



BY CHRIS BRANDON WHITAKER

ONE BOOK, ONE NEW PALTZ

CHRONOGRAM CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DASH SHAW

Nearly 40 writers submitted short stories inspired by the 2004 One Book, One New Paltz community-reading selection, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, to the *Chronogram*-sponsored Creative Writing Contest.

There were no submissions in the young-adult category. Every submission in the adult category was read anonymously and ranked by Creative Writing faculty at SUNY New Paltz. Those manuscripts receiving three points (the highest possible score) from all judges were selected as finalists. Many thanks to first-round judges Larry Carr, Dennis Doherty, John Langan, Tad

Richards, Rachel Rigolino, and Jan Schmidt. Thanks are also due to Lyn Thoman, SUNY New Paltz Writing Programs Staff Assistant, who guarded the anonymity of the entrants and administrated the first-round judging.

I forwarded three short stories (the writers' identities unknown to me) to nationally acclaimed novelist Da Chen, who read them anonymously. The finalists were (in alphabetical order): Irene McGarrity, "The Ruler of Ramen Noodles"; Abigail Robin, "Searching for Papa"; and Chris Whitaker, "Different."

Announcing the winner, Da Chen wrote: "The winner is 'Different.' It is brave, raw, and utterly lyrical. It reads truthfully like some black-and-white Sundance documentary. The author skillfully unpeels every layer as we go along. Thus each paragraph ambushes the reader with grenades of more shocking revelations. What amazes me the most is the sweet tone, of a boy different but never bitter, depressed but never hopeless. One knows that a better weekend awaits him somewhere...."

—Pauline Uchmanowicz, Contest Coordinator

Blue light seeped in around the edges of the curtains when Malcolm parted them to look at the still street below. Soon the sun would rise, and then doors would slam and cars would start up. For now, the morning was his, private and quiet. He had been awake since the middle of the night, when his father started pounding on his door and yelling obscenities. Although Malcolm was long in the habit of locking his door at night, it was hard to go back to sleep after one of his dad's sieges. The wood of the doorframe was busted out at the handle from being kicked in before. Now, two heavy-duty slide bolts held fast opposite the hinges at top and bottom.

Malcolm yawned as he sat back in his chair and evaluated his night's work. Underneath a gooseneck lamp and surrounded by eraser shavings lay a detailed drawing of a drum kit that included many cymbals, tom-tom drums, and a gong in the back. Malcolm flipped through the instrument catalog, that had been his patient model throughout the night, and then tossed it aside. Satisfied with his masterpiece, he tucked it carefully into his book bag, under the cover of his dreaded math textbook. The learning specialist in the Resource Room would be on his case for not doing his homework again. Why couldn't they simply agree there was no hope for him in mathematics and move on to a more interesting subject? Malcolm shrugged it off and thought about showing his drawing to Steve Zeller instead. Steve's thick immobile lips and carefully combed blond bangs resting on top

of steel-rimmed glasses came to mind, and Malcolm started to get another erection. He pulled down his underwear to admire it for a moment. The temptation to jerk off again was strong, but he decided to save it. It was Friday, and you never knew what might happen. He flicked the head with his finger before pulling up his underwear.

"Down, boy."

After showering and dressing entirely in black, Malcolm opened the minifridge stashed in the corner of his room and poured a half-glass of orange juice. The last of the vodka splashed into the glass; it was time to pay another visit to his supplier. Savoring a big gulp, Malcolm set the drink down next to a mirror ringed with lights. This was one of his favorite parts of the day. It was a private time to put on his public face. Armed with a can of hairspray in one hand, he teased and prodded his hair with the other. Within minutes, his hair-do defied gravity and symmetry. It was like a painting: Too many touch-ups could destroy the effect. Now he was ready to face another day in high school.

Malcolm sat on the edge of the chorus riser in the Band Room. He could hear the muted thump and crash of a drummer practicing in one of the soundproof booths in the back. The wobbling melody of a horn playing a new piece wafted in the background from another booth. Malcolm knew that Steve Zeller usually spent his study hall period practicing in the Band Room. He couldn't decide whether or not it would be a good idea to show Steve his drawing. Would it seem cool or weird? The thumping came to



a dramatic and splashy finale, and then there was silence. Malcolm's heart began to beat faster. What should he do? He sat paralyzed with the drawing in his hands. Steve walked into the Band Room and tucked two drumsticks into his back pocket. He was a junior with a muscular body, but the glasses and pockmarks on his face made him look less intimidating.

"Hey, Malcolm. What's up?"

"Nothing a drink wouldn't fix."

Steve laughed. "Yeah, right. You thinking of joining the chorus?"

"No, just blowing off my math tutor. You sounded really good back there."

"Thanks. I was only working up a sweat."

"Sounds exciting."

"Oh, yeah? Cut myself on the snare, though."

Steve showed a bloody knuckle. "Check it out."

"Ouch. That must have hurt."

"Not really. What do you got there?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just an idea I was messing around with."

"Let me see it." Steve took up the drawing and examined it closely. "Check you out, Malcolm. This is awesome!"

Malcolm was relieved. "Do you think so?" He gazed upon Steve's cherished profile with the piece of paper up to his face.

"Totally. You've got the major prog rock set-up here. Check out all this Ludwig gear."

"Do you prefer Ludwig or Pearl drums?" Malcolm observed that Steve's bangs were pasted to his forehead with sweat rather than resting on the tops of his glasses as usual.

"They're both decent." Steve seemed to notice how intently Malcolm was looking at

him. "Uh—but if I had the money, I'd probably go for a set of Sonor Delites."

"Oh, really? What kind do you have at home?"

"I've got a Pearl fusion five-piece. It's okay."

Steve laughed nervously and put the drawing on a music stand. "It sure beats the hell out of those Tama hunks of junk they got in there."

Malcolm laughed nervously too. "Yeah, I know what you mean." The horn had gone silent, and soon they would have company. His mind was going blank.

"I don't know why the school doesn't spend more of its budget on musical instruments."

"Uh—right. I don't know."

An awkward pause was broken when Phil Tibble emerged from his practice booth with an instrument case in hand. He slung it into the storage bins along the wall and then strode up to the chorus riser with a smile.

"Hey, Steve. Just the man I wanted to see."

"Hey, Phil. What's going on?" Steve knocked knuckles with Phil.

"Not too much." Phil gave Malcolm a dubious look and decided to ignore him. "So, I was wondering if maybe you could go over this horn chart with me sometime before Band on Monday?"

"Before Monday?! Dude. I guess I could meet you right after school today for a little while."

"Excellent! You da man, Steve."

"Sure, no problem."

Steve and Phil started toward the door.

Malcolm felt crushed from being ignored. "Well, it was nice talking to you."

Steve looked back, puzzled. "Uh—whatever. I'll see you around." He gave Phil a smirk as they left the Band Room.

"Bye," said Malcolm wistfully.

Malcolm picked up the drawing from the music stand and stuffed it huffily into his book



Malcolm walked out the front door of Middlekill Area High School. Only parents and salesmen used that entrance, but Malcolm knew it was best to avoid the school bus platform after school. There, he would usually be bumped into, tripped up, or at the very least, called a faggot. He had always thought that the ridicule would stop when he became a senior, but evidently his status as a faggot was yet lower than that of the zitty freshmen who got laughs for trying to spit on him.

The afternoon was hot and hazy. It seemed as if the day were tired out and just going through the motions until sundown. Malcolm walked up Main Street and then turned onto the county highway. From the look of the empty parking lot, they were still between shifts at the Pancake House. He opened the tinted glass door and let the book bag slide off his shoulder as he took a seat at the counter. It smelled warm inside like hot food, dishwater, and smiles. A round waitress whisked past him.

"Hi, Shirl."

"Oh, hi, Malcolm. I'll let your mom know you're here."

"Is there a check for me by any chance?"

"Not if you didn't work last week." Shirl backed through the kitchen doors with a smile.

Malcolm looked around the dingy restaurant. This was his second home, and he often thought of how he would redecorate it. Today, a pink and aqua Malibu theme came to mind. First off, the dull brown paneling would get a coat of pink paint. Then, aqua silhouettes of palm trees and sailboats would replace the copper relief still lifes on the wall. Finally, he would make the middle-aged waitresses wear sunglasses, sandals, aqua halter-tops, and, what the hell, pink hot pants. Malcolm smiled at the thought.

"Glad to see yer in such a good mood." Trish was short and energetic, but looked like she could be Malcolm's grandmother.

"Oh, it's just a facade to keep you from feeling guilty, Mother."

"That's my boy." Trish winked as she poured a fountain soda for Malcolm. "What do you want to eat?"

"I'm not hungry. I'm just here for the ambience."

"Oh, that's our special today." Trish liked it when her son spoke French. "Have a tuna melt with that?"

"Well, if you insist."

Trish placed the soda and a straw on the counter.

"Soup or salad?"

"The tuna melt's fine."

"How 'bout some fries on the side?"

"Just the tuna melt, Mother."

"I'll be right back." Trish disappeared into the kitchen.

Trish was the cook at the Pancake House, and she often came out of the kitchen to joke and gossip with the customers. This used to embarrass Malcolm, but now he thought she was a hoot. People often told Malcolm that his mother was a wonderful person. He always thought they said it because she put up with his father. At the moment, he could see that other people loved his mother for the same reasons he did: because of her sense of humor and her caring ways. He wanted to be just like his mother when he grew up except without the large, impoverished family.

After a while, Trish reappeared with a tuna melt deluxe. "Here you go, hon. Watch. Those fries are hot."

"Thanks, Mother. This looks delicious!"

"Well, if you put it that way, you're welcome."

Trish scrunched her nose at Malcolm and leaned her elbows on the counter. "Have you seen your brother lately?"

"He didn't come home yesterday, and you can forget about tonight because it's the weekend."

"He hasn't stopped in all this week for a meal."

"Mother, haven't you noticed Darren has a liquid diet?" Malcolm coyly popped a few fries into his mouth.

"I'm worried he's turning out like his father."

"Don't worry, Mother, because—because it's too late!"

Malcolm and Trish shared a laugh.

"That's terrible to say." Trish winked at Malcolm. "He's young still. He'll come around yet."

"Whatever. Have you heard from Big Sis?"

"Tonda came by for lunch just this afternoon. And you should see little Corey. He's getting so big!"

"Oh, I know. I've been a bad uncle lately."

Malcolm munched regretfully on some more fries. "I'll go visit them sometime soon."

"I wasn't gonna say nothing, but why don't ya stop by tonight?"

"It's Friday. I'm going to the movies."

"You always go to the movies."

"But I have a rendezvous with friends tonight, Mother. I can't abandon what little social life I have."

"Well, suit yourself. Corey'd love to see ya."

Trish straightened out the condiments on the counter.

"Now, look at who didn't want any fries?"

Malcolm stared at his lone tuna melt with mock alarm. "What fries? I ordered a fruit cocktail!"

"Oh, so it's dessert you want now."

They both giggled.

"No, I'm fine. Have to watch my figure, you know."

"So, you want a fruit cocktail to go with your figure?"

"No, that's okay, Mother. I still have the sandwich."

"I'll be right back." Trish vanished into the kitchen.

After finishing a fruit cocktail topped with whipped cream, Malcolm stooped over to give his mother a hug and a kiss. She had to get the specials ready for dinner; he had to go meet his "friends." As he plodded across the parking lot of the Pancake House, Malcolm felt a brief twinge for fibbing to his mother about his social plans. There would be time to see his nephew later in the weekend. He loved his family, but sorely needed doses of freedom in between them to keep from getting too depressed. Although he knew he would miss them when he left town after graduation, he dreamed of a new life in the city all the time. The only thing that stood in the way of his post-graduation dream was passing math. Why couldn't they accept he was simply different in that area and just give him the dumb diploma?

Malcolm walked down Main Street toward the Capitol Theater. Its art deco marquee was lit up even though it was still light outside. The first and last letters of the neon sign didn't work, so the theater proclaimed itself as the "apito" at night. It was one of the few sights that endeared Middlekill to Malcolm. He went up to the curved window of the ticket booth and wrapped on the glass. Someone peeked between the closed blinds and then, after a pause, unlocked the front door. Charles Keefer was an overweight man in his mid-twenties with skin that flaked badly. He held the door open with one hand like a doorman and motioned for Malcolm to enter.

"Get in before someone sees you."
 "Always charmant, Charles."
 "Hey, if I get caught, I lose my job."
 "Well, while you're still employed, why don't you have the name changed? The Capitol Theater makes no sense at all."
 "It works for me."
 "But think about it. This isn't a theater, and it's not in the capital."
 "So? Middlekill's the county seat."
 "You're reaching there, Charles. Then it should be called the County Cinema."
 "Don't bust my balls."
 "I think you should walk right up to Mr. Kratts and demand that he change the name to the County Cinema immediately."
 "Yeah, right. And he'd fire me for insubordination. Come on."
 Charles lumbered across the lobby with his arms stiffly straight by his sides. The cinema stank of stale popcorn and carpet freshener. The worn red carpet was brown in the middle where people usually tread. Malcolm followed Charles up the spiral stairs to the cramped manager's office.
 "Charles, you shouldn't be afraid to speak your mind."
 "Look, I have enough to do as it is. I open up, sell concessions, run the projector, clean up, and close down. What more do you want from me?"
 Malcolm giggled at his exasperation. "Well, you could start by cleaning up this office. It's a disgrace."
 "Who cares? Nobody ever sees it." Charles collapsed heavily into a chair on wheels and leaned back until it creaked.
 "It's the principle, Charles. I'm sure these are inhumane working conditions somewhere in the world. I insist you call the union right now." Malcolm picked up a phone that was half-buried on the desk.
 "Don't touch stuff in here!" Charles snatched back the phone.
 Malcolm laughed, and then pretended to be offended. "I was merely standing up for your rights."
 "Well, don't! I don't need your help."
 "Oh, Charles. You're no fun!" Malcolm sighed. "Do you have a bottle for me?"
 Charles' eyes narrowed. "Do you have money for me?"
 "Well, there's the problem. Perhaps you could put it on my tab until next week?"
 "No way." Charles leaned forward and pumped his eyebrows. "Of course, there are other ways of paying."
 "Don't flatter yourself, Charles. I'm not that desperate tonight."
 "Hey, I'm just reminding you of the options. You'd be surprised how many others go for it."
 Charles grinned unpleasantly.
 "I'm sure I wouldn't be." Malcolm sighed.
 "Look, I've got ten dollars. I can get the other five to you by next Friday."
 "Oh, you should have said so! Ten bucks will buy you a pint."
 "A pint? Shouldn't that be seven-fifty?"
 "It is what it is. Do you want it?"
 Malcolm dug into his pocket and tossed the money onto the desk.
 "You've become quite the businessman, Charles."
 Charles flipped open the top of a cardboard file box and pulled out a pint from a stand of bottles.
 "And it's a pleasure doing business."
 "Georgi. Only the finest." Malcolm slipped the bottle into his book bag.
 "Just don't spill it in the theater."
 "Don't worry. I'll curl up in the balcony, and no one will know I'm here."
 "That's out tonight. I've got customers."
 Charles smiled dirtily.
 "No! Who?"
 "Can't say." Charles ushered Malcolm out of the office. "Just wait in the projection booth until six forty-five. Then come down to the lobby and take a regular seat."
 "I'll be sure to wave to Mr. Kratts."
 "Stay away from the ticket window!"

The sun set gloriously across the sky outside while Malcolm sat in the corner of the ill-lit projection booth. The air reeked of film and machine oil, and there was little breathing room thanks to the huge projectors. Feeling lonely, Malcolm took a nip of the vodka. Some social life he had, and so much for his rendezvous with all those "friends." Malcolm was almost used to being a social outcast ever since he had come out of the closet. There were times when the aloneness was hard to take, though. This was one of them. He thought of whom he might see in the theater that night. Malcolm often lingered in the cinema lobby after shows to see if anyone else was lonely and open to adventure. So far, none of the moviegoers in Middlekill had been adventurous. Maybe Steve Zeller would show up alone and wouldn't ignore him again because of sidelong glances from other guys. Malcolm pulled the drawing of the drum kit out of his book bag and looked at it dreamily for a while. Then, very carefully, he tore it up into tiny pieces of paper and sprinkled them over his math book. ●



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