

If I didn't have to face these miserable, mordant problems every day, my life would be a whole lot better. The problems are, in order of importance, Mummy's disgusting adultery and Da's insanity. So, if I felt like it, I could use this morning's composition to write about how I am facing each of these problems. But today I just don't feel like it.

“Zachary Burnross! Have you finished your paragraphs?” Mrs. Carp is yodeling again. Her voice is high and scratchy like a noisy kid. Not like herself, which is short and smooth. Actually lumpy-smooth and pretty old. Mrs. Carp probably doesn't like me. She shows it by hollering at me, to wake me up, she sort of jokes.

“Yes, ma'am.” I am polite, since my mother and father brought me up to be polite to old ladies, handicapped persons, and guys in charge.

She squints her eyes at me.

“You look like you're finished with your paragraphs, what with you looking out the window like that instead of concentrating on your work. *Are* you actually finished with your paragraphs?”

“Actually, ma'am, I'm still thinking.” This excuse, I have discovered, is a remarkably good one, since teachers, anybody, in fact, can't tell if you've been thinking or not. There's no way they can check without resorting to a brain scan.

“Well, get back to writing. And use some of these new vocabulary words on the board here. And put that huge helmet thing on the floor. And you should comb that red mop out of your eyes and wipe off your glasses.” Mrs. Carp

always has to have the last word, like my mother.

Or my father with my mother.

Mummy doesn't holler. She speaks her last word in a normal voice but without moving the outside of her mouth, since my father acts like he can't hear a lick anymore. Da always looks satisfied whenever he's given his big-deal, last-word order to her. He smacks and twists his lips, mumbles to himself, nods his head. He figures this word will work.

Little does he know. My mother always looks like she's smiling, but she'll go ahead and do whatever she wants to do, since she's about fifty years younger than him and so can move a lot faster.

About the hair, unless I'm wearing my fine, somewhat oversize helmet there's no way I can keep hair out of my eyes, the way my father cuts it. Da charges me a dollar.

I look up at the board where Mrs. Carp has written the new vocabulary words: *clamor*, *debonair*, *deign*, *din*, *endeavor*, *ilk*, *lewd*, *mordant*, *saunter*, *svelte*.

I look back from out the window. I think about writing something more. Anything will do at this point. I could write, "The debonair little brown dog deigned to jump on the svelte white dog."

But, in a really low mood this morning, I'm not thinking about either dog. I'm pondering on my tragic existence. I'm thinking about hypocrites. Everybody is a hypocrite.

I happened to watch some politicians on TV last night. And it suddenly struck me that they were telling stuff that even I know isn't true.

Teachers are always telling you not to cheat, but they expect you're going to try to cheat anyway.

My father is always making speeches to the Daughters of the Delta and the Delta Doodle Dandies and the Delta City Solidarity. He tells them to do away with guns. Da also writes anti-gun stuff in his guest-column for the *Courier*.

Da is always telling me I've got to wear my neck brace and practice my victim behavior. "If you're ever going to sue successfully, you got to practice your behavior." So I do.

And Da makes speeches at Veterans and before the Student Council at Balona High School (most guys call it Big Baloney) about being against crime and how you should contribute to the Anti-Smut and Crime Fund of the Daughters of the Delta.

But Da's got his gun dealer's license along with his law practice. He brags to Mummy that he makes a lot of money dealing guns around Chaud County, so she should shut up about gun control and let him handle the public relations. I don't know what others might call that behavior, but me, I call it hypocritical.

Patella's always telling me that I should "act like a normal person" and call Da what she calls her father.

"Daddy" sounds like baby-talk to me. Da is what I call my old man. It's what I've *always* called him.

Non-hypocritical.

Jack Ordway is my neighbor and would be my classmate, except he doesn't have to drag his butt over here to Big Baloney summer school on a perfectly good June morning. He passed all his classes with As (which Mummy wagged her head about and made loud *tsks* at me, since I'm supposed to make all As). Jack says the only honest hypocrite is an actor, since the actor's doing something everybody expects him to do: be somebody other than himself. I have been thinking about that.

I have not decided to be an actor, tragic figure that I am. No. I have simply almost decided not to be a hypocrite. Which is why I am proud to wear my great red bargain motorcycle helmet whenever the opportunity arises. Guys point and laugh. Teachers complain.

Almost decided not to be a hypocrite.

I need to test the water.

I crumple up my composition and stuff it in my backpack. I don't want to be a hypocrite, but I cannot rat and write about my parents' awfulness or about Gussi Rieper's death-plot. I raise my hand.

I take a deep breath, try out my new lifestyle and say something my favorite writer Hemingway might have said if he was ever a future famous person snagged unfairly in summer school. "Mrs. Carp, you are getting fatter every day." There is a gasp and a titter all over the room.

"Zachary! What did you say?" Mrs. Carp is acting like she didn't hear my truthful saying.

"He said you're pretty fat, Mrs. Carp. Zack Burnross said that," goes Pippi Zornweb, an almost-junior who's here taking this class over again, maybe because she flunked sophomore English. Pippi's smirking and looking around the room.

"Zachary, you go tell Mr. Croon what you just said. And don't come back in here unless you're ready to apologize."

I pick up my book and my notebook and backpack and haul myself off to the principal's office. I can hear the kids all buzzing behind me as I leave. Not exactly applause, but heartwarming anyway.

Mr. Croon's secretary, Miss Candy Wishingfor, is also Dr. Thrust's secretary, but the two big wheels have different offices, with her desk sitting between the two offices. She has got her dog crouching next to her again, a dog which deigns to escape and go clamor with other dogs. Miss Wishingfor is about thirty-five years old and has big, very red lips and long straight blonde hair, kind of like Claire Preene's, Claire's being even lighter-colored.

Miss Wishingfor has blue eyes with long black eyelashes which she lashes at you. She is either superintendent Dr. Thrust's extra girlfriend or banker Mr. Trilbend's extra

girlfriend, according to current rumors.

“Hello, Zachary,” she goes, recognizing me as an actual person with a name, since I’ve been in here before.

“Mrs. Carp says I have to come in here since I told her the truth.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“I told her she was fat.”

“Mmm-hmm. Well, you better go back and tell her you’re sorry you said so.”

“Okay, but I’m supposed to see Mr. Croon.”

“Mr. Croon’s busy.”

“Okay.” I go on back to Mrs. Carp’s room and tell her I’m sorry I told her the truth.

“First, you march right back to Mr. Croon and tell him personally what you said! Tell it to *him*, not to that witch up there.” Mrs. Carp looks mad. Her face is now *red* and fat.

“Okay.”

Back to the office.

I put on my tragic look.

Miss Wishingfor examines my face. “You told her you were sorry?”

“Yeah, but she said to come on back here again and talk in person to Mr. Croon.” I don’t mention the “witch” part.

“I’ll see if Mr. Croon is still busy.” Miss Wishingfor cracks open Mr. Croon’s door. I can see the top of Mr. Croon’s bald head. He’s napping at his desk, nodding onto his chest.

“Mr. Croon? Mr. Croon? You have a case here. Zachary Burnross from Mrs. Carp’s class.”

“Tell him to say he’s sorry for whatever it was.”

“I already did, and he’s back again.”

“Well, make him write it out. She likes that.”

Miss Wishingfor gives me a piece of paper and tells me to write “I’m sorry for what I said.” That’s what I write, but I add, “since I got sent to the principal’s office for telling

the truth.”

“Scratch out that last part,” she goes.

“Well, honk! I’m here in the first place since I’m trying not to be a hypocrite.”

“Sometimes it’s necessary. Or maybe you’d get kicked out of summer school and wut’n graduate next spring and your daddy’d get on your case.”

Miss Wishingfor’s argument suddenly makes sense. I lean over her desk and cross out the second part. I leave enough of the original writing so you can still make it out if you want to. Miss Wishingfor smells like sweetpeas or carnations and coffee.

I supplicate. “I can go back now?”

“You’re how old, Zachary?”

“Sixteen. Be seventeen in October. End of October.” I leave it at that and don’t specifically mention Halloween, since people always seem to have to make smart-mouth comments about a guy’s birthday being on Halloween and about how the guy’s parents must have been shocked when they first saw him.

Miss Wishingfor’s got her little portable radio playing golden oldies over the airwaves of KDC-FM. You can hardly hear the music. She goes, “I thought maybe you were a whole lot younger. Anyways, you’re more than old enough to know better than this. I’d have thought you’d know better by now.”

“It just occurred to me I shouldn’t be a hypocrite.”

“Well...” She shows her teeth, hands me a tissue to wipe off my glasses with. She’s hinting that they’re smudgy, which is usual. I wipe and leave the tissue on the desk. “Go on, now.” The dog yawns and makes a gargly yawn-noise back in her throat, showing her teeth.

Da doesn’t like dogs, since he says they are always whizzing on your hedge and car and fireplug. The less dogs, the

better, is his motto, but this dog is not so bad.

“Hush-up, Manon!” Miss Wishingfor shows her own teeth at me again. Pretty teeth. Maybe she’s only twenty-five, not thirty-five, Miss Wishingfor, I mean, not Manon, a French poodle, white, maybe two years old with big brown eyes. Manon leaves when I leave.

Now everybody’s got his book out on his desk. Mrs. Carp glances at my note. She sniffs, points me to my desk, and continues talking while writing on the board. She stops talking and writing, stands with her back to us. She turns around, her eyes are wet.

“I been fat all my life, class. It isn’t necessary to tell me. My husband always tells me.”

“Zack’s cruel,” goes Winni Wonkerly, turning around and winking at me. I guess she likes me. Or else she wants to tease me. Girls will do that, Patella says, so watch out about the teasers. Winni is known around school as “Shirley Wonkerly,” since all the guys say she will do it. “Shirley,” she will say, with anybody, any time. Except me.

Tragically, I’ve never done it with anybody, preferring the clean alternative which I hear the Boy Scouts tell you not to do or you will go insane. I consider what Winni’s wink might mean to my future sex life. Probably nothing, since she is taller than me and fatter and gives off the same sort of hot smell that both Gussi and Patella have.

“It seems like Zachary’s getting to be more like his cousin every day, more’s the pity.” Mrs. Carp likely means Joseph Kuhl. Everybody tells me he’s my cousin, but I prefer to believe he’s my nephew. Joe is a student at Chaud County Community College where he is studying criminal justice.

I am his James Bond-type Q, unpaid, since he is planning to be a private eye, is always cash poor, and needs an assistant.

So I accommodate him once in a while, despite my per-

sonal tragic circumstances. Mrs. Carp didn't like Joe when he was at Big Baloney. Still doesn't like him, I guess.

"Here, class, is this nice poem by John Keats, an Englishman who was practically a teen when he wrote it, so you should like it. Here, I'll read some."

All around the class guys roll their eyes, as the tradition at Balona High is that guys are not supposed to like poetry. I like poetry and I know this poem from Mr. Pilcrow's class two years ago, but Mrs. Carp strives on:

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
Alone and palely loitering;
The sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing....

I met a lady in the meads
Full beautiful, a faery's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild....

Mrs. Carp reads on. Not bad. It's obvious she likes poetry. I like this poem, too. My poetic nature is sympathetic to guys trying to make out with young women.

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long....

I would set Fionnula on my Harley and see nothing but her, my dream girl.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew,
And sure in language strange she said,
I love thee true.

That would be okay, to have a chick come on to you like that, providing she was nice looking.

And this is why I sojourn here
Alone and palely loitering.
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Even the mouth-breathing Fring twins in the back row are finally listening. They don't know what sedge means, or loiter, but at least Mrs. Carp looks and sounds more human while she's reading this good stuff.

“‘Sans merci’ here in this poem means what?” goes Mrs. Carp, swiveling her head, her eyebrows up.

“Without mercy,” goes Winni right away, without raising her hand. “It says so, right here at the bottom of the page.”

“Well... all right. And ‘la belle dame’?”

Gussi Rieper this time: “The svelte lady.” Gussi turns around and wiggles her heavy frowning eyebrows at me. Gussi's always doing that to me lately. This is kind of strange since she's never before paid me any attention at all. Now she confides personal, top-secret stuff to me. I'm hoping the confiding isn't true stuff.

Mrs. Carp gives unsvelte Gussi a hard look. “*Pretty* lady, not necessarily svelte. Back in those olden days, to be considered pretty it was expected ladies would have some flesh on their bones. Not like today where, if you have some flesh on your bones, rude people will call you fat.” Mrs. Carp gives the top of her desk a hard look, but everybody knows she was referring to me when she mentioned “rude people.”

I can't see what reading you a Keats poem has to do with teaching you creative writing, which is one of the things this dumb class is supposed to be about. But I decide not to mention that true fact. We all listen to Mrs. Carp go on about how creative this poet is. I listen, thinking about stuff, not necessarily about the poem. But I recall some words it uses. “A wretched wight alone and palely loitering.”

These words are describing me, Zachary Taylor Burnross, a red-headed wight with freckles and glasses, a neck brace and tooth braces and a great helmet, alone and palely loitering.

The rest of the poem doesn't have a whole lot to do with me right now. But the "alone and palely loitering" part really hits the spot. It's about exactly the way I feel.

Alone and palely loitering. Yes.

My nephew thinks he's a poet. Always writing poems and reciting them if anybody even looks in his direction. Some of them probably are pretty good if you don't listen real carefully. But Joe doesn't have the *look* of a poet, him being tall and skinny with blond hair, blue eyes, and pink cheeks. I'm the one who looks authentically poetical. Loose hair, sad brown eyes—practically black eyes. Tragic looking.

Pale.

Wretched, loitering, usually, when I'm not busy. And alone, too, if you don't count Patella.

The reason I'm taking this dumb class is, I got only a C in chemistry last semester. Da says I have to take biology now and get an A to make up for the C. But you have to take two classes in summer school, so I am also taking this dumb creative writing class, which is also a required subject but seems to be mostly poetry right now.

"Some of you may be wondering what this poem has to do with creative writing," goes Mrs. Carp, reading my mind like a witch.

Everybody who is listening and not sleeping nods, since most guys in this class are really dumb and have flunked a lot of stuff and are here only because their parents threatened to throw them out of the house if they don't pass and graduate.

My parents sort of threaten me about my helmet but I wear it anyway. A splendid act of independence. I saw it in

the show window at Lapdazer's. It was sitting on an over-size dummy so guys could see it from the street. Candy-apple red. Glowing. I had to have it and used some college-savings money to pay for it. The helmet is slightly oversize. Well, maybe more than slightly. But if I stuff it with an old scarf, it fits. And it makes me feel like a champ. Too bad if guys point and laugh.

My father says his friends are calling me Weird Zachary, so if I am going to wear the helmet, I have to get a B average. My mother says I should be getting an A average. Ridiculous. Except for Jack Ordway and Claire Preene, nobody gets an A average at Big Baloney, especially in summer school when even the teachers wish they were somewhere else.

Mrs. Carp is still striving on. "Poetry is *ipso facto* creative writing, so that's why I want you to get acquainted with some." She writes *ipso facto* on the board. "Everybody knows what *ipso facto* means?" Nobody who's awake looks like he or she recognizes *ipso facto*.

Mrs. Carp says, "Well, never mind!" Her facial expression looks like she just stepped on something smelly and disgusting. She leaves you with the impression that even she doesn't know what *ipso facto* means.

"What's the poem mean, anyways?" goes Winni, acting interested.

Mrs. Carp perks up right away. "Well, what do you think it means?" This is what teachers often do when they don't know the answer to a question. They throw it right back at you. That's why it's a good idea to keep your mouth shut and pretty soon they will either tell you or forget about it.

"I don't know. That's why I asked the question."

"Well," Mrs. Carp looks around the classroom where a lot of guys are again either sleeping (the Fring twins) or talking with each other. "Well, this was a sad poet who fig-

ured women were heartless. So he wrote this poem to prove it, I guess.”

“Dumb!” goes Winni, making a face. You can’t tell whether she’s talking about Mrs. Carp’s answer or about the poet’s attitude. Maybe both.

My sort-of cousin Monkey Kuhl suddenly laughs a big “ha” and points his thumb out the window.

“Hey, lookit! Eeeeeew! Lewd!” *Lewd* is one of Mrs. Carp’s famous vocabulary words we have to learn.

We all get out of our seats to go watch the lawn outside where the little brown dog is stuck to Manon, end to end. This is not unusual behavior for Manon and visitor, which is why Miss Wishingfor tries to keep Manon by her desk.

Mr. Serly comes along with his garden hose and sprays cold water so the dogs pretty soon go their separate ways. All of us creative writers groan at the thought of getting sprayed with cold water under those circumstances.

Whoever said high school kids are not sympathetic.

Miss Wishingfor appears out on the lawn and blows into her dog-whistle like crazy, but it being a dog-whistle, we can’t hear it. Miss Wishingfor is wearing shiny black boots which probably keep her feet from getting wet, like she knew that this was going to happen. But Manon just stands there shaking the water off of herself. Mr. Drumhandler comes outside and shoos away the brown dog that has been standing around looking hopeful.

We all boo Mr. Drumhandler, but we also witness Miss Wishingfor lashing her eyes at him.

The bell rings. Mrs. Carp is still standing at the board with her chalk in her hand, looking sort of dissed. “Don’t you forget to study your vocabulary words,” she hollers in the din. *Din* is another one of her dumb words which I already know.

I push my way through the crowds of student din to Ms.

Frackle's biology room, where the din is about the same at the beginning of every class and where it always smells like something died and got stuffed into a glass jar.

I'm wishing I didn't feel so down today.

Ms. Frackle stands at her desk, giving us all her usual squinty look, her black eyes flashing back and forth, her mustache not much visible this morning.

Mr. Croon is growling something over the all-call, but you can't hear what it is, since everybody is talking and dining and clamoring.

"Get out your tray, class, and get to work right now." Ms. Frackle is used to ordering guys around, since she is the chairman of the teacher's union and orders Mr. Croon around all the time.

You don't argue with Ms. Frackle.

I got paired with Monkey as my lab partner. His father is ancient like mine, but his mother is pretty old, too, unlike mine. His name is actually Montgomery W. Kuhl but everybody's always called him Monkey for short. Even being big, he looks a lot like his name, which I believe is why you shouldn't name your kid "Monkey" or "Shorty" or "Skinny" or names like that, since they usually grow up to meet your expectations.

Our frog is sort of beat-up looking, since we've been cutting on him all week. Smells pretty ripe, too. Each day since we started, Monkey has taken a piece of our frog's insides and added it to my sort-of cousin Arleen Chaud's frog when Arleen wasn't paying attention (which is most of the time). So Arleen is probably having a hard time identifying stuff. She right away calls over Ms. Frackle, since Arleen has flunked twice already and should have graduated and been over at "C4," Chaud County Community College last year, like Gussi.

"Some joker's been playing around here," accuses Ms.

Frackle, looking tough, fixing Monkey with her special stare.

“I didn’t do nothing,” goes Monkey right away, pointing his thumb at me. “Zack’s probably the one playing around here.” Monkey puts on his virtuous look.

“I didn’t do it,” I go, quietly. “It was Monkey did it.”

I say this softly since I’m no longer being hypocritical, but not yet ready to rat on a lab partner who is bigger than me.

Ms. Frackle checks out our frog, which is sort of hollow. “What’s happened to its organs?”

“Which organs is that?” Monkey is frowning into our frog, looking innocent. He is pretty good at it.

I go, “Them being gone from the frog is probably why we have not been able to do all of our assignment yet. On account of the manufacturer shorted us on organs. Probably we ought to sue. Get back the investment.”

I am trying to talk like a lawyer, but it occurs to me that I’m sounding like a hypocrite again. Not at all what I intend.

Now Ms. Frackle squints her eyes at me. “I thought you said you were going to make an A in biology, Zachary.” She looks at Monkey. “I don’t know about Montgomery here. But I thought at least you might make an A in this class.” She raises up one eyebrow at me and squints again.

Maybe she actually has faith in my future.

She reaches into her lab-coat pocket and pulls out a tissue, hands it to me. “Your glasses could use a wipe or two.”

I suddenly realize I better correct this situation. “Uh, I think maybe some of those organs got transplanted to Arleen’s frog there, by mistake.”

“Yeah. Or the manufacturer included some of our organs in her frog over there.” Monkey is sounding sincere.

“You better draw those missing organs correctly, whatever. And shape up if you wanna pass this class,” goes Ms.

Frackle and walks away. She gives us the impression that she's been through this sort of thing before.

Arleen still isn't paying much attention, even though it's her frog who has been the subject of our conversation. Monkey transplants one of our remaining organs into her peanut butter and jelly snack left unsupervised.

Monkey is a daring and original joker, all right. Arleen hogs down her sandwich and doesn't even notice the vitamin supplement Monkey donated.

I start thinking creative thoughts while drawing frog organs from memory.

I better do two things if I want to realize my ambition of becoming Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. First, I better get into law school. Second, I better graduate from Balona High School. Or vice versa. I figure I can still limit my hypocrisy, if I work at it, but it better not be extreme or I'll get flunked out of school.

I guess Pastor Nim Chaud is right when he keeps saying moderation in all things is the way to go. Boring and dull, but the way to go if you want success.

Pastor Nim is pastor at the BoMFoG Tabernacle, where me and my mother go to church nowadays. BoMFoG sounds weird and lots of guys want to see the name changed. But Pastor Nim says Brotherhood of Man, Fatherhood of God stays as it is. Everybody likes Pastor Nim, but even so, Da's always complaining about the hour. "I'm too tired from my labors to get up for church that early," Da goes. "Sunday's supposed to be a day of rest for sinners."

Mummy doesn't even bother knocking on his bedroom door on Sunday mornings.

Alone and palely loitering.