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HOSTAGE LANDS



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DEAD WORDS

Of arms and the man I sing," intoned the teacher, red blotches of exhilaration glowing on her cheeks. She lifted her half-closed eyes to the blackened timbers of the classroom ceiling and continued. "That is to say, '*Arma virumque cano.*'"

"Arms? Like, well, arms?" said a girl, her nose crinkled in bewilderment as she looked from her copy of Virgil to her own arms.

"Weapons, Sally, dear," said the teacher, Miss Klitsa, blinking rapidly, her bony knuckles turning white as she steadied herself with a grip on her lectern. "Swords, spears, catapults—you know, the tools of warfare. Now then, if I may recommence. '*Troiae qui primus ab oris Italiam fato . . .*'"

"Hey, I'm getting it. I'm really getting it!" said Sally. "That'd be something about a fat Italian, right?"

Snorts of laughter erupted throughout the classroom.

Miss Klitsa blanched, as if someone had slapped her. Her eyes fluttering at the class over her half-rimmed glasses, she blew her nose and began again.

Neil Perkins watched every gesture of the recitation from his desk at the north corner of the classroom. He always sat in the back, in the north corner, because through the leaded panes of a window he had a pretty good view of a stretch of moorland and sky—and of the wall. All things he'd seen before, too many times, but for day-dreaming there was simply no better seat in the classroom. Miss Klitsa's recitation continued, "... *multa quoque* ..."

Neil rolled his eyes with embarrassment as the teacher's voice rose and fell, one hand clenched in anguish over her heart, the bony fingers of the other splayed with twitching fervor, changing gestures from hand to hand as she spoke. He frequently asked himself at times like these: *Why did Haltwhistle Grammar School, crammed up against an old pile of rocks in the north of England, why did the students from this hole-in-the-wall place have to have a teacher like Miss Klitsa?*

Miss Klitsa was not normal. What else was a boy of fifteen to conclude about a sixty-something-year-old spinster with hair so red it made your eyes go bloodshot looking at it? Worse yet, the curly mass seemed to spew from her head like molten lava from a volcano. *Come to think of it, she would have made a great physical science teacher; thought Neil, a living, fire-regurgitating specimen right in the classroom. Or maybe she should have taught ancient history. What could be better than a flesh-and-blood, walking, sneezing fossil for your ancient history teacher?*

Which brings up the matter of her nose. Neil's mother had tried to explain about chronic sinus difficulties and postnasal drip, but never to the effect of producing in her son an ounce of sympathy for the poor woman's condition. Finding a way to steal yet another of Miss Klitsa's lacy pink handkerchiefs, which she habitually stuffed under her

watchband between blowings, was a daily task that Neil assumed with disciplined regularity. Good days he succeeded. Bad days he failed. To date, his collection of pink hankies numbered thirty-four. Thirty-four good days out of forty-five days of school, he had to admit, was decidedly above average.

And there were other things about Miss Klitsa, like her tricycle. Neil found it difficult in the extreme to take seriously a teacher who pedaled a giant-sized tricycle, its pink paint chalky with age, its ancient basket huge enough to haul large dressed stones or a month's supply of coal. Every morning, every evening, in nearly all weathers, Miss Klitsa hiked up her skirts and hoisted herself into the driver's seat of that rattletrap piece of junk. She sometimes even rode in the rain, pedaling along with an unfurled umbrella. The thing was so old that Neil imagined that Iron Age Celts probably rode tricycles like Miss Klitsa's. Maybe they'd found some buried in the peat at the digs in Vindolanda. He'd have to ask about it.

Miss Klitsa's voice had switched back to English. She often broke in to explain something she thought was interesting—*she* thought was interesting, though Neil rarely did. "Some say Virgil wrote on papyrus, but he might just as well have written on thin wooden tablets, such as this," she said, holding up what looked like a flat sheet of wood a bit smaller than a sheet of paper. "Then dipping a stylus in ink, such as this—" She held up a tapered bronze pen-like thing. "He would set down his incomparable verse, which we now resume reading, '*... hic illius arma ...*'"

Neil turned from the window and looked hard at the teacher. Odd as she was in nearly every other way, he mused, it was her interest—no, no, *interest* would not do—her obsession with Roman stuff, like tablets and that stylus, that made her the oddest. Of course there was the language—she was, after all, a Latin teacher. But she was obsessed. It was as if she came under its power. Neil

watched her closely. *Here it comes*, he thought: that ecstatic gazing past the students in her classroom, that transported tone in her voice, that relaxed wonder that caused her cheeks to sag. *She's gone*, said Neil to himself. *It's two thousand years ago, and she's in Rome*. He sighed and turned back to his window and to the wall. *Or she's marching around up there*.

Suddenly, he felt a lurching coming from his insides. He often got these overwhelming urges to break out laughing. He could just see Miss Klitsa, her hair groping in the breeze from under her helmet, marching along in lobsterback armor and one of those skimpy red kilt things Roman legionaries used to wear—her knobby knees—oh, and a polka-dotted leopard skin over her bony shoulders. Clamping his fingers over his lips and nose, desperate to smother the laughter, he felt like his eyes might pop out with the pressure.

Though the ridiculous old woman often had this effect on him, Neil did find himself at other times—times of extreme weakness—temporarily arrested by her passion for all things Roman. She would raise a bony fist, throw back her head with a shake that made her hair waggle wildly, then snuffle convulsively, and shout, “Strength and honor!” Though for the most part he couldn’t help thinking of Miss Klitsa as stark-staring, foaming-at-the-mouth, certifiably bonkers, he had to give the old girl this much: she had enthusiasm.

Miss Klitsa paused in her recitation of Virgil and began describing an ancient battle waged on nearby Hadrian’s Wall, painted Caledonians charging madly into the disciplined ranks of a Roman legion. And Neil found himself, firmly against his will, transported with her. *What am I doing?* he thought, with an irritated shake of his head. The fit passed, and he resumed thinking of Miss Klitsa as, well, Miss Klitsa—demented, certifiable, and as obsolete as an old Roman sandal. He turned again to his window.