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# The Kindergarten of Earthly Delights

## **Abstract**

I don't usually tell love stories. But here's one...

## **Cover Page Footnote**

"The Kindergarten of Earthly Delights" was originally published at *Booth*.



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# BOOTH



A JOURNAL

April 29, 2016

## The Kindergarten of Earthly Delights

Nonfiction by John McNally

I don't usually tell love stories. But here's one.

In 1970, when I was five years old, I fell in love with all the girls in my kindergarten class. I loved the ones who looked like they could have been on magazine covers. I loved the tomboys, the brainy ones, the wild ones. I especially loved the wild ones. The wild ones wore dresses with loud colors and crazy patterns, and their hair was untamable. There was a feral look in their eyes that said, *Let's climb that jungle gym, stand on top of it, and scream as loud as we can!*

Most of all, I was in love with my kindergarten teacher, Miss Mendoza. She was young, probably in her early twenties. She had dark eyebrows and wore her dark hair in a beehive. Her makeup sparkled. In my only photo of her, she's wearing a tight pink polyester dress with a high collar, sexy and prim at the same time, like a British woman from one of the Hammer Horror movies that I watched on Sunday afternoons, a woman who might have been a member of high society at the movie's beginning but by the movie's end would be a blood-sucking vampire showing a good amount of cleavage. When I was five years old, I loved cleavage, and I loved vampires, and I loved prim women who turned into vampires after other vampires had bitten their

necks. I wanted to bite Miss Mendoza's neck. I wanted to suck her blood. I wanted to sink my fangs into her and fill up like a tick and then rest my head against the cleavage she never showed us. Was this so wrong?

\*

We lived in Summit, Illinois—a foul-smelling southwest Chicago suburb that was home to the Argo baking powder and corn starch factory. The whole area reeked from the noxious vapors that rose like genies from its smokestacks.

Summit is probably most famous as the setting for Ernest Hemingway's story "The Killers." The story is about, among other things, mobsters, for whom, historically, Summit became a hiding place during Prohibition. The grade school where I attended kindergarten was just down the street from the factory, and a little farther down that same street were several lunchrooms and taverns, like the ones in Hemingway's story.

Our family had recently moved into an apartment under an expressway. I don't remember having any friends in the neighborhood that year. Mostly, I spent time alone, which was fine. I liked—and still like—spending time alone. It was during these stretches, with nothing planned and no one to play with, that my imagination thrived and the seeds of storytelling were planted.

Railroad tracks ran behind our apartment, a few feet beyond the parking lot, and I would stand close to the rails and yell for chalk each time a train rolled by. Back then, freight train cars would be marked up with chalk to inform the switchmen where the cars needed to go, and if a conductor had any spare chalk with him, he'd throw it out the window for me, usually a hunk half as big as my small head, and I would then write all over sidewalks and Dumpsters with it. Other times, I would climb the steep incline to Harlem Avenue, the major road that intersected the expressway that took you downtown, and I would raise my fist over my head and gesture for passing semi drivers to honk their horns. This was how I entertained myself when I was five years old. If I wasn't doing one or the other, I might be strategically placing a penny on the railroad track and then waiting for a train to run over it, or I would be patrolling the neighborhood with a can of Silly String. I loved my can of Silly String, but I used it sparingly because my mother told me that it would be the only can she would ever buy me. "It's too expensive," she said, "so enjoy it while it lasts." When an older boy came up and demanded that I give it to him, I raised the can and sprayed him in the face, as though he were a bug. The boy, whose face was covered with green strings of foam, screamed in fright and took off running.

One afternoon, I sat on the kitchen floor playing while my mother talked on the phone to my Aunt Peggy. My mother was leaning against the counter and smoking a cigarette. While she smoked and talked, I played with a train that I had made in kindergarten using construction paper and brass fasteners that held the different train cars together. If I placed it flat on the floor, the train would curve when I moved it quickly. The train, I imagined, ran along the tracks behind our apartment. I had invented two characters for whom I used two different voices. One character was the train conductor. The other character was a man who simply asked questions.

The man who asked questions said, “What you got in that train?”

The conductor said, “Oh, just some drugs.”

The man who asked questions said, “Where are you taking those drugs?”

The conductor said, “Oh, just gonna take them to the drug pusher.”

I heard my mother say to my aunt, “Hold on a second, Peggy.” When I looked up at my mother, she was staring at me as though I were not her son but rather an imposter, a boy who looked remarkably like her son but who was, upon closer examination, not her son at all.

My mother said, “What’re you doing, Johnny?”

“Playing,” I said.

“What’re you playing?” she asked.

I smiled. “Drug pusher,” I said, having given my story a name. It was the first time I could remember having come up with a wholly original story that had a setting and a cast of characters.

My mother, keeping her eyes on me, said into the phone, “I got to go, Peggy. I’ll call you later.” After hanging up the receiver, my mother approached me cautiously, suspiciously. “How do you know about drugs?” she asked.

“Wait here,” I said.

I ran to the bedroom that I shared with my older brother, collected the evidence, and ran back to the kitchen, happy to accommodate. What I handed her were pamphlets that warned against drug use, but the warnings were not what had caught my attention.

What appealed to me were photos of colorful pills and mountains of powder. I also loved the wavy images that made everything look like a funhouse mirror. Best of all were the hippie girls. One of them on the pamphlet looked sad, sitting in a corner and putting a needle in her arm, and I wanted to pet her head and say something comforting like, “Now, now.” Another girl looked like she was having a lot of fun trying to fly out her apartment window, and I wished I was jumping out the window with her. I knew from the TV news what drugs were and what drug pushers did, but the pamphlets were full of such spellbinding photos that I didn’t care what the words actually said, only that drugs looked like fun. *A lot of fun.*

“You know that drugs are bad,” my mother said.

I smiled and nodded.

“Why don’t you have the train carry something else then?” she suggested.

“Okay,” I said.

My mother dialed my aunt again. I looked up at her and said, “Choo! Choo!” but when my mother finally turned her back to me I said under my breath, “Where’s the drug pusher?” and then I answered myself: “Around the corner, sir.”

\*

The year that I spun propaganda-inspired tales of freight trains and drug mules was also the year that I created a simple but effective sexual fantasy to which I would put myself to sleep each night. In that fantasy, I’m the only boy in a nudist colony. The other nudists include the girls in my kindergarten class. My kindergarten teacher, Miss Mendoza, is also nude and sitting on a large boulder while the girls in my class sit naked around her.

When the girls see me, they smile and call out: “John! John! Come here! Join us!” I obey. I stroll over. I, too, am naked, and the first person I greet is Miss Mendoza. She pats her thigh, and I climb up onto her lap. It doesn’t occur to me that sitting naked on a large, jagged boulder might be uncomfortable for her, or that adding the weight of a child to her lap would be unbearable. This is a fantasy, a story, so there is no pain at the nudist colony, only pleasure. I sit on her lap and make myself comfortable.

Miss Mendoza strokes my hair and says, “You’re so cute. You’re the cutest boy in the whole class.” And then she does something quite amazing. She lifts me up over her head, as though I’m a beach ball, and passes me around to the other naked girls, who

giggle as they reach for me, and I giggle when they touch me, their fingers gently pressing into me, tickling me. I look down and see them all—Lisa and Veronica and Marcy and Kimberly—all the girls I love, and all of them naked! I am as weightless as air. The girls love passing me around. It's erotic, it's *sexual*, although I'm not sure how I know this. But I do. And I want them to keep passing me back and forth. I want them to pass me around forever.

\*

I had crushes on all the girls in kindergarten except one. She and her brother were both in my class, but neither spoke a word. Not a single word. In their school photos, they look Eastern European and are dressed in tattered clothes—the boy in a vest you'd imagine Oliver Twist wearing, the girl in a sweater that could have been handed down several generations. They look like really tiny old people. They have the saddest expressions I've ever seen, and in their individual photos, they are each frowning the way refugee children frown in wartime photos. There were a lot of immigrants where I lived, and the possibility was great that they didn't speak English, that they didn't have any idea what anyone was saying. There was, to my knowledge, no ESL class back then. They had likely been taken away from their friends back in Poland or wherever and dropped into this strange room with wooden pedal cars, an oversized copy of *Dick and Jane* resting on an easel, and an ever-smiling woman with a beehive hairdo; likely, none of it made any sense. I worried about them. I worried about them a lot, in fact, often telling my mother about them. I worried, but I did not have a crush on the girl. Having a crush on her would have been like having a crush on somebody's grandmother. It would have been wrong.

\*

But the rest of the girls? I wanted to remain naked with them at my own private nudist colony, like the ones I'd seen on the nightly news. It was on TV where I learned about these nudist colonies. They were in California and Florida, but there were not any in Illinois, certainly not in Chicago along the shores of Lake Michigan. I wanted to spend my life as the sole boy in a nudist colony full of girls and women, not just with Miss Mendoza and my classmates but also Ginger and Mary Ann from *Gilligan's Island*, the girls from *The Partridge Family* (including Mrs. Partridge, for whom I also lusted), *The Brady Bunch* girls, and the Flying Nun. Especially the Flying Nun. I wanted all of them to remove their clothes and habits, to strip down in front of me, a five-year-old boy with bright red hair and an ambiguous gleam in his lazy left eye. I would have been forty-four inches tall and forty-four pounds. A pound for every inch. I am monochromatic in my kindergarten photo, wearing a harvest gold shirt with a harvest gold clip-on tie. My mother had attached a darker tie to my shirt that morning,

but when we arrived at school and I opened the car door, the tie fell off and landed in a puddle. My mother rushed me home and put a tie on me that blended in with the shirt, which is why I looked vaguely futuristic in 1970.

My mother was a kind and loving but unsentimental woman. My very first childhood memory was of the day she returned to work. I was two. She had taken a job working second shift in a factory that made corrugated boxes, and when she left me with my father, I screamed for hours. I screamed as though I were being lowered into a pot of boiling water. I didn't fear or dislike my father, but I had spent every moment of my first two years with my mother, and my father was not my mother. Exhausted from screaming and crying, I finally fell asleep on the couch. I remember being so tired that everything became dreamy through my smeared vision. And then I don't remember anything else for another year.

My attachment to my mother, however, remained steadfast. The year I was in kindergarten, I made her promise that she would wait outside for me. I attended the morning session, and each morning my mother drove me to school and dropped me off.

"Promise," I would say.

"Yes, Johnny," my mother would reply, not hiding any of her exasperation. "Of *course* I'll wait here."

Years later, my mother confessed that she had not waited for me. Ever. Not even once. I was in high school when she told me this, and I was deeply hurt.

"I had too much to do," she told me. "Sometimes I'd put laundry in the trunk before you woke up in the morning. Other times I went shopping."

Even though I knew by then that asking her to wait for me was unreasonable, I still felt betrayed.

"You never waited?" I asked. "Not even once?"

My mother shook her head. Nope.

"A couple of times," she said, "I'd be running late and worried I wouldn't get back there before they let you out. Or I'd get caught in traffic. And then I'd rack my brain trying to think up a story to tell you." She took a long drag off her cigarette and



smiled at her own deviousness. “I always made it back, though,” she said. “It never came to that.”

I wonder what sort of little boy I would have been had I known my mother wasn't waiting nearby. Would I have been as afraid and sad as the brother and sister who never spoke a word? Would I not have fallen in love with Miss Mendoza or the other girls in my class, too worried that my mother might have left me behind for good, that she wasn't ever coming back?

\*

I was hospitalized three times the year I was in kindergarten. Once for pneumonia, once for dehydration, and once for a tonsillectomy. I remember, after the tonsillectomy, waking up in a room near a man who looked dead. He was probably still asleep from his own surgery, deeply anesthetized, but the way the white blanket covered him, the way his eyes were shut, and the way he didn't appear to be breathing all confirmed for me that he had stopped breathing long ago. I had spent that year staying up late to watch *Creature Features* on WGN, and each Saturday at 10:30 I would watch, until I fell asleep, an old black-and-white horror movie. My parents would put me to bed much earlier, but I would stay up, sneak out to the living room after they had gone into their bedroom, and then click on our tiny black-and-white TV. I always fell asleep on the couch, and one or the other of my parents must have carried me back to the bed I shared with my brother, but we never spoke of this. Thanks to the movies on *Creature Features*, I had seen my fair share of dead people as well as living dead people. I'd begun to convince myself that everyday objects were monsters—a coat dangling on a hook in a dark room was the Wolf Man waiting for me to shut my eyes before he pounced; a shadow coming from my open closet was the Creature from the Black Lagoon who just so happened to be hanging out in there. If the man next to me in the hospital room wasn't dead, then surely he was a vampire. I opened my mouth to scream, but the pain in my throat was too great, and I shut my mouth. Shortly thereafter, I fell back to sleep.

Each time I returned to my kindergarten class after a hospital stay, I would be even more popular with the girls, more popular with Miss Mendoza. It was as though I were surrounded by a magical glow that everyone wanted to bathe in. Oh, how they loved me!

One day, the sad little boy who never talked mumbled, “Excuse me,” on his way to the bathroom, and I yelled out, “He spoke! He spoke!” I had recently watched the old *Frankenstein* movie with Boris Karloff, and I would walk around our apartment

yelling, “It’s alive! It’s alive!” and so I yelled “He spoke! He spoke!” in the same dramatic way.

Miss Mendoza said, “Hush, John. Don’t make a big deal out of it.”

But it *was* a big deal. Or it should have been. The boy had never spoken before, and I was the first one to hear him speak. More than anything, though, my feelings were hurt. This woman I loved—this woman I fell asleep to each night imagining naked—had just told me to hush. To make matters worse, she trivialized what I had thought was important. I wanted to cry, but I didn’t. I must have *looked* like I wanted to cry, however, because Miss Mendoza eventually wandered over to me, crouched down, and said, “It’s better not to make a big deal of it, is all. That way, he’ll feel comfortable talking.” I nodded. I wanted to hug her; I wanted her to hug me. “Okay,” I said, holding back tears. “Okay.” It would be the exact same thing I would say to my first real girlfriend eleven years later when she told me that she thought we should just be friends. *Okay* would forever after be the word I’d most associate with heartache, this single word repeated twice, four syllables that would crush me in an instant because it meant that something that had once been wonderful had now come to an end.

\*

I’m tempted to say that my recurring nighttime fantasy was my first explicitly sexual fantasy, but, except for the nudity, it wasn’t explicit at all. The explicitness was in what it suggested and the effect it had on me. This was the power of the story I had told myself. Each night, I would refine it. I might add a dog, like the one in the Coppertone billboard that featured a cartoon girl getting her bikini bottoms pulled down by the feisty, enviable mutt. Or I might let the girls keep their jewelry on but nothing else. I would tweak it, just a little, and then I would play out the scenario, falling asleep only after they had lifted me over their heads.

After kindergarten, I attended first grade at the same school for only a month. My best friend was one of the wild girls from kindergarten, a girl named Veronica, but then my life sped up, resembling, if it were a montage in a movie, the wavy, funhouse mirror of those drug pamphlets: a few months in Houston, Texas, where the school I attended was unnervingly experimental and the teachers were abusive, and then back to a different southwest suburb of Chicago, where the principal considered holding me back a year because I was so far behind. My mother insisted that I would catch up, and catch up I did, with the help of a girl named Kristina Rochette, who had crushes on all the boys and would do their homework for them. And though I had a crush on Kristina, I still pined for Miss Mendoza and the girls of kindergarten. I studied every

detail of them from their class photos: the mole on Denise's cheek, the pearls Rochelle wore, the way wild Veronica's bangs were parted. I even studied the sad brother and sister, their ill-fitting clothes, these two old people who had been shrunk down to the size of children.

A year passed. I begged my mother to take me to Open House at the school where I had attended kindergarten. Open House was not normally an invitation for students who no longer attended the school, but my mother would occasionally indulge me, sometimes at my own peril, as though to teach me about the nature of consequences for doing improper things. And so we went.

In the hallway I saw Veronica, wild girl of my heart. I smiled and yelled her name and then I ran over to her.

A little over a year had passed since I had last seen her, but she did not remember me. She had that look in her eyes that said *save me* as she sidled up next to her mother. She was wearing a similar dress to the one she had worn in her kindergarten photo, a multi-colored affair, and though she still parted her bangs in the middle, she looked ever so slightly different, the way identical twins look different after you get to know them. But the simple truth is that she looked different only because she had gotten older.

It wouldn't be the last time that my memory of someone would be stronger than their memory of me. This is the fate of a child who frequently changes schools. I would eventually attend five grade schools, and while the kids from my previous schools loomed large in my imagination, like supporting characters in a play in which I was the star, I was often nothing more to them than a stagehand, easily forgotten. I didn't yet understand any of this the day that I returned to my old school. I just figured something horrible had happened to Veronica since we'd last seen each other, and that she had mistaken me for the person who had done the horrible thing to her. I wanted to reach out, touch her, and reassure her that it was only me, her old friend, but I refrained for fear that she would flinch.

Spooked by Veronica's reaction, I told my mother that I didn't want to see Miss Mendoza anymore, but my mother wouldn't have any of it.

"Now, Johnny. We didn't come all the way out here just to turn around and go home," she said. "Let's go see her."

We walked into her classroom. She was finishing up with a boy I didn't know, talking to the boys' parents, as I stood there shivering. When it was my turn, I walked up to her, stuck out my hand to shake hers, and said, "Do you remember me?"

"Of course I remember you," she said. "John! It's so nice to see you. What a pleasant surprise." She crouched down to my height and said, "You were so good in my class. I wish I had an entire classroom full of little boys as nice as you."

I saw for the very first time love in her eyes, and I imagined us getting married and growing old together. I would introduce her to my friends. "This is my wife—Miss Mendoza," I would say. "She was my kindergarten teacher. Imagine that!"

She patted my head and stood back up. To my mother, she said, "Such a good boy. Thank you so much for coming by."

"He really wanted to see you," my mother said.

I shook Miss Mendoza's hand goodbye, and when I pumped it, she smiled and laughed. It wasn't a mean laugh. It was conspiratorial, as though she knew that I was in possession of a great big secret about the two of us and she had finally figured out what that secret was.

She loves me, I thought. Everything will be fine.

This was the story that I told myself, at least. This was the story I most wanted to believe. Never mind that my mother had probably phoned ahead to warn Miss Mendoza of our arrival. Never mind that I would never see Miss Mendoza or any of the girls from my kindergarten class ever again. Never mind that my life is now full of such people to whom I have said, "Okay. Okay." The stories we tell ourselves are powerful drugs, and this one was my opiate, my addiction. I wanted to believe that it was a love story and not, as it surely was and is, a story about heartache, embarrassment, failure, and humiliation, none of which I knew about back then. I only knew about love and not-love, and I knew which one made me feel good. I knew which one I wanted.

Later that night, and on many subsequent nights, I returned to that colony of beautiful girls. They had been waiting for the arrival of the only boy they had ever loved, a boy who, by merely showing up, would brighten their already-sunny day.

"John," they would call out to me. "Come here!"

Sitting in the brightest patch of sunlight would be Miss Mendoza, smiling, waiting.

“Join us, John!” the girls would say. “Hurry!”

And like the good little boy that I tried so hard to be, I obeyed each and every naked one of them.

John McNally is author of eight books, most recently the Young Adult novel *Lord of the Ralphs* and *Vivid and Continuous: Essays and Exercises for Writing Fiction*. His collection of personal essays, *The Boy Who Really, Really Wanted to Have Sex*, will be published in 2017. A native of Chicago's southwest side, John divides his time between North Carolina and Louisiana, where he is Writer-in-Residence at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.