans Wake*, but I believe several instances in "Daycare" provide justified examples of rule-breaking. For example, rather than "big kids' classroom," I chose to write "big kids classroom." The standard use of the term, of course, is the plural possessive, but I decided to use the plural in the sense of "room where the big kids are." This is far closer to the sense of the term as a child says it. I used dialect in the kids' speech, since children of Taylor's age are unlikely to speak clearly yet. Clarity of speech also extends to the specific words Taylor and Sam use: "It's a special thing for together," while somewhat clunky to read, is a faithful transcription of a child's vocabulary that reflects how the children are spoken to. Adults like Miss Valerie, who speak to children in truncated, oversimplified sentences, unknowingly fulfill their own expectations for how those children will speak. I've marked other examples and justifications of rule-breaking in the text of Draft Four.

Imagery, however, is a different story; while sensory details are important, image-dumps often bury the most significant details. Unless a character's hair color or left-

handedness is significant to the action of the story, these details can be left out for readers to fill in themselves. However, two characters with red hair in a predominantly dark-haired town might point to a blood relation between them, and a sword fight may be thrown off-kilter with the presence of a lefty. In short fiction especially, details irrelevant to the central story are *verboten*. Gardner argues that “one of the chief mistakes a writer can make is to allow or force the reader’s mind to be distracted, even momentarily, from the fictional dream” (31-2). Extra details distract from the story and can destroy the suspension of disbelief without adding anything to the story’s central theme. Even in unedited prose, however, I naturally do not include descriptive details like hair color, height, or clothing, so the culling of irrelevant details, an important step for most revision, was fairly minimal for me. I included several references to Taylor’s discomfort with the two shirts on the first day, but they all appear as actions Taylor takes to adjust the shirts. Informing readers about the colors of the shirts wouldn’t add much, unless I was playing with psychological color theory to argue that a purple shirt symbolized something. So long as the shirts were sources of tactile discomfort rather than visual, the colors were not relevant to mention. The mention of winter was necessary to establish a basis for Taylor’s two shirts and Julian’s jacket.

Imagery is still a significant part of fiction, though, so I needed to examine places where imagery might be useful to add or develop. LaPlante argues that we must “examine all imagery...Is it *precise* enough? Does it push the reader toward an inevitable (and complex) emotional response? If not, focus and intensify” (436). The purely auditory information of Taylor’s sobs on the playground did not provide a strong enough impression of her distress; to that end, I added this sentence: “Her tangled hair was stuck to her cheeks from the tears, but she didn’t seem to notice or care.” Now, readers receive something tactile

to compound on the auditory; instead of simply inserting some mental sobs as they read, they are forced to feel gasping, uncontrollable sobs in their chests and moist cheeks with locks and strands of hair stuck to them. The combination of these pieces of imagery may be strong enough to call to readers' minds childhood memories of how it felt to cry from an intense feeling of being overwhelmed by their situations, a feeling that adults generally encounter with far less frequency.

For sentence-level concerns of stylistic consistency and flow, I utilized Joseph M. Williams's *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. In this book, one of Williams's most emphatic, oft-repeated, and relevant pieces of advice is to "underline the first seven or eight words of every sentence. If you don't see a character as subject or a verb as an action, you have a candidate for revision" (63). Though Williams, like Strunk and White, writes on prose in general, the advice is still applicable—we are looking to develop clear, graceful prose regardless of technical or creative genre. Consider these paragraphs:

Sam filled in Taylor when she returned. "We get to play on the huge slide and play pirates on the big ship!" he quietly squealed; he had once played on them during an open house at the elementary his family had attended for his brother, and he was excited to share the secret passages he had found in the ship with his new friend.

Sam filled Taylor in when she returned. "We get to play on the huge slide and play pirates on the big ship!" he quietly squealed. "I can show you the secret spots in the ship. I was there when my bubba and momma met my bubba's teachers."

The first sentence in both versions is fine; it's short and includes subject, verb, object, and prepositional phrase. The next sentence is a line of dialogue. This is messier, but the messiness is purposeful, so we move on. Now, after the semicolon, the first version uses several short words due to the strange tense of the sentence. The sentence is also triple-compound with three independent clauses and provides no justification as to why they

needed connecting. The second version, however, circumvents the odd tense and clearly provides a concrete subject, verb, and object. Williams's advice to revise the first version results in the second version, which is a far more direct representation of the same material that also keeps to easily-digestible sentence length. More specific revisions are discussed in-text below.

DRAFT FOUR: IN-LINE EDITS AND COMMENTS

“Are you sure you’re alright, honey? You were pretty sick yesterday. You can always stay home another day—it’s okay, I still have some sick days left,” Taylor’s ~~mother~~ ~~father~~ said. ~~He~~ pulled a second shirt over five-year-old Taylor’s head, lifting one of her ~~child’s~~ limp arms at a time to guide them through the arm holes. Taylor was clearly still feverish, but ~~he~~ ~~mother~~ simply couldn’t afford another sick day—especially when ~~she~~ was also paying for daycare service by the week.

Taylor fiddled with the two shirts, trying to make them ~~lie~~ flat against each other rather than bunching up in awkward places. “I’m okay,

~~MommaDaddy~~. I feel all better,” she said. Taylor didn’t believe this any more than ~~her~~ ~~father~~ ~~her mother~~ did, but Tuesday was ice cream day at daycare. ~~Sand~~ she was never allowed an entire ice cream bar at home.

~~He~~~~Taylor’s mother~~ gave ~~Taylor~~~~her~~ a close look: her nose was still running, but that could blend in with most of the rest of the perpetually-running noses at the daycare. She was pale and swayed while she stood, but ~~her mother~~~~he~~ knew she preferred to play while sitting down, so that likely wouldn’t be noticed by the daycare staff. Her eyes lacked their usual brightness, but Taylor hardly ever looked anyone in the eyes. She ~~kept fidgeting~~~~fidgeted~~ with her second shirt, trying to make it ~~lay~~ ~~lie~~ flat against the first.

While the change from mother to father here may seem like a significant one, I made this change based on the awkwardness of having two female characters in the scene, one of whom has no name. Constantly having to say “Taylor’s mother” to avoid confusing pronouns motivated the change—nothing else about the parent figure’s behavior changes, since it was purely a mechanical problem, not a character problem.

~~Taylor's mother~~He picked ~~her up~~~~up her~~ ~~daughter~~, wrapped her in a blanket, and took her to the car. Taylor hugged the blanket around herself, more aware of the blanket's warmth than the cold surrounding her in the rickety vehicle.

When they arrived, Taylor jumped from her car seat and attempted to bolt for the daycare's front door with the blanket still wrapped around her shoulders. Her ~~mother~~~~father~~ caught her as she sped around the car to the front door, neatly plucking a loose corner from the blanket and pulling it off her ~~daughter~~. "No, no, no, we're going to be in enough trouble if the teachers notice your runny nose, let alone your runny self," ~~she~~ ~~he~~ said. ~~H~~She threw the blanket into the back seat and shut the driver's door, then took Taylor's hand and led her inside.

Taylor immediately ran past the office door, down the stairs, and into the big kids room, which she had only graduated to in the previous week. ~~S~~She was still very excited to make friends, which she had never managed to do in the four-year-old classroom, and she believed that the collective early-morning distribution of toys was the best way of doing so. As ~~s~~he approached the doorway leading into the room, she slowed, then came to a stop—she wanted time to survey the state of the room prior to entering. Several kids were divvying ~~LEGO~~~~egos~~ by color; others were competing to stack wooden blocks as high as possible. Julian, ~~one of the~~ ~~older kids~~~~an older kid~~ spending ~~their~~ ~~his~~ winter break ~~days~~ at the facility ~~instead of first and second grade classrooms~~, was organizing a secret, ~~inside~~ game of hide and seek ~~to dupe~~;

I deleted the "first and second grade classrooms" bit and tightened up the rest of the choppy clauses. While Julian's age is important for understanding how he relates to the daycare kids, I present the information later with his actual age in dialogue rather than a nonessential clause.

since the teachers, who only allowed ~~hide and seek~~ running games during recess outside, not inside.

Taylor's shoulders slumped ~~was sad~~ when she realized everyone had migrated to relative stations in the class; she ~~didn't think she could~~ couldn't approach them directly; ~~assuming instead that~~ until the others had ~~to~~ approached ~~her to~~ and officially adopted her as a fellow. Last week, she had hidden what she considered the best toy behind what she considered the most off-putting: the modular marble run set was wedged between the wall and the box of DUPLO ~~purple~~ bricks. Regardless of everyone else, she wanted to play with the set, so she pulled down on her bottom shirt and marched to the hiding spot, hoping some other kids would see her resolute walk and remember they had neglected to recognize her presence as the new friend in the classroom.

The set was still there, so she removed all the pieces one by one and laid them neatly on the ground, organized by color, length, and ~~function~~ number of swirls. She began connecting -the pipes ~~together, beginning with the longest and trying to create~~ make the longest possible path for the marbles ~~to take.~~ Taylor focused on her task: her brows furrowed and lips pursed when two pipes resisted joining, but she remained intent on forcing them together.; Just as she found success on the first pair, though, the teachers ~~made their rounds to gather all the children~~ rounded up the children for ~~breakfast line and walk to~~ breakfast.

I added the description of Taylor's face and behavior here rather than simply telling the reader that she did something, as discussed by LaPlante above. Taylor's action here of intently forcing the connection can point to her larger issue of trying to force connections between people. In addition, the description of her face introduces a recurring image of Taylor's natural facial expressions as opposed to her curated expressions.

Taylor was jostled backwards to the end of the line; ~~—they organized themselves by age—and she~~ leaned into the jostling in hopes that her show of conformity would signal her eagerness to make friend~~tried to jostle herself along in the same direction in an attempt to ingratiate herself.~~ As she passed each classmate, she tried to recall their names and ages. Once she arrived in her place, she addressed the child ahead of her, Sam, aged five and a half. “What do we do for breakfast on today’s?”

“Iunno, I think cereal,” he whispered back.

“What kinda cereal?” Taylor asked again. She tried to alter her voice to match Sam’s, but it was a child’s whisper, one that changes only the timbre of the sound, not the volume. She knew the rule was to be quiet in line or forfeit dessert, but she thought the rule didn’t apply to breakfast—~~since her mother father~~ said that big kids didn’t have ~~desserts at breakfast~~morning desserts.

~~She was wrong.—The instant Taylor’s rough whisper hit Miss Valerie’s ears, Miss Valerithe young teacher spun to face her; the reaction was so swift it seemed planned. had expected the new girl, so selectively quiet or rowdy, to speak in line, so the instant Taylor’s rough whisper reached her ear she pounced.—“Taylor, sweetie, you know the rules: There’s no talking in line, sweetie,” she said with saccharine sympathy. “Since you did it today and on Friday at lunch, that’s no dessert for you today.”~~

While the change here is again cosmetic, it more directly presents the action of the moment; the narrator creates less distance between narration and action, thereby allowing the audience to experience more directly, as discussed with Booth’s *Rhetoric of Fiction*.

Taylor’s reaction was almost entirely inward invisible—aside from a slump in her shoulders and a slight widening of her eyes, Miss Valerie could hardly know she had registered the reprimand. Inside, though, she felt her chest tighten and burn; she realized she

had been wrong about the rule, though she didn't understand how. "Okay, Miss Valerie," she replied, still ~~whispering with the whisper she had used with Sam.~~

"Ah-ah-ah, that's still talking, honey. Now you're going to move your color ball to the yellow box from the green box when we get back from breakfast. Understand? Just nod your head if you understand."

Taylor nodded vigorously, then slowed the movement ~~of her head~~; the shaking ~~made her head feel like her brain was rocketing against her skull~~ ~~hurt due to her continued sickness,~~ ~~and s-and~~ she also wasn't sure if Miss Valerie would consider the strong shaking as bad as talking.

The active figurative language here more effectively communicates physical pain.

The other teacher in the room, Miss Diane, had watched the exchange from the front of the line with a small frown, but she did not intervene. ~~;~~ Now that it was over, she ushered the children forward into the cafeteria.

Each child filed into their ~~seats,~~ which were in the same order they had been in line ~~organized in the same way as their line; this was to promote camaraderie between kids in the same developmental stages.~~ TOf course, this also placed Taylor on the edge of the final table, only sitting directly next to only Sam, who now avoided looking at her ~~lest he get in trouble the next time she did.~~ Not that he had shown anything against her before; she ~~seemed~~ seemed nice enough, and he likely would have been as perfectly willing as any other child to play together or talk during breakfast, but after the incident with Miss Valerie he ignored her in the pointed way a child does—the way that functions more as active avoidance than passive disregard. ~~made him unconsciously rule Taylor out as a potential friend.~~

This information is completely unnecessary. It also conflicts with my later assertion that Julian introduced the age-specific lineup, which is a far more interesting detail for the story at hand.

Taylor's ~~reaction was far from Sam's attitude at the table was almost unchanged from her previous behavior.~~ ; ~~S~~he was not conscientious enough to keep the admonishment in mind for too long without an immediate consequence. As a result, she spent her breakfast period trying to coax Sam into talking, which he steadfastly did not notice—.

Halfway through the meal, ~~until~~ one of the older ~~kids~~students, Julian, who was seven and three quarters and only visiting the class ~~for the few weeks of~~during his winter break, began a whisper chain at the top table. Taylor noticed the slight change in the pattern of noise in the room as a small, two-person-sized pocket of silence made its way ~~through~~around the tables and, ~~snaking~~ing through everyone in the room.

When the chain made its way to Sam, he hesitated for a moment before leaning to whisper in Taylor's ear, ~~holding on to his worry about associating with Taylor before passively waving it away in the way children can do for each other. He leaned over and almost~~He nearly hit his face on the side of Taylor's head, which she had leaned toward him in anticipation—s; ~~s~~he was excited to hear the message that had circulated so ~~excitingly~~secretively. With his hands cupped around his mouth and her ear and a tickly, warm whisper that required frequent breaths to maintain, Sam delivered the communiqué: "Julian says we are gonna all do a fun thing outside before lunch."

Taylor screwed up the side of her mouth and furrowed her eyebrows the way ~~s~~the had seen confused people do in picture books. She motioned for Sam to turn his head and ~~so she~~

Instead of making a simple statement of what Sam and Taylor did in this situation, I now have an observation about children in general; these kinds of observations can be part of "hav[ing] an originality of perception and utterance" that Rust Hills says marks a writer with a story worth telling (x). My narrator makes numerous other comments about how kids behave; let this comment stand to explain all of them.

~~could~~ whispered back to him in the same breath-intensive whisper. “But we always do a fun things outside, that’s why it’s a *playground*,” she said. ~~She used the same breath-intensive whisper as Sam.~~

Sam pawed at his ticklish ear, then ~~motioned~~ gestured for Taylor to turn her head again. “He says it’s a special thing for together,” ~~he said.~~

“Is it a special day?” This time, Taylor forgot to whisper; it didn’t matter, since they were allowed talking at meals, but Sam shushed her anyway—they were engaged in a top-secret, kids-only conversation.

“Shh,” he whispered into her ear. “I’unno what Julian wants’~~ta~~ do, it’s just~~but there’s~~ something.” After that, the secret conversation was over and the thin ice separating children from becoming friends was broken; Taylor and Sam spent the rest of the meal ~~time~~ talking and stealing dips of each other’s maple syrup with ~~using their~~ French toast sticks.

They continued talking, pausing only when in line to return to the big kids room. Sam joined Taylor in constructing marble runs, though Sam always won when they raced their courses ~~Sam always won, —since~~ Taylor had claimed all the longer, more twisty tubes for herself.

Soon, Julian and two of his second-grade friends, Ben and Chelsea (both seven and a half), made ~~their~~ rounds through the room to gather, ~~gathering~~ everyone in the corner by the play kitchen set. This was an easy task; the younger children were all in awe of these older visitors in the classroom. by virtue of his spoken fluency and superior age. They all gathered in the corner by the bathrooms They formed in a rough circle around Julian; Taylor followed Sam to the circle but stayed on the fringes. She was mistrustful of him, since he had begun the tradition of lining up by age and systematically pushing younger kids to the

back of the line, though the teachers hadn't noticed, since ~~some~~ jostling was standard for ~~these~~ young children when they ~~attempted organization~~ tried to organize themselves.

Taylor felt she should voice her distrust of Julian despite the fascination his advanced age held for her; she also felt she could now that she had an established playmate in Sam. "Why's a plan from you good?" she asked, almost too quiet for Julian to hear; it wasn't on purpose, but ~~she~~ her nose was still stuffy and her ~~mother~~ father had hammered into her how loud she ~~normally~~ often was when stuffy, so she tried to regulate her volume.

Julian responded matter-of-factly: "Because seven and three quarters is better than five." Then, he continued detailing his plan to his enthralled audience, quietly, so they had to gather closer to hear him. He held an open book ~~he was~~ and pretended to read aloud from it to avoid ~~so the teachers' suspicion wouldn't suspect anything;~~ ~~he was old enough to read this book, and the kids young enough to belong in the class weren't.~~

Taylor frowned but couldn't ~~protest~~ dispute Julian's ~~the~~ logic; not only did it seem sound, it had come from a more reliable source than she. She ~~kept~~ remained on the fringes ~~of the group,~~ both unwilling to lose the chance of wider acceptance and disinclined to lend him her full support.

While this happened, Meanwhile, Miss Valerie ~~h~~ put away a few toys and checked the disciplinary buckets for students trying to avoid moving their balls, which had names and pictures to represent each student, ~~and spotted her~~ Triumphantly, she picked Taylor's out of the green bucket and scanned the room for the young girl, then walked toward her with aggressive steps that belied the smile on her lips. ~~in the room and walked toward her in a violently nonthreatening~~

The move away from Taylor to focus on Miss Valerie gives a little more context to her actions and more firmly establishes her as an antagonist in the minds of the readers.

~~manner holding Taylor's ball with the picture facing her target.~~ She came to a stop in front of Taylor and held the ball, picture and name facing Taylor, right in front of the girl's face. ; ~~standing partly between Taylor and the crowd to give a modicum of privacy.~~ “Where do you think I found this, sweetie?” she asked.

Taylor gazed up at Miss Valerie with furrowed eyebrows, wide eyes, and puffed-up lips—all expressions she had seen on the faces of confused people in her picture books at home.

“The balls bin?” she responded, attempting to raise the pitch of her voice on the last word in the manner of a serious, genuine question. She had no desire to get in trouble for noncooperation with Miss Valerie, and she hadn't yet remembered the edict from before breakfast—~~so much had happened since then~~ she had found a friend and participated in conspiracy since then, and the minds of children are not well-suited to remembering mildly bad things.

Miss Valerie's lips puckered ~~in an expression of well-meaning disapproval.~~ “Which balls bin, cutie?”

Taylor's eyes widened as she remembered—she never moved her ball from the green to yellow bin to show she'd been naughty in line. Miss Valerie, however, reacted as if Taylor's expression was one of regret at being caught rather than remembrance. ~~took this expression as one of realization of being caught rather than plain realization.~~ “Ah-ha, that's right, hon. You know what not moving your ball means, right? It means moving it to red and calling your ~~momma-daddy~~ if you do anything else bad today. Understand, dear?” Taylor nodded and fidgeted with her shirts again. Miss Valerie handed her the ball. “Then take this over to the red bin, Taytay.” ~~she said, handing Taylor the ball.~~

Taylor disliked the moniker, but she tried not to make any more faces around Miss Valerie—~~since she they~~ always seemed to ~~make be~~ the wrong ~~one face~~. She took the ball ~~and, letting~~ her arm fall limp at her side as she walked at a measured ~~ly slow~~ pace to the ball bin. Miss Valerie watched, almost annoyed enough to intervene and tell Taylor to return and walk back to the bin faster this time.

~~During the exchange, No~~ one but Sam noticed the incident. They were all focused on how Julian explained his plan: to play on the big ~~big~~ kids playground at before-lunch recess, they would pretend to accidentally throw several balls over both the fences separating the daycare playground from the elementary playground next to it. The teachers would let kids through the gate and escort them to the balls and back the first few times, then get bored and leave the latches open so the ~~kidsy~~ could retrieve balls themselves. ~~Julian had snuck~~

~~some zip ties to daycare with him that day, so halfway through the recess he would lead everyone in throwing every ball over the fence, then moving to retrieve them, then using zip ties to close the gates so the teachers couldn't get through to bring them back.~~

This passage was moved to the spot below for chronological consistency.

While Miss Valerie ~~was~~ hover~~ed~~ing and watch~~ed~~hing Taylor return her ball to the bins, Julian had actually read from the book, but after, he finished explaining his plan. He had snuck some zip ties to daycare with him that day, so halfway through the recess he would lead everyone in throwing every ball over the fence, then moving to retrieve them and using zip ties to close the gates so the teachers couldn't get through to force them back.

Sam filled in Taylor when she returned. “We get to play on the huge slide and play pirates on the big ship!” he quietly squealed. “I can show you the secret spots in the ship. I was there when my bubba and momma met my bubba’s teachers.”; ~~he had once played on them during an open house at the elementary his family had attended for his brother, and he was excited to share the secret passages he had found in the ship with his new friend.~~

See the analysis provided in the Commentary on Aesthetic Unity of Story and Language, pg. 42-3, for this change.

Taylor simply fidgeted with her bottom shirt, her eyebrows furrowed in a more genuine, unconsidered expression of conflict than the carefully-constructed expressions she prepared for Miss Valerie. She couldn’t afford to be in trouble again today; her ~~mother-father~~ would be called to take her home ~~for the day~~, she would miss ice cream lunch next week as well, and she might lose her new friend if she had to leave so early into their friendship. But he seemed so excited; she couldn’t decide what to do, so she simply stood as the illicit meeting ended, then followed Sam when he pulled on her arm to lead her back to their marble run set. They stayed there, Taylor slowly coming out of her stupor as the immediacy of the problem fell away. ~~from her, until it was time for recess.~~

The children gathered into a line, facing the other direction this time, to head outside. Taylor and Sam were still jostled to the back, but this time Taylor ~~resisted limply this time~~ did not lean into the pushing; she ~~felt more secure now and~~ no longer felt the need to ingratiate herself to everyone when she had an assumedly--stalwart friend in Sam.

After an inspection by Miss Valerie and Miss Diane to ensure no children were trying to sneak inside toys outside, the door to the playground was thrown open and the children tried to remain ~~as calm as possible~~ calm until they completely crossed ~~walking across the~~ the threshold, only breaking into gleeful sprints once they were well and truly past the door frame. Sam pulled Taylor along to claim one of the better, bouncier balls for them to play catch or keep-away with each other. ~~She stumbled a bit, then hit her stride;~~ dDespite her discomfort at how ~~the~~ her two shirts laid against each other, they ~~did~~ helped her keep warm in the chilly sSouthern winter midmorning. The pair retrieved a respectable rubber dodgeball, narrowly avoiding being stuck with a foam one, which ~~were~~ was lousy for bouncing—an especially important factor that day, given the plan in motion.

Mentioning the time of year was necessary to explain the presence of seven-year-olds in a daycare classroom; it also functioned to explain Taylor's two shirts and Julian's jacket holding the zip ties. The "southern" detail justifies why the kids don't need anything heavier than a jacket or two shirts.

As they ~~had run~~ toward the repurposed trash can (now a ball storage), Julian ran past them, having already claimed the best three balls by virtue of age, long legs, and being the plan-maker. He removed his jacket as he ran, claiming he wasn't cold, though he snuffled ~~quite a few times~~ as he ~~spoke~~ aid this. As the jacket landed next to ~~the~~ he ~~throw the jacket against the building~~ wall of the building, Taylor saw ~~the two~~ zip ties ~~landed~~ peeking out of ~~his jacket~~ the pocket and ~~skidded to a stop~~. ~~Taylor noticed,~~ but Sam called her forward to the fence area; ~~to~~ he ~~had gathered two other five-year-olds to~~ play monkey-in-the-middle ~~together~~ with another student; ~~—~~ Ilured by the promise of more friends, Taylor shook off her concern and ran over. — She was perfectly fine with starting the game as one of the monkeys.

She saw how everyone had balls today—Julian and a few others had already begun ~~accidentally~~ chucking them over the fences—and knew the abundance was suspicious. Not a single child from the big kids class was playing with a hula hoop or on the swings; the teachers hadn't noticed, since they were mainly concerned with surveying for injuries or overly-rowdy behavior. The younger kids were also outside at this time in their smaller ~~side~~ playground, so the teachers had plenty of fallen-down three-year-olds to take care of.

Taylor felt a hard, cold lump in her abdomen despite her two shirts. She knew that if the plan went through, she would be sent home ~~along with~~ ~~and so would~~ Julian. She knew where the zip ties were to show the teachers and not be implicated with the rest of the class in the debacle. She knew she had to tell on Julian.

As she ~~had been~~ ~~reflect~~ ~~ed~~ ~~ing~~ on ~~this~~ ~~her~~ ~~situation~~, ~~she~~ ~~neglected~~ ~~the~~ ~~game~~. ~~Her~~ playmates ~~had~~ ~~taken~~ ~~took~~ pity on her never managing to catch the ball ~~despite~~ ~~their~~ ~~occasional~~ ~~attempts~~ ~~to~~ ~~give~~ ~~her~~ ~~easy~~ ~~passes~~ ~~even~~ ~~when~~ ~~they~~ ~~tried~~ ~~to~~ ~~make~~ ~~it~~ ~~easy~~ ~~for~~ ~~her~~, so Sam switched ~~with~~ ~~her~~ ~~places~~ ~~with~~ ~~her~~ ~~so~~ ~~she~~ ~~could~~ ~~throw~~. She was still lousy at focusing, however, and soon returned to the middle. ~~After~~ ~~a~~ ~~few~~ ~~more~~ ~~minutes~~ ~~of~~ ~~playing~~, ~~during~~ ~~which~~ ~~she~~ ~~was~~ ~~hit~~ ~~twice~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~head~~ ~~while~~ ~~she~~ ~~simply~~ ~~stood~~,; she excused herself, saying she needed the potty. ~~She~~ ~~drifted~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~direction~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~bathrooms~~—~~Julian's~~ ~~jacket~~ ~~was~~ ~~lying~~ ~~against~~ ~~the~~ ~~wall~~ ~~next~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~bathroom~~ ~~door~~,—~~which~~ ~~happened~~ ~~to~~ ~~be~~ ~~right~~ ~~next~~ ~~to~~ ~~Julian's~~ ~~jacket~~.

~~She~~ ~~jogged~~ ~~over~~, ~~Taylor~~ ~~wiped~~ ~~ing~~ her runny nose on her sleeve ~~(though~~ ~~mostly~~ ~~smearing~~ ~~it~~ ~~further~~ ~~on~~ ~~her~~ ~~face)~~. She made a show of noticing her shoe was untied once she arrived next to the jacket, holding her leg out and shaking it a few times even though she wore ballet flats. Taylor knelt ~~next~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~jacket~~ ~~down~~ and made what she thought were shoe-

tying motions in the air ~~above her shoe~~ with one hand and reached for the jacket with the other. ~~S~~Having grabbed it, she looked around and made a beeline for Miss Diane.

She held the jacket out from herself as if the extra physical distance, ~~trying to add distance~~ between herself and the offending object could add to her blamelessness, ~~as she walked~~. Miss Diane was busy giving a magic band-aid to one of the three-year-olds, so she was across a fence on the other side of the small fence separating the big kids playground from the little kids playground. Taylor ~~had to reach~~reached a skinny arm through the chain link and tugged a few times on Miss Diane's oversize floral shirt ~~to get her attention~~, ~~but once she had~~, Two things happened at once: she began to cry and Miss Valerie came up behind her; ~~snatching to snatch Julian's the~~ jacket from ~~Taylor's her~~ hand.

Miss Valerie quickly composed her face into something resembling polite confusion ~~to avoid scaring Taylor~~. "What are you doing with another child's jacket, sweets?" she asked.

Taylor's nose was now running in earnest, and she sobbed stressfully. She refused to look towards Miss Valerie, instead trying to speak between ragged sobs and gasps to Miss Diane, who now calmly looked between her the child and ~~the relatively junior~~ Miss Valerie. Valerie's youthful face contrasted with Diane's wrinkles——.

"You take your time, child," she said simply.

After a moment, Taylor developed hiccups from the strain, but she was able to calm herself enough to speak between them. "Julian—hic—made a plan with the big—hic—kids to—hic—cheat over to

The above visual description of Diane and Valerie emphasizes the difference in experience between the two women, something that was only present in the phrase "relatively junior," which did nothing to call up an image.

the big—hic—big kids playground over there,” she said, pointing over the fence, where several of the big kids were ~~already~~ on the elementary playground retrieving their balls.

“How was he going to cheat?” Miss Diane asked. She walked around the fence to ~~become~~ closer to Taylor and Miss ~~Valerie rather than attempting to hold a conversation across a fence~~ Valerie.

Again, Taylor took time to ready an answer. Her tangled hair was stuck to her cheeks from the tears, but she didn’t seem to notice or care. Miss Valerie moved to grab her arm and take

See Commentary on Aesthetic Unity of Story and Language, pg. 41-2.

control of the situation, but one stern look from the older woman made her ~~paus~~stop, albeit momentarily. ~~Taylor n~~Noticeding a smidge less hostility coming from Miss Valerie, so she~~Taylor~~ risked reaching out for Julian’s jacket and pulled the zip ties from the front right~~h~~ pocket. She handed them to Miss Diane, who now knelt beside her.

“They were gonna all throw their balls over and make the gates stay closed with them over there but I was gonna be in trouble too since I was in trouble and everybody did it but I didn’t wanna go home early cause my ~~momma~~daddy will be mad and I won’t get ice cream lunch dessert ever again and—” At this point, she broke down again, though she ~~kept~~ tried~~ying~~ to continue pleading~~to plead~~ her case between sobs and hiccups.

Miss Diane took her into a hug and stroked her hair, then, after she had calmed down, stood her back up and straightened Taylor’s shirts smoothly against each other. “You’re okay, honey. You did the right thing and told us about a problem. You’re not going to be punished, and neither will anyone else unless they try to cheat, okay, sweetie? Now go to the potty and clean your face off and calm down.” ~~she said~~. She gently spun Taylor around and nudged her in the direction of the restroom.

For one moment, Taylor was elated; she wouldn't be in trouble any more today, and her ~~plan~~idea had totally worked. She felt the cold spot in her tummy warming back up as she thought of how she could tell her ~~mother~~father about what she did. Then, as she pulled open the restroom door, she saw Sam looking at her —a few of the other kids she had been playing with watched her as well—~~with a morose expression.~~ She wasn't sure what their expressions meant, but t~~t~~The cold lump returned as she entered the restroom and closed the door behind her.

The rest of the day, Taylor's classmates treated her with ~~passed with~~ hostility that faded into automatic-passive aloofness ~~from the other kids to Taylor~~. As she attempted to rejoin her game on the playground, the other kids let her join but forced her into the middle and hit her with the ball ~~, hard,~~ one too many times to be entirely accidental. When she caught the ball, they insisted she hadn't and forced her to remain in the middle. She eventually walked away, and all thought-impression of her left the memories of her classmates.

She spent the rest of the day back on the fringes of every activity, trying to find ways to edge back into someone's good graces. She tried sneaking an extra piece of fried okra to give to Sam during lunch, but he turned it away; she tried showing a few classmates how to use the marble run set, but they played with it the wrong way, making short tracks. She tried to ~~tell~~show them ~~their~~their mistakes, but they ~~had become~~were absorbed in ~~their~~ play and ignored her.

Julian had been taken into the office after recess to talk with the office lady, but his only punishment was no ice cream dessert at lunch and he only had to ~~sitting~~ in the corner until afternoon snack. ~~and get no ice cream dessert since~~ Hhe was a big kid older than the

~~other children, so- the teachers held no real fear for him. Plus, since he had he hadn't~~
didn't actually done anything, they couldn't send him home for the day. After he left time out, he and his big friends pretended to play with Taylor for a while but slowly stole the toys they were sharing until Taylor had none and she returned to the background.

Taylor was quiet the rest of the day and night and into the morning. Her ~~mother~~
~~father~~ didn't notice; ~~she-he had~~ left ~~Taylor-her~~ at home with a babysitter, ~~seemingly asleep, so he~~
~~could~~ to pick up a shift. ~~It was alright; Taylor had the~~
~~phone number for her father, the police, and the~~
~~neighbors~~. In the morning, they rushed to daycare;
~~Taylor's mother had another shift to catch, so he could pick up another-~~.

A babysitter is added here to allay concerns about a five-year-old being left home alone. While the detail could have been valuable to include, it would have needed further development and context, which wasn't relevant to the story I decided to develop.

"Be good again, honey," ~~she-he~~ said, ushering Taylor out of the car and into the building. "Don't feel bad, they'll forget all about it. No one's gonna remember yesterday after a while, and you did the right thing."

Taylor didn't respond, but she leaned forward a bit, interested in what ~~her mother~~
~~he~~ had said about forgetting. She didn't want everyone to forget. Before yesterday, they had all ignored her—what if they always ignored her whenif they forgot? She had to do something to make them remember her. Her ~~mother-father~~ evidently took ~~this-her~~ lean as an invitation for him to plant a kiss on ~~the-her~~ cheek—he, ~~as she leaned~~moved forward with lips puckered—, but Taylor turned and walked decisively into the building, down the stairs, and into the big kids room.

As she walked, she thought: *Sam liked me. But not now. I told. I never knew stuff before yesterday to tell. I didn't have friends before yesterday when there was something to*

tell. They like Julian. Julian has something to tell. But Julian doesn't tell. I need something to tell but not tell so Sam will be my friend again.

She had this final thought as she came to the threshold of the big kids room, and she came to a halt like she had yesterday, surveying the room for something to tell. She could glean nothing from her classmates' activities, nor from their toys; however, as she searched, her stomach rumbled.

This was no surprise in itself; Taylor had been unwilling to eat the bowl of beans her ~~mother~~ father left heated for her last night or the lunch from the previous day, ~~as~~ she considered eating a social activity. But it did remind her that she had not gotten her ice cream dessert yesterday, nor had Julian ~~since she told on him~~. Since everyone listened to Julian, she decided to ~~have~~ make Julian listen to her so he would make the others do so as well—she knew he could, and ice cream was a universal motivator, after all.

She located Julian and his friends where they were playing hide-and-peek again. Julian was the one hiding, so Taylor squeezed herself into his hiding spot behind the door of the toy closet.

She poked his arm. "You do stuff that you can tell on all the time."

Julian flinched back, then relaxed once he turned to see Taylor next to him. He answered suspiciously. "Uh huh."

The rewrite of this scene stems from a concern that Julian responded positively to Taylor's plan too quickly. It wasn't a believable reaction for a two-line exchange. In addition, I wanted Julian to clearly be genuinely interested in playing with Taylor. I've established kids as people who hardly ever remember grudges for more than a day, and I wanted Julian's reaction to Taylor to be transparent until Chelsea and Ben make him realize he is jeopardizing his status by interacting with Taylor the pariah. Now, Julian's real responses to Taylor develop over several pieces of dialogue and are contradicted by what Taylor overhears from Chelsea and Ben.

“You wanna do more stuff you can tell on?”

“Uh huh,” he answered again, perking up. “What do you wanna do?”

Taylor sucked on her bottom lip and furrowed her eyebrows. “Iunno, that’s your job.”

“You gotta have something to do to have something to tell on,” said Julian, somewhat less enthusiastic.

Taylor tapped her fingers on her chin. “Ice cream?”

Julian let down his guard completely; he was excited for this new idea. He squeezed behind Taylor and out from behind the door to wave his friends over. Now that he had a goal, he jabbered about possible plans. Chelsea and Ben looked confused at first, but soon nodded along with him. Taylor watched from behind the door—she didn’t want Julian’s tall, scary friends to notice her.

As Julian finished delivering an idea, Taylor ventured out.

His friends glanced between themselves, confused. Chelsea tapped Julian on the shoulder and whispered in his ear with her hand cupped. Since she was older, she had nearly mastered actual whispers, so the only word Taylor caught was “friends.” Julian’s face briefly flashed wide-eyed fear, then returned to excitement—though it seemed more static than before. Chelsea whispered again in his ear—this time Taylor heard “pretend”—and Julian nodded quickly at her before turning to look at Taylor. “You wanna do it?”

“I wanna get everybody ice cream dessert,” she said.

“Then here’s the plan,” Julian said. He glanced toward his friends, then at the teachers, and finally bent down to whisper in Taylor’s ear.

~~She located Julian and his friends where they were playing hide and seek again, then approached. She walked resolutely as first, faltering as she came closer and closer to the older boy.~~

~~She came to a stop in front of him. “You do stuff that you can tell on all the time.”~~

~~Julian and his friends looked between each other and Taylor. Julian answered suspiciously: “uh huh.”~~

~~“You wanna do more stuff you can tell on?”~~

~~“Uh huh,” he answered again, perking up.~~

~~His friends glanced between themselves, confused. Chelsea tapped Julian on the shoulder and whispered in his ear with her hand cupped; since she was older, she had nearly mastered actual whispers. The only word Taylor caught was “friends.” Julian’s face briefly flashed fear, then switched modes. He nodded at a second question Chelsea asked, then turned again to look at Taylor. “What do you wanna do?”~~

~~“I wanna get everybody ice cream dessert,” she said. She sat down with the group, criss-cross applesauce, and began to outline her plan; the rest of the group smoothly moved to include Taylor in their circle with some overlap to protect her plan from the teachers.~~

They all stood in line, completely silent and still; Miss Valerie’s eyes lingered on Taylor, who now took~~stood at~~ the front of the line, and widened slightly, but she had been admonished by Miss Diane the previous day for targeting Taylor. , so S~~she~~ moved on.

Taylor was only a few feet from the door. After Miss Valerie ~~stopped scrutinizing her~~moved on to chastise another girl for her ~~runny nose~~, Taylor~~she~~ tapped her feet nervously and twisted her shirt in her hands. The rest of the class watched her from behind,

not quite sure what would happen when she tried to enact her plan. They kept still without noticing regardless of Miss Valerie's scrutiny; no one wanted her attention while this strange event was gearing up, and they wanted to see everything that happened in such a novel situation as this.

As soon as Miss Valerie arrived at the end of the line, where Julian stood, Julian made to ask a distracting question as they had planned. Miss Valerie turned to him, either to admonish or address, and Taylor acted. She sprinted forward, not bothering to listen to Julian's words—the sound of his voice was enough indication that it was time to act. She reached the large, heavy door that lead into the kitchen and pulled against it with all her strength. After a moment, it swung open with a loud squeak, and she spun to face her classmates, the better to watch them eagerly rush forward into the kitchen and close the door quickly once they were all inside.

They all stood. No one moved to follow. Their eyes flickered between Taylor and Julian, who stood on opposite ends of the room.

Julian repeated his question, louder, though Miss Valerie was no longer listening to him and he was looking at Taylor. "Am I in trouble because Taylor's in trouble?" He seemed-looked a mixture of anxious and smug; the corners of his mouth twitched downward in uncertainty even as he smiled at Miss Valerie.

Taylor didn't understand; she motioned for her friends to follow her through the doorway to ice cream, but they didn't move. Miss Diane came down the stairs and looked at her sadly, while Miss Valerie alternated between looking triumphantly at Taylor and Miss Diane. Sam and-did the same as all the other children and looked mainly down at his their

~~shoes shoes and snuck, sneaking~~ a few ~~glances he thought were hopefully-~~discreet ~~glances~~
at the major players in the room.

Miss Valerie stalked toward Taylor, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her to the back of the lunch line, nattering about the trouble she was in after lunchtime; Taylor didn't register her words, but her tone harmonized with the sound of the kitchen door as it ~~swung~~ ~~squeakily shuts~~squeaked shut behind her. ~~When~~As she passed Sam, she tried to reach out to hold his hand. She wasn't sure, but she thought he squeezed it slightly before knocking it away and swinging his head around to see who had noticed ~~the exchange~~.

See Commentary on Character and Theme, pg. 32-3, for discussion of the concluding sentence.

CONCLUSIONS

The invention process documented above was informed by research into accepted practices for writing and revising short fiction. The transparency of the entire process means that any reader could utilize this thesis as a blueprint for developing their own short fiction with confidence that the authors discussed here have made usable, practical contributions to the literature on literature.

To prove that the writing in Draft Four is concretely stronger than the writing in earlier drafts, I ran the texts through Word's readability statistics and The Writer's Diet online diagnosis tool. Draft Two is not directly mentioned here, since its main body of text is identical to Draft Three. The average words per sentence went down between Drafts Three and Four, though the average characters per word remained the same at 4.4; this is significantly shorter than my average word length in essays, signaling a less challenging text that allows readers to immerse themselves without becoming exhausted by an abundance of longer words. The average word length in Draft One, however, is 3.8, reflecting the stilted language the first-person narrator forced into the writing. The Flesch-Kincaid grade levels of the drafts show the same trend. Draft One was rated 6.2, Draft Three was rated 8.0, and Draft Four was rated 7.6. The simplicity present in Draft One was overrun by my unfiltered third-person prose, but the revision from Draft Three to Four mitigated that large rise in complexity.

The Writer's Diet is an online diagnostics tool that analyzes frequency of parts of speech (be-verbs, prepositions, adjectives/adverbs, etc.) to highlight possible areas in need of revision. In analyzing Draft One, a selection of 461 words, the tool rated my writing "flabby" on be-verbs. The tool's analysis of the equivalent sections in Drafts Three and Four

returned “lean” in all categories; the lack of change between these diagnoses indicates that the changes I made were phrase-level rather than word-level. In other words, I focused on rearranging phrases to present information in more logical order rather than specifically concerning myself with removing filler words. Other samples I ran from Draft Four generally came back lean in all categories, though a few spots were flagged for slight overuse of be-verbs and prepositions. Since the tool is purely numbers-based not specifically geared toward fiction writing, I reviewed these sections without making changes to the text—I had used this less-direct writing as a tool for immersing the reader in a stressful situation, so this violation of rule was justified.

The result here—the short story “Daycare”—is analyzed throughout the thesis as I examined the kind of story I set out to write and the story that emerged. The process taken, from germ to final draft, was entirely informed by the research discussed, though I mention my personal experience with writing when necessary to contextualize more particular decisions. In all, this thesis can function as a tool for hopeful writers to see the results of writing advice as they play out on an emerging text.

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APPENDIX: UNMARKED FINAL DRAFT

“Are you sure you’re alright, honey? You were pretty sick yesterday. You can always stay home another day—it’s okay, I still have some sick days left,” Taylor’s father said. He pulled a second shirt over five-year-old Taylor’s head, lifting one of her limp arms at a time to guide them through the arm holes. Taylor was clearly still feverish, but he simply couldn’t afford another sick day—especially when he was also paying for daycare service by the week.

Taylor fiddled with the two shirts, trying to make them lie flat against each other rather than bunching up in awkward places. “I’m okay, Daddy. I feel all better,” she said. Taylor didn’t believe this any more than her father did, but Tuesday was ice cream day at daycare. She was never allowed an entire ice cream bar at home.

He gave Taylor a close look: her nose was still running, but that could blend in with most of the rest of the perpetually-running noses at the daycare. She was pale and swayed while she stood, but he knew she preferred to play while sitting down, so that likely wouldn’t be noticed by the daycare staff. Her eyes lacked their usual brightness, but Taylor hardly ever looked anyone in the eyes. She kept fidgeting with her second shirt, trying to make it lie flat against the first.

He picked her up, wrapped her in a blanket, and took her to the car. Taylor hugged the blanket around herself, more aware of the blanket’s warmth than the cold surrounding her in the rickety vehicle.

When they arrived, Taylor jumped from her car seat and attempted to bolt for the daycare’s front door with the blanket still wrapped around her shoulders. Her father caught her as she sped around the car to the front door, neatly plucking a loose corner from the

blanket and pulling it off her. “No, no, no, we’re going to be in enough trouble if the teachers notice your runny nose, let alone your runny self,” he said. He threw the blanket into the back seat and shut the driver’s door, then took Taylor’s hand and led her inside.

Taylor immediately ran past the office door, down the stairs, and into the big kids room, which she had only graduated to in the previous week. She was still very excited to make friends, which she had never managed to do in the four-year-old classroom, and she believed that the collective early-morning distribution of toys was the best way of doing so. As she approached the doorway leading into the room, she slowed, then came to a stop—she wanted time to survey the state of the room prior to entering. Several kids were divvying LEGO by color; others were competing to stack wooden blocks as high as possible. Julian, an older kid spending his winter break at the facility, was organizing a secret, inside game of hide and seek to dupe the teachers, who only allowed running games during recess.

Taylor’s shoulders slumped when she realized everyone had migrated to relative stations in the class; she couldn’t approach them directly until the others had approached and officially adopted her as a fellow. Last week, she had hidden what she considered the best toy behind what she considered the most off-putting: the modular marble run set was wedged between the wall and the box of DUPLO bricks. Regardless of everyone else, she wanted to play with the set, so she pulled down on her bottom shirt and marched to the hiding spot, hoping some other kids would see her resolute walk and remember they had neglected to recognize her presence as the new friend in the classroom.

The set was still there, so she removed all the pieces one by one and laid them neatly on the ground, organized by color, length, and number of swirls. She began connecting the pipes to make the longest possible path for the marbles. Taylor focused on her task: her

brows furrowed and lips pursed when two pipes resisted joining, but she remained intent on forcing them together. Just as she found success on the first pair, though, the teachers rounded up the children for breakfast.

Taylor was jostled backwards to the end of the line; she leaned into the jostling in hopes that her show of conformity would signal her eagerness to make friends. As she passed each classmate, she tried to recall their names and ages. Once she arrived in her place, she addressed the child ahead of her, Sam, aged five and a half. “What do we do for breakfast on todays?”

“Iunno, I think cereal,” he whispered back.

“What kinda cereal?” Taylor asked again. She tried to alter her voice to match Sam’s, but it was a child’s whisper, one that changes only the timbre of the sound, not the volume. She knew the rule was to be quiet in line or forfeit dessert, but she thought the rule didn’t apply to breakfast—her father said that big kids didn’t have morning desserts.

The instant Taylor’s rough whisper hit Miss Valerie’s ears, the young teacher spun to face her; the reaction was so swift it seemed planned. “Taylor, sweetie, you know the rules: There’s no talking in line,” she said with saccharine sympathy. “Since you did it today and on Friday at lunch, that’s no dessert for you today.”

Taylor’s reaction was almost entirely invisible—aside from a slump in her shoulders and a slight widening of her eyes, Miss Valerie could hardly know she had registered the reprimand. Inside, though, she felt her chest tighten and burn; she realized she had been wrong about the rule, though she didn’t understand how. “Okay, Miss Valerie,” she replied, still with the whisper she had used with Sam.

“Ah-ah-ah, that’s still talking, honey. Now you’re going to move your color ball to the yellow box from the green box when we get back from breakfast. Understand? Just nod your head if you understand.”

Taylor nodded vigorously, then slowed the movement; the shaking made her head feel like her brain was rocketing against her skull, and she also wasn’t sure if Miss Valerie would consider the strong shaking as bad as talking.

The other teacher in the room, Miss Diane, had watched the exchange from the front of the line with a small frown, but she did not intervene. Now that it was over, she ushered the children forward into the cafeteria.

Each child filed into the seats in the same order they had been in line. This placed Taylor on the edge of the final table, only sitting next to Sam, who now avoided looking at her. Not that he had shown anything against her before; she seemed nice enough, and he likely would have been as willing as any other child to play together or talk during breakfast, but after the incident with Miss Valerie he ignored her in the pointed way a child does—the way that functions more as active avoidance than passive disregard.

Taylor’s attitude at the table was almost unchanged from her previous behavior. She was not conscientious enough to keep the admonishment in mind for too long without an immediate consequence. As a result, she spent her breakfast period trying to coax Sam into talking, which he steadfastly did not notice.

Halfway through the meal, one of the older students, Julian, who was seven and three quarters and only visiting the class during his winter break, began a whisper chain at the top table. Taylor noticed the slight change in the pattern of noise in the room as a small, two-

person-sized pocket of silence made its way around the tables and snaked through everyone in the room.

When the chain made its way to Sam, he hesitated for a moment before leaning to whisper in Taylor's ear. He nearly hit his face on the side of Taylor's head, which she had leaned toward him in anticipation—she was excited to hear the message that had circulated so secretively. With his hands cupped around his mouth and her ear and a tickly, warm whisper that required frequent breaths to maintain, Sam delivered the communiqué: “Julian says we are gonna all do a fun thing outside before lunch.”

Taylor screwed up the side of her mouth and furrowed her eyebrows the way she had seen confused people do in picture books. She motioned for Sam to turn his head and whispered back to him in the same breath-intensive whisper. “But we always do a fun thing outside, that's why it's a *playground*,” she said.

Sam pawed at his ticklish ear, then gestured for Taylor to turn her head again. “He says it's a special thing for together.”

“Is it a special day?” This time, Taylor forgot to whisper; it didn't matter, since they were allowed talking at meals, but Sam shushed her anyway—they were engaged in a top-secret, kids-only conversation.

“Shh,” he whispered into her ear. “I'unno what Julian wants'a do, it's just something.” After that, the secret conversation was over and the thin ice separating children from becoming friends was broken; Taylor and Sam spent the rest of the meal talking and stealing dips of each other's maple syrup with French toast sticks.

They continued talking, pausing only when in line to return to the big kids room. Sam joined Taylor in constructing marble runs, though Sam always won when they raced their courses—Taylor had claimed all the longer, more twisty tubes for herself.

Soon, Julian and two of his second-grade friends, Ben and Chelsea (both seven and a half), made rounds through the room to gather everyone in the corner by the play kitchen set. This was an easy task; the younger children were all in awe of these older visitors in the classroom. They formed a rough circle around Julian; Taylor followed Sam to the circle but stayed on the fringes. She was mistrustful of him, since he had begun the tradition of lining up by age and systematically pushing younger kids to the back of the line, though the teachers hadn't noticed, since jostling was standard for young children when they tried to organize themselves.

Taylor felt she should voice her distrust of Julian despite the fascination his advanced age held for her; she also felt she could now that she had an established playmate in Sam. "Why's a plan from you good?" she asked, almost too quiet for Julian to hear; it wasn't on purpose, but her nose was still stuffy and her father had hammered into her how loud she often was when stuffy, so she tried to regulate her volume.

Julian responded matter-of-factly: "Because seven and three quarters is better than five." Then, he continued detailing his plan to his enthralled audience, quietly, so they had to gather closer to hear him. He held an open book and pretended to read aloud from it to avoid the teachers' suspicion.

Taylor frowned but couldn't dispute Julian's logic; not only did it seem sound, it had come from a more reliable source than she. She remained on the fringes, both unwilling to lose the chance of wider acceptance and disinclined to lend him her full support.

While this happened, Miss Valerie put away a few toys and checked the disciplinary buckets for students trying to avoid moving their balls, which had names and pictures to represent each student. Triumphant, she picked Taylor's out of the green bucket and scanned the room for the young girl, then walked toward her with aggressive steps that belied the smile on her lips. She came to a stop in front of Taylor and held the ball, picture and name facing Taylor, right in front of the girl's face. "Where do you think I found this, sweetie?" she asked.

Taylor gazed up at Miss Valerie with furrowed eyebrows, wide eyes, and puffed-up lips—all expressions she had seen on the faces of confused people in her picture books at home.

"The balls bin?" she responded, attempting to raise the pitch of her voice on the last word in the manner of a serious, genuine question. She had no desire to get in trouble for noncooperation with Miss Valerie, and she hadn't yet remembered the edict from before breakfast—she had found a friend and participated in conspiracy since then, and the minds of children are not well-suited to remembering mildly bad things.

Miss Valerie's lips puckered. "*Which* balls bin, cutie?"

Taylor's eyes widened as she remembered—she never moved her ball from the green to yellow bin to show she'd been naughty in line. Miss Valerie, however, reacted as if Taylor's expression was one of regret at being caught rather than remembrance. "Ah-ha, that's right, hon. You know what not moving your ball means, right? It means moving it to red and calling your daddy if you do anything else bad today. Understand, dear?" Taylor nodded and fidgeted with her shirts. Miss Valerie handed her the ball. "Then take this over to the red bin, Taytay."

Taylor disliked the moniker, but she tried not to make any more faces around Miss Valerie—she always seemed to make the wrong one. She took the ball and let her arm fall limp at her side as she walked at a measured pace to the ball bin. Miss Valerie watched, almost annoyed enough to intervene and tell Taylor to return and walk back to the bin faster this time.

No one but Sam noticed the incident. They were all focused on how Julian explained his plan: to play on the big-big kids playground at before-lunch recess, they would pretend to accidentally throw several balls over both the fences separating the daycare playground from the elementary playground next to it. The teachers would let kids through the gate and escort them to the balls and back the first few times, then get bored and leave the latches open so the kids could retrieve balls themselves.

While Miss Valerie hovered and watched Taylor return her ball to the bins, Julian had actually read from the book, but after, he finished explaining his plan. He had snuck some zip ties to daycare with him that day, so halfway through the recess he would lead everyone in throwing every ball over the fence, then moving to retrieve them and using zip ties to close the gates so the teachers couldn't get through to force them back.

Sam filled in Taylor when she returned. “We get to play on the huge slide and play pirates on the big ship!” he quietly squealed. “I can show you the secret spots in the ship. I was there when my bubba and momma met my bubba’s teachers.”

Taylor simply fidgeted with her bottom shirt, her eyebrows furrowed in a more genuine, unconsidered expression of conflict than the carefully-constructed expressions she prepared for Miss Valerie. She couldn't afford to be in trouble again today; her father would be called to take her home, she would miss ice cream lunch next week as well, and she might

lose her new friend if she had to leave so early into their friendship. But he seemed so excited; she couldn't decide what to do, so she simply stood as the illicit meeting ended, then followed Sam when he pulled on her arm to lead her back to their marble run set. They stayed there, Taylor slowly coming out of her stupor as the immediacy of the problem fell away.

The children gathered into a line, facing the other direction this time, to head outside. Taylor and Sam were still jostled to the back, but this time Taylor did not lean into the pushing; she no longer felt the need to ingratiate herself to everyone when she had an assumedly-stalwart friend in Sam.

After an inspection by Miss Valerie and Miss Diane to ensure no children were trying to sneak inside toys outside, the door to the playground was thrown open and the children tried to remain calm until they completely crossed the threshold, only breaking into gleeful sprints once they were well and truly past the doorframe. Sam pulled Taylor along to claim one of the better, bouncier balls for them to play catch or keep-away with each other. Despite her discomfort at how her two shirts laid against each other, they helped her keep warm in the chilly southern winter midmorning. The pair retrieved a respectable rubber dodgeball, narrowly avoiding being stuck with a foam one, which was lousy for bouncing—an especially important factor that day, given the plan in motion.

As they had run toward the repurposed trash can (now a ball storage), Julian ran past them, having already claimed the best three balls by virtue of age, long legs, and being the plan-maker. He removed his jacket as he ran, claiming he wasn't cold, though he snuffled as he spoke. As the jacket landed next to the wall of the building, Taylor saw zip ties peeking

out of the pocket and skidded to a stop. Sam called her forward to the fence area to play monkey-in-the-middle with another student; lured by the promise of more friends, Taylor shook off her concern and ran over. She was perfectly fine with starting the game as one of the monkeys.

She saw how everyone had balls today—Julian and a few others had already begun chucking them over the fences—and knew the abundance was suspicious. Not a single child from the big kids class was playing with a hula hoop or on the swings; the teachers hadn't noticed, since they were mainly concerned with surveying for injuries or overly-rowdy behavior. The younger kids were also outside at this time in their smaller playground, so the teachers had plenty of fallen-down three-year-olds to take care of.

Taylor felt a hard, cold lump in her abdomen despite her two shirts. She knew that if the plan went through, she would be sent home along with Julian. She knew where the zip ties were to show the teachers and not be implicated with the rest of the class in the debacle. She knew she had to tell on Julian.

As she reflected on her situation, she neglected the game. Her playmates took pity on her never managing to catch the ball despite their occasional attempts to give her easy passes, so Sam switched places with her. She was still lousy at focusing, however, and soon returned to the middle. After a few more minutes of playing, during which she was hit twice in the head while she simply stood, she excused herself, saying she needed the potty. She drifted in the direction of the bathrooms—Julian's jacket was lying against the wall next to the bathroom door.

Taylor wiped her runny nose on her sleeve. She made a show of noticing her shoe was untied once she arrived next to the jacket, holding her leg out and shaking it a few times

even though she wore ballet flats. Taylor knelt down and made what she thought were shoe-tying motions in the air with one hand and reached for the jacket with the other. She looked around and made a beeline for Miss Diane.

She held the jacket out from herself as if the extra physical distance between herself and the offending object could add to her blamelessness. Miss Diane was busy giving a magic band-aid to one of the three-year-olds, so she was on the other side of the small fence separating the big kids playground from the little kids playground. Taylor reached a skinny arm through the chain link and tugged a few times on Miss Diane's oversize floral shirt. Two things happened at once: she began to cry and Miss Valerie came up behind her to snatch the jacket from her hand.

Miss Valerie quickly composed her face into something resembling polite confusion. "What are you doing with another child's jacket, sweets?" she asked.

Taylor's nose was now running in earnest, and she sobbed stressfully. She refused to look towards Miss Valerie, instead trying to speak between ragged sobs and gasps to Miss Diane, who now calmly looked between the child and Miss Valerie. Valerie's youthful face contrasted with Diane's wrinkles.

"You take your time, child," she said simply.

After a moment, Taylor developed hiccups from the strain, but she was able to calm herself enough to speak between them. "Julian—hic—made a plan with the big—hic—kids to—hic—cheat over to the big—hic—big kids playground over there," she said, pointing over the fence, where several of the big kids were on the elementary playground retrieving their balls.

“How was he going to cheat?” Miss Diane asked. She walked around the fence to be closer to Taylor and Miss Valerie.

Again, Taylor took time to ready an answer. Her tangled hair was stuck to her cheeks from the tears, but she didn't seem to notice or care. Miss Valerie moved to grab her arm and take control of the situation, but one stern look from the older woman made her pause. Taylor noticed a smidge less hostility coming from Miss Valerie, so she risked reaching out for Julian's jacket and pulled the zip ties from the front right pocket. She handed them to Miss Diane, who now knelt beside her.

“They were gonna all throw their balls over and make the gates stay closed with them over there but I was gonna be in trouble too since I was in trouble and everybody did it but I didn't wanna go home early cause my daddy will be mad and I won't get ice cream lunch dessert ever again and—” At this point, she broke down again, though she tried to continue pleading her case between sobs and hiccups.

Miss Diane took her into a hug and stroked her hair, then, after she had calmed down, stood her back up and straightened Taylor's shirts smoothly against each other. “You're okay, honey. You did the right thing and told us about a problem. You're not going to be punished, and neither will anyone else unless they try to cheat, okay, sweetie? Now go to the potty and clean your face off and calm down.” She gently spun Taylor around and nudged her in the direction of the restroom.

For one moment, Taylor was elated; she wouldn't be in trouble any more today, and her idea had totally worked. She felt the cold spot in her tummy warming back up as she thought of how she could tell her father about what she did. Then, as she pulled open the restroom door, she saw Sam looking at her—a few of the other kids she had been playing

with watched her as well. She wasn't sure what their expressions meant, but the cold lump returned as she entered the restroom and closed the door behind her.

The rest of the day, Taylor's classmates treated her with hostility that faded into passive aloofness. As she attempted to rejoin her game on the playground, the other kids let her join but forced her into the middle and hit her with the ball one too many times to be entirely accidental. When she caught the ball, they insisted she hadn't and forced her to remain in the middle. She eventually walked away, and all impression of her left the memories of her classmates.

She spent the rest of the day back on the fringes of every activity, trying to find ways to edge back into someone's good graces. She tried sneaking an extra piece of fried okra to give to Sam during lunch, but he turned it away; she tried showing a few classmates how to use the marble run set, but they played with it the wrong way, making short tracks. She tried to show them their mistake, but they were absorbed in play and ignored her.

Julian had been taken into the office after recess to talk with the office lady, but his only punishment was no ice cream dessert at lunch and sitting in the corner until afternoon snack. He was older than the other children, so the teachers held no real fear for him. Plus, since he hadn't actually done anything, they couldn't send him home for the day. After he left time out, he and his big friends pretended to play with Taylor for a while but slowly stole the toys they were sharing until Taylor had none and she returned to the background.

Taylor was quiet the rest of the day and night and into the morning. Her father didn't notice; he left her at home with a babysitter so he could pick up a shift. In the morning, they rushed to daycare so he could pick up another.

“Be good again, honey,” he said, ushering Taylor out of the car and into the building. “Don’t feel bad, they’ll forget all about it. No one’s gonna remember yesterday after a while, and you did the right thing.”

Taylor didn’t respond, but she leaned forward a bit, interested in what he had said about forgetting. She didn’t want everyone to forget. Before yesterday, they had all ignored her—what if they always ignored her when they forgot? She had to do something to make them remember her. Her father took her lean as an invitation for him to plant a kiss on her cheek—he moved forward with lips puckered— but Taylor turned and walked decisively into the building, down the stairs, and into the big kids room.

As she walked, she thought: *Sam liked me. But not now. I told. I never knew stuff before yesterday to tell. I didn’t have friends before yesterday when there was something to tell. They like Julian. Julian has something to tell. But Julian doesn’t tell. I need something to tell but not tell so Sam will be my friend again.*

She had this final thought as she came to the threshold of the big kids room, and she came to a halt like she had yesterday, surveying the room for something to tell. She could glean nothing from her classmates’ activities, nor from their toys; however, as she searched, her stomach rumbled.

This was no surprise in itself; Taylor had been unwilling to eat the bowl of beans her father heated for her last night or the lunch from the previous day. She considered eating a social activity. But it did remind her that she had not gotten her ice cream dessert yesterday, nor had Julian. Since everyone listened to Julian, she decided to make Julian listen to her so he would make the others do so as well—she knew he could, and ice cream was a universal motivator, after all.

She located Julian and his friends where they were playing hide-and-seek again. Julian was the one hiding, so Taylor squeezed herself into his hiding spot behind the door of the toy closet.

She poked his arm. “You do stuff that you can tell on all the time.”

Julian flinched back, then relaxed once he turned to see Taylor next to him. He answered suspiciously. “Uh huh.”

“You wanna do more stuff you can tell on?”

“Uh huh,” he answered again, perking up. “What do you wanna do?”

Taylor sucked on her bottom lip and furrowed her eyebrows. “I’unno, that’s your job.”

“You gotta have something to do to have something to tell on,” said Julian, somewhat less enthusiastic.

Taylor tapped her fingers on her chin. “Ice cream?”

Julian let down his guard completely; he was excited for this new idea. He squeezed behind Taylor and out from behind the door to wave his friends over. Now that he had a goal, he jabbered about possible plans. Chelsea and Ben looked confused at first, but soon nodded along with him. Taylor watched from behind the door—she didn’t want Julian’s tall, scary friends to notice her.

As Julian finished delivering an idea, Taylor ventured out.

His friends glanced between themselves, confused. Chelsea tapped Julian on the shoulder and whispered in his ear with her hand cupped. Since she was older, she had nearly mastered actual whispers, so the only word Taylor caught was “friends.” Julian’s face briefly flashed wide-eyed fear, then returned to excitement—though it seemed more static than

before. Chelsea whispered again in his ear—this time Taylor heard “pretend”—and Julian nodded quickly at her before turning to look at Taylor. “You wanna do it?”

“I wanna get everybody ice cream dessert,” she said.

“Then here’s the plan,” Julian said. He glanced toward his friends, then at the teachers, and finally bent down to whisper in Taylor’s ear.

They all stood in line, completely silent and still; Miss Valerie’s eyes lingered on Taylor, who now took the front of the line, and widened slightly, but she had been admonished by Miss Diane the previous day for targeting Taylor. She moved on.

Taylor was only a few feet from the door. After Miss Valerie moved on to chastise another girl for her runny nose, Taylor tapped her feet nervously and twisted her shirt in her hands. The rest of the class watched her from behind, not quite sure what would happen when she tried to enact her plan. They kept still without noticing Miss Valerie’s scrutiny; no one wanted her attention while this strange event was gearing up, and they wanted to see everything that happened.

As soon as Miss Valerie arrived at the end of the line, where Julian stood, Julian made to ask a distracting question as they had planned. Miss Valerie turned to him, either to admonish or address, and Taylor acted. She sprinted forward, not bothering to listen to Julian’s words—the sound of his voice was enough indication that it was time to act. She reached the large, heavy door that lead into the kitchen and pulled against it with all her strength. After a moment, it swung open with a loud squeak, and she spun to face her classmates, the better to watch them eagerly rush forward into the kitchen and close the door quickly once they were all inside.

They all stood. No one moved to follow. Their eyes flickered between Taylor and Julian, who stood on opposite ends of the room.

Julian repeated his question, louder, though Miss Valerie was no longer listening to him and he was looking at Taylor. “Am I in trouble because Taylor’s in trouble?” He looked a mixture of anxious and smug; the corners of his mouth twitched downward in uncertainty even as he smiled at Miss Valerie.

Taylor didn’t understand; she motioned for her friends to follow her through the doorway to ice cream, but they didn’t move. Miss Diane came down the stairs and looked at her sadly, while Miss Valerie alternated looking triumphantly at Taylor and Miss Diane. Sam and all the other children looked mainly down at their shoes and snuck a few hopefully-discreet glances at the major players in the room.

Miss Valerie stalked toward Taylor, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her to the back of the lunch line, nattering about the trouble she was in after lunchtime; Taylor didn’t register her words, but her tone harmonized with the sound of the kitchen door as it squeaked shut behind her. When she passed Sam, she tried to reach out to hold his hand. She wasn’t sure, but she thought he squeezed it slightly before knocking it away and swinging his head around to see who had noticed.

BIOGRAPHY

Jodi Nicole Erickson attended Angelo State University from August 2015 to December 2018; in December of 2018, she graduated with a BA in English, specializing in Creative Writing with a minor in Spanish, and a BA in Philosophy. Jodi plans to attend graduate school in Texas and earn an MA in English, then begin a career in editing trade-published fiction books.

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