

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

Sandy Collier

Louis and the Letter O

Seven year old Louis ducks his head and plows his way forward through the swarm of kids. He hates Bus A. He envies the drop-off kids whose parents leave them off with hugs and I-love-yous. After his dad leaves for work, he waits, at the end of the driveway, for however long, until Bus A comes. This morning the sharp cold wind had prickled the inside of his nostrils, bearing with it the sweet scent of woodsmoke from the neighbors' chimney. A puffy white cloud perches on top of the tallest pine, soft and still.

"Good morning, Louis, how are you today?" His teacher touches his shoulder. He freezes. His dad says not to let his teacher baby him. He's a big boy. They don't need his mother, either. She's been absent since the start of school. Louis doesn't know what happened to her, or where she is.

Louis believes his father about most everything, but not when he tells him he's stupid. Why can't you read? Like the other kids? They can all read. And write? You can't even write your name. That's why they've put you with a special teacher part of the day. How do you think that makes me feel?

Louis thinks, but does not dare respond, you're wrong, dad. I *can* read. I *can* write.

Louis is determined to prove him wrong today.

The hot hallway and classroom are redolent with the smell of hot breakfast – waffles?

He squirms away from the teacher, heading for the cafeteria.



The sub collects the magnetic key from the school secretary. She's subbing for the reading interventionist. She'll need to enter and re-enter the main building several times that day, to pull out students for one-on-one instruction. She'll walk them out of the main building and into the low-lying outbuilding into a quiet little room at the end of the hall, where she'll have them all by themselves for thirty minutes.

She crosses between the buildings. A woman stands in the parking lot between a pick-up and a sedan, not moving. The image strikes her as odd. Everyone else, in and around the school, is, at this time of day, in motion.

The morning bell rings as she swipes her way into the dimly lit hallway. She promptly forgets what she just saw.

She finds sub plans and worksheets neatly piled for each student with typed instructions about how to teach each child. Her first student will be Louis.

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He'll be expecting her in the second grade classroom.
His lesson plan is the letter O.



The woman waiting between the pick-up and the sedan is Laurie Nadel, who knows that her son needs her. The restraining order his father got over Labor Day weekend? Her lawyer promises her that the judge will throw it out at the hearing finally set for later in the week. But she can't wait. She needs to see him. The school is the best place. She knows he's in there. She watched him get off the bus and go into the building. She'll say she has something for Louis. That school secretary used to like her. She'll let her in.



Ronnie Nadel got as far as the town line before a glance at the passenger's seat reminds him of what he'd forgotten until then. Louis' asthma prescription, still in the stapled pharmacy bag, stares up at him, accusingly. Yes, he'd promised the school nurse he'd get the prescription filled and yes, he'd bring it into the principal's office. Yes, he understands that Louis really needs to take a pill in the middle of the day because his asthma is severe.

But, Ronnie thinks, as he wheels into the Sunoco station and swerves back toward the school, does the nurse or the principal understand that he works two jobs? That last night he made all of \$22 in tips at the Brickyard Brewery and barely made it to the drive-through pharmacy before it closed at ten, to turn over \$30 for the prescription?

Now Ronnie is going to be late to the lumberyard. He has two tardy warnings already. It was a "three strikes you're out" kind of business. He'll have to grovel and beg. It would be so much easier if Laurie was still in the picture, but that would mean lifting the restraining order and he wasn't about to let her near their son, not after what she'd done.



While the morning announcements are being read, Nurse Julie pokes her head into the secretary's office.

"By any chance did Ronnie Nadel drop off Martin's medication this morning?"

Norma shakes her head no, sighing, dramatically.

"Of course not. Did you really think he would?"

Benson Hughes, the principal, overhears them from within his inner office just past the secretary's desk. He's new to the elementary school that year, and has a chameleon-like habit of adopting the attitudes of whichever staff member he happens to be interacting with at the moment. It hadn't taken Benson long to deduce that Ronnie Nadel was held in low regard by pretty much everyone.

Norma, who is omniscient, calls into him.

"You probably should get Ronnie in. Paper up a meeting about the medication requirement. Poor kid,"

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She mumbles the last under her breath. Louis has a tough go. In the opinion of the teachers' room conclave Louis suffers from the absence of his mother in his life. They've never had any particular issues with Laurie Nadel. It's a shame what Ronnie did, getting that restraining order. They were sure there was nothing to it.

Benson leans back in the threadbare tan Naugahyde swivel chair. Unlike Norma, he dreads confrontation at all costs, to the extreme that he avoids parent meetings as much as possible, despite such meetings being a prominent item in his job description. In fact, he's due to receive his three month performance review at the end of the week, and the Board had made it crystal clear that he would be evaluated on his ability to deal with parents who were "marginally involved" with the school, and to encourage them to create conditions at home for their child to "thrive in school."

Benson frets. Could he foist a meeting with Ronnie Nadel off on the nurse, or even Norma? Martin's father was a rough, burly man with a reputation for being difficult. And he was half again as big as Benson. Benson did not relish the thought of telling Ronnie Nadel that he was, in essence, a bad father.



" 'O' is for?"

"Octopus," Louis whispers, fidgeting in the orange plastic chair that, small as it is, still looks enormous for his tiny butt.

"Good! Good!" the sub grins ridiculously, wanting to encourage this sad little boy with the big moon eyes.

She flips the page for him.

"And, what does this 'O' stand for?"

"Onion."

"Yes, yes!"

Martin turns his big eyes to meet hers. These were pretty easy questions. What was she getting so worked up for? He like the sub anyway. Her generous blue eyes sparkle from within her wrinkled face, reminding him of a Halloween pumpkin lit by a candle within, starting to crumple with age.

"Now, let's see how well you can color in this picture of another animal that starts with the letter 'O'," she says, pushing a black and white drawing toward him. Martin selects a fat red crayon and holds it near his nose, because its greasy chemical smell reminds him of the candles his parents used to light outside last summer, to keep away the bugs. He hunches over the paper and begins to color in the contours of the letter, meticulously, with red.

He works steadily, without looking up.

"This is an ostrich," he announces, finally, putting the crayon down. "And this is the letter 'O'. It's the first letter of his name."

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"Yes, very good!"



Laurie Nadel buzzes at the school door.

Norma pauses her finger over the "in" button. It's been some time since she's seen Laurie here.

"Laurie," she says, "you're not allowed inside the school. You're not supposed to be here on school grounds."

"It's okay, Norma. I'm all good. I have something for Louis. That restraining order's been ...cancelled." Laurie stumbles over her mouthful of lies.

"A minute."

Norma stands up and walks the ten feet to the door of Benson Hughes' inner sanctum. The school nurse is gone, classes have started for the day, and it's just the two of them.

"I've got Laurie Nadel at the door," she says. "Says the restraining order's been cancelled, and she has something for Louis."

"Tell her we need to see proof the restraining order's been vacated before we can let her in," Benson somehow finds the resolve to say.

Norma returns to her desk.

"Laurie, do you have paperwork to show you can be here?"

It's cold outside. Laurie wears a thin sweatshirt over some kind of blue cotton uniform. Norma remembers where she'd last seen her: pushing a cart in the hospital corridor when her mother was getting her hip replaced this past summer.

Laurie is shivering.

"I... I don't have it with me. Please, I'll only be a minute. I just have something Louis forgot to bring with him to school."

Norma leaves her desk again.

"Can't I let her in?" she asks the principal. "She's freezing out there."

He looks on the camera. Does she have Louis' prescription? He knows nothing about Laurie Nadel. That woman did not look threatening at all.

"Let her into the foyer, out of the cold, but not into the hall. Ask her what she has."

He'd not dealt with this situation before, and knows he is not at his best. He types in "School Policies and Procedures," scrolling toward the section on parents' rights.

When Laurie was inside the foyer, still outside the locked doors that opened into the school, Norma said,

"Do you have Louis' asthma prescription?"

Laurie looks through the glass at Norma. Yes, that would be perfect.

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"Right here," Laurie says, patting her sweatshirt pocket. She points at the remaining door. "Can I come in now, please?"

"Well?" says Norma, back in Benson's doorway, steely eyes staring him down. "She's got his prescription. She wouldn't have it if she didn't have her rights back, would she? What do you want me to do?"

Benson considers his reply for an instant. If he lets this woman in, he'll be doing the right thing. The kid needs his medicine. He knows he'll be taking a gamble. A risk. Norma's withering glare tells him all he needs to know about what she'll say about him if he turns this woman away. And it will all be over in another minute or two. Louis' mother could drop off the medicine and leave, and then he could figure out what the policy manual said, and how he'd justify his decision.

"Okay. She can leave the prescription off, but then she has to go."

"Come into the office, Laurie," Norma unlocked the door.

Laurie took one moment to orient herself, and ran.



It was 8:10 by the time Ronnie Nadel pulled into the circular driveway in front of the school. He grabbed the prescription bag and ripped it open. Two bottles of asthma pills. One for home, and one for school.

He loped the few yards to the school entrance and pressed the buzzer. Come on, he muttered. I know you can see me. Let me in.



"She's run!" Norma cried, watching Laurie disappear toward the second grade classroom.

Benson pressed the intercom button: "Lockdown!" he yelled.

Doors locked everywhere. Including the second grade classroom. Laurie was there, struggling to twist the door latch open, but it wouldn't budge.

From the office, Norma saw Ronnie Nadel standing at the entrance, holding up a bottle of pills.

"You can't come in, Ronnie." She shouted, feeling like an idiot. "We're on lockdown."

He pointed to the bottle. "Martin needs his pills!" he shouted, the secretary's words not sinking in. "Just let me drop off his pills!"

He was now going to be way too late at the lumberyard. This added delay would cost him his job for sure.

Norma held up her hands in despair. No one was to leave, or enter, the building in lockdown, except law enforcement. She opened her mouth to explain.

"Bullshit!" yelled Ronnie. "This is all bullshit!"



Laurie stalked the hallways now, trying door after door. All of them

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locked. The lights were out in all the rooms and shades were pulled over the doors. Louis was in here somewhere.

“How long until they get here?”

Benson stood next to Norma at her desk, watching Laurie on the cameras move about the school, and glancing now and then at Ronnie Nadel now standing in the cold with his son’s medicine, cursing. How could he have allowed this to happen?

It took at least three minutes before the wailing sirens of sheriff’s cruisers could be heard, speeding into town and then to the school. The first two cruisers skidded into the circular driveway and screeched to stops in front and back of Ronnie’s pick-up. Deputies jumped out and rushed toward Ronnie who, glued to his spot at the door, gripping Martin’s prescription, was now screaming at Norma and Benson.

“Up against the wall!”

Two officers pushed his face into the side of the school and yanked his arms behind him. The prescription bottle fell into the pile of leaves they stood on.

From inside the office, Benson and Norma gestures wildly. “No, he’s not the one!” they yell, pointing inside.

Laurie hunts for Martin up the hallway, trying each locked door. She can see virtually nothing through the small cracks between the shades and the edges of the door windows. So, they were on to her now. She had nothing to hide. Nothing to conceal. Nothing more to lose. Louis is in here somewhere, and they’re hiding him from her.

She comes to the end of the hall, past the library, where the door exits the main building. She sees the entrance to the next building. Louis must be in there. Laurie pushes the door open and runs out right in front of a terrified twenty-six year old deputy sheriff who’s drawn his revolver for the first time ever in his nascent career.

“Stop right there,” he screams.

To the other deputies: “I’ve got her!”



It is so quiet in the little building after the principal’s “lockdown” call that the sub – who’d been taught none of the protocol – thought it must have been a drill.

“Time for the writing worksheet, Louis,” she says, giving him that warm, wrinkly smile he is starting to like a lot.

They set aside the red ostrich picture, and she hands him the final worksheet.

“Now, here’s when you get to draw and write your own letter ‘O’. You know that an ‘O’ is really just a circle? A big ‘O’ uses both the top and bottom lines. Take your time. Make it perfect. You can do it.”

Louis takes the pencil she hands him.

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Sirens sound faintly, becoming louder.

Louis crimps his fingers around the pencil, and bends down over the paper, and thinks about everything he's learned that morning. He starts at the tippy-top of the double lines, and bears down slowly with his pencil, willing himself to create the curve of an ostrich's neck, the roundness of an onion, the top of the cloud he'd seen that morning, a perfect roundness that flows from the pressure of his own hand, down to touch the bottom line exactly beneath the starting point, without crossing under it, then swooping up and around, dreaming of a loving parent's finger caressing his face, from chin to forehead, until he reaches the point of beginning.

He puts down his pencil.

"How's that?" he whispers.

The sub smiles back at him.

"It's perfect. Your '0' is perfect."

"Now, you have to take it home to show your parents," the sub says.

"They'll be so proud of you."