

Who Is We?

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Patrick Lynch is passing back personal narratives to his second period. He used to call them *memoirs*, but his students always laughed. He glances up at the clock on the back wall: 9:47 it reads, as it has for the past seven years. The clock, end point of an exclamation begun by the fissure that runs down the back wall, reassures Patrick. The one constant in his classroom. Beneath it, Emily Dickinson, poor defaced Emily Dickinson, looks over the proceedings with equanimity, alarmed neither by her disfigurement nor by her function as cover for the section of fissure beneath the clock. Mr. Lynch hands his narrative back to Jamar, a pudgy, bright-eyed boy in the front row.

“Are they pretty, Mr. L?” Jamar smirks at his favorite Lynchism.

“Some are pretty, Jamar,” Mr. Lynch says, “some less so.”

Jamar frowns at his A-, which is pretty, but wants to be beautiful.

Abdul says, “You always give me C’s ‘cause I’m black.”

“Cause you black and don’t study,” says Jamar, who is blacker still, and studies, and is hell-bent on pushing his A- average to an A. Everyone laughs, even Abdul.

“Don’t play yourself, Abdul,” the teacher says. It’s an expression Patrick likes. Still, you had to be judicious with street lingo. It could only be used as self-parody: Look at the feeble white man, reaching out. You couldn’t let them think you were trying to be hip or, worse, making fun of their culture. Patrick remembers Mr. Graves, sophomore English, Parker’s Prairie High, back in the early ’70s. “Let’s forget old

Will Shakespeare,” he’d say, plopping *The Tempest* on his desk. “Let’s just rap. What’s goin’ on? What’s happenin’?” Then he’d pull at his bushy, Elvis-length sideburns. Mr. Grooves his students called him, in the hallways. Twenty years later the same rules applied. “Snoopy Dog, I’m down with him,” sleepy Phil Sitkowitz declared last semester, without irony, during a dying chem lecture, a desperate grab for street cred that was met with howls, then barks for weeks afterwards.

Today’s narrative, “My Role in the American Drama,” one of Patrick’s lesser inspirations, has yielded predictable results. But they couldn’t expect a home run from him every day, could they? Not after Gladys Rosenberg decided on August 30th that her tetchy hip would not, after all, allow her a thirty-sixth year of ninth grade American History, that she wouldn’t be answering the bell for the 1992-93 school year. Principal Silverstein had left a terse, enigmatic message on Patrick’s answering machine that day: “Mr. Lynch, how would you feel about teaching American Humanities?”

Silverstein later explained that American Humanities, this new course, would give Patrick the chance to broaden his teaching repertoire, synthesizing English and history. And, yes, it would save the principal the task of scrambling to find a replacement for Mrs. Rosenberg. And save the district money. And, since Patrick was certified to teach both subjects, students would get credit for both. Unquestionably, he was the man for the job.

“But Mr. Silverstein—Steve—I’m licensed in secondary English. I’m not credentialed in history,” Patrick stammered.

“Oh, really? Wally said you were.” Walter Kupczek, vice principal, not a man to let facts stand in the way of expediency. Patrick listened

to the static on the line, to Silverstein's raspy breathing. "Hmmm. Well, Patrrrick," the principal pulled on his name, "they'll never check." Silverstein hung up before Patrick could ask what would happen to him if "they" ever did.

And so American Humanities was born, bastard child of AmLit10 and AmHist12, reconceived every night at Patrick's desk, and sometimes in the morning as the #3 local screeched into the 103rd Street station, Patrick's lesson plan book in one sweaty hand, sesame bagel with a *schmear* in the other.

It's late February, the meat of the school year; now the heavy lifting begins. The first two quarters were always given over to taming and training. He and Abdul had gone toe-to-toe every day into mid-December, until one morning when Abdul decided Mr. L was for real.

"Where is your essay, Abdul?"

"I don't got it. Didn't do it."

"Why not?"

It was such a stupid question, repeated so often, Abdul finally laughed and slicked down what he liked to think of as his mustache. "You not gonna stop askin', are you, Lynch?" (Sounded like lunch. He knew they called him that. Are you ready for Lunch? they asked each other before a quiz.)

Mr. Lynch shook his head.

"Well, *a'ight* then," said Abdul.

The next day Patrick found Abdul's essay on his desk. It wasn't pretty. Abdul was chairman of the too-cool-for-school crew. But, as chairman, he was able to do occasional work without damaging his rep, for his cronies understood the act of handing in an assignment as

the highest form of satire. Let him think you care. Much wittier, in the end, than being empty-handed; anyone could do that.

Yes, February was good. If you were going to make serious headway with a class, it was between now and spring break: Manhattan was slushy, the new TV shows had lost their novelty; it was still too cold to hang out in the park drinking 40s or smoking blunts with your buddies. Mid-April the big black puffy coats came off and you were competing with some buxom girl's cleavage, an alpha male's biceps, a contest that was no contest. But February was fun, February was productive—a veteran teacher could finally smile and not be thought weak, you could get in the face of an unprepared student without provoking all-out war. Usually.

Mr. Lynch makes his way back to Amina, Fadwa, Muna, and Hegira, the Afghani girls perched on the ledge at the rear of the classroom, beneath Emily Dickinson, above the splintered boards that once were bookshelves. He still feels that twinge of guilt when they nod in thanks as he hands them their narratives, their eyes cast down, faces obscured by their head coverings. Thirty-six students, thirty-two desks. Who else will sit back here, shoulder to shoulder, silent, listening, taking notes? Hegira, spokeswoman for their group, still pauses every day after the bell rings, waits at the door, focuses her large brown eyes on Patrick's chin and says Thank you, teacher, for teaching us today. The way she says teacher humbles him. The other three nod and file out behind her. Hegira's father, who made it out of Kabul just ahead of the Russian tanks, has a little smoke shop in Crown Heights. She spoke not a word of English two years ago, but got an 87 percent on the city-wide writing test this fall. Abdul could learn a thing or two from Hegira, were he

the kind of boy to pay attention to a girl who covers every square inch of her body.

There are thirty-six students in period two, but, as with every class, the flavor of the group is established by a handful. In this class, Jamar, Hegira and, of course, Abdul. Also Angela Wong and Maria Lopez. Angela works nights in her family's restaurant, waiting tables, folding won tons, and breaks boards in karate class after school. Maria is an angel-faced *femme fatale*. Wicked smart, Maria, but, as they say, at risk. Patrick can't look into Maria's first-Communion eyes without remembering the note he found on his floor a few weeks ago. *Did you like what I did in lab? it said in her loopy, girly script. You want some more of that after school?* Sitkowitz's chem lab. Procreation—nuclear fission—could be going on in the back row without his knowledge.

Then there's Josh Mishkin.

He's quiet today, slumbering at the little round "editing table" to the right of Hegira's girls. *Joshua requires preferential seating* says his Individualized Education Plan—by which they mean front row, center—but back row, right corner is what Josh prefers and is the only spot where he, and the class, can function.

Mr. Lynch taps a finger on the table, next to Josh's head. He learned early this fall not to rouse Josh with a tap on the shoulder. *While shouting and upsetting furniture is clearly unacceptable behavior in a classroom setting*, Dr. Mishkin, Josh's mother, wrote in her October 7th missive to Principal Silverstein, *it is behavior consistent with the psychopharmacological and socio-cultural issues detailed in Joshua's IEP*. She concluded with a snappy, *I urge Mr. Lynch to familiarize himself with this document*, and a final shot across his bow: *as federal law mandates*.

Josh opens one blue eye, then tilts his head up towards his teacher, short pale dreadlocks bobbing over his freckled forehead. How can one sleepy eye convey so much disdain? Patrick wonders. Then Mr. Lynch has to say it: “Josh, where’s your personal narrative?”

Josh waits until Abdul and Jamar have swiveled to take in the show, then hoists his lanky torso up. He smoothes down his Bob Marley Lives! T-shirt so the cannabis leaf that outlines Bob’s head like a halo is clearer. “Hey, yo, I forgot it at home again.” He puckers his lips, making visible the surrounding reddish wisps of facial hair. “Sorry.”

Jamar shakes his head; Abdul and his minions chuckle.

“Bring it in tomorrow if you want credit,” Mr. Lynch says, and moves on.

Patrick can feel his throat beginning to tighten, his stomach swirling. He has always made it his mission to find something to like in the unlikable student—good penmanship, nice hands. Sometimes you really had to dig.

His father’s dictums, however corny, were still his guiding lights. “Education is a relationship,” Superintendent Lynch would pronounce, carving the turkey in smooth, even strokes, “an unspoken contract between the teacher and the taught, based on trust.” It was tempting to dismiss these archaic notions—the Upper Midwest wasn’t the Upper West Side, after all—but his dad had had plenty to deal with back in Parker’s Prairie: pregnancies, pot, vandalism perpetrated by farm boys who somehow blamed the unified school district for four generations of family farm going under. But Patrick couldn’t recall anyone like Josh or his mother back in Minnesota, nor had he encountered their like in his seven years at Marcus Garvey.

Patrick had never come this close to hating a student before, and it was that, more than any of Josh's antics, that ate at him.

Mr. Lynch comes back to center stage. "O.K.," he claps his hands, rubs them together, "who read the Declaration last night? Who looked up the vocabulary?" The usual hands pop up: Hegira and her girls, Jamar, Angela; Maria raises her hand shoulder height—she looked up half the words, before the lucky recipient of the chem class hand job telephoned—a few others from the front two rows wave uncertainly. An inauspicious response to Patrick's latest brainstorm, introducing Jeffersonian democracy by weaving it into their previous unit on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The Malcolm unit had gone well—Spike's film biography had just come out, X-caps and T-shirts were everywhere—so most of them had read most of the book. He'd put up a poster of Malcolm as an experiment, to see if he'd wind up with the same Frankenstein scars and bandito mustache as Emily Dickinson. Patrick was out in the hall one morning when he saw Abdul, fine-point in hand, prepare to perform cosmetic surgery on Mr. X. Before he could say a word, Patrick heard Jamar scold softly, "Hey, man. That's Malcolm." Patrick watched from behind the door as Abdul paused, then capped the pen.

"Jefferson states that some truths are 'self-evident.' What's he mean? Angela?"

Angela consults her notes. "Obvious."

"Obviously," says Abdul, to titters from his people.

"If it's so obvious, why the long letter to King George?" asks Mr. Lynch.

"Not obvious to the *British*," declaims Jamar, adjusting the silver

and black frames that appeared midway through chapter nine of Malcolm's autobiography.

Jamar's pride in appreciating the distinction is justified; it had been a long hard slog through the national, regional, and religious issues of the rebellion. None of it seemed to stick. For most of them, the only meaningful signifier was race. And Mr. Lynch had done himself no favors by drawing comparisons with the Bolshevik revolution and using the term "White Russian." (Abdul: "How many Russians is black, Lynch?" Mr. Lynch: "None that I can think of, Abdul. It's a political term." Jamar, nudging the glasses up his nose: "Pushkin was black, Mr. L. Don't forget Pushkin.")

Attempting a brief summary of the American military campaign, the teacher had explained how "We were a disaster here in New York City—worse than the Knicks—we were a frozen mess at Valley Forge . . . but we triumphed sneakily at the Delaware River." He was halted in his march toward Yorktown by Maria's fluttering hand, perhaps raising a question, perhaps perfecting the arc of shiny black hair that shaded her almond eyes.

"Yes, Maria?"

"Excuse me, Mr. L." She patted a few strands back into the arc. "I don't mean to be rude or nothin'," she wrinkled her petite, caramel colored nose, "but *who* is *we*?"

Being New Yorkers, they got *pluribus*; the *unum*, Patrick finally realized, would take time.

"Unalienable," Mr. Lynch barks, "that's a weird word. Who has that one?" He waits. Seeing no takers, he calls on his go-to girl. "Hegira?"

She looks down at her notes, her face shrouded. She shakes her head. "It's in the wrong form, Mr. Lynch, I think."

"Go for it."

"My dictionary is no good." She looks to her fellow ledge girls for support. They stare back solemnly. "Foreign, it says. Strange."

Mr. Lynch nods. "Yes, 'alien.' That's on the right track."

"Strangers from another planet," says Abdul, followed by his famous inter-galactic noise, half-hum, half-whistle.

"Oh, snap, d'joo see *The X-Files* last night?" squeals Julio, Abdul's right-hand man. He waves his long, preying mantis arms. Julio's father is Dominican, his mother Haitian. This parentage, coupled with his extravagant gestures and slender prettiness, led to the stairwell graffiti claiming that Julio slept on "both sides of the island." Being Abdul's boyhood chum and court jester spare him additional physical abuse.

"Illegal aliens, next on Fox," intones Abdul.

"My Uncle Ramon's illegal," says Julio.

"Yo' whole family's illegal," says Abdul.

"Yo' mama's illegal . . ."

"Oooooo . . ." says Mr. Lynch's American Humanities class, in sudden hope that something more exciting than an explication of Lockean philosophy might develop second period.

"Enough," says Mr. Lynch, knowing that Abdul and Julio could easily burn forty minutes with this routine and, according to accounts of Sitkowitz's class, frequently have.

Strolling the aisles, a quick survey confirms that homework completion lacks critical mass. Jefferson is dying. Plan B had been to introduce *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but he'd miscounted in the book room and is six copies short. Plan C—this being a new course, he has no Plan C.

The jackhammers on Columbus Avenue start up. The ancient radiator, which produces much noise but little heat, begins its *ping-ping-ping*. Maria is evaluating her crimson nails. Abdul is about to punch Julio's shoulder. Josh is sleeping. Angela—Angela!—is sketching on her desk. She's his canary in the coalmine; if he loses her, it's really over. Patrick looks through the metal meshwork that covers his windows. A red Corvette is gunning up the ramp of the Park 'n' Pay across 103rd. A damp, early spring breeze leaks through the baseball-sized hole in the front windowpane. His first year at Marcus Garvey, Patrick put in a work order to have it fixed. A braver man would've sent in another work order, but Bernie, the hollow-eyed, brandy-breathed head custodian, is the only person in the building who scares him.

Patrick faces his students. He looks over their heads, at the clock. Nine forty-seven. It will always be second period. Help me, Emily. Her gaze is unyielding: *You let them do this to me. You never said a word.* The teacher's eyes come down on Julio, who, forgetting which class he's in, is slipping his Mets cap on, tilting it backward. Mr. Lynch strides to Julio's desk, snatches the cap off his head.

"What the—"

"No hats in class, Mr. Aguilar."

"Yo, Lynch—"

"But . . ." Patrick knows without looking that all eyes, save Josh's, are now on him, "you can have it back—you can wear it in class the rest of the year, Mr. Aguilar—if you can tell me what Thomas Jefferson and this man," he does a little hop, skip and jump to the poster of Malcolm, raps it with his knuckles, "have in common."

Julio's narrow face crumples in despair. Who knew this would be the day doing homework actually mattered?

"They're both men," offers Abdul. "Can I have Julio's hat?" Julio glares at him.

"When in the course of human events it becomes necessary to dissolve the bands . . ." Patrick waves the cap in front of them as if it were his quill pen.

"They're both rebels," says Angela, her jaw set at the angle he's seen after school in the gym, when her fist goes through a board.

"A rebel? Jefferson? On his hill-top plantation?" Patrick flips the cap, catches it by the brim. Jamar raises one hand and thumbs his text with the other. "Jamar?"

"And for this we pledge our lives, our land, and our sacred honor." Yeah, he owned a plantation and slaves, but if the British found him, he was gone."

"And he got all his rich friends to agree," says Maria, who has forgotten her nails. "Their names are on it same as his."

"Hmmm. I don't see the connection yet." Patrick tries the cap on for size. Julio squirms.

"Malcolm used to work those crowds on 125th, up by the Apollo," offers Jamar.

"My dad heard him. He say everybody be screaming. Say brother could really talk some sh—stuff." This from Abdul, who'd said little during their discussions of the autobiography. A first for him, invoking his father, who, apparently, was moved enough by Malcolm to leave his son with the Nation of Islam name before he left for good.

"They were both persuasive, okay." Mr. Lynch stalks the room, taking off the cap, running a hand through his retreating hairline. "But to what end? Their philosophies?"

"The white man's the devil."

"The British are the devil."

Mr. Lynch throws his head back. "That's lame." He scowls.

"That's weak."

"Tyrants," says Jamar. "The British were tyrants."

"Better," says Mr. Lynch. "What to do about it?"

"Fight back."

"How?"

"Protest."

"Arm yourself."

'When in the course of human events it becomes necessary . . .'

Julio springs to his feet, pointing a long finger at the teacher. His eyes are wide. He thrusts his shoulders back. "By any means necessary!" he shouts.

"Bravo, Mr. Aguilar, well done. A+." Mr. Lynch Frisbees the cap back to Julio, who snatches it out of the air and yanks it on his head to the class's applause. He gives a deep bow and sits with theatrical flourish.

Patrick lets Julio and the class savor their collective brilliance for a moment. He glances at his watch; twenty-five minutes left in the period. This could really go places. Patrick hugs his sides, which are a little damp. He puts a fist on each hip. "So—Tom and Malcolm, a couple of homeboys, lookin' to stir somethin' up. Let's take it further. Who were their audiences? To whom were they appealing?" Half a dozen hands go up, several for the first time this year. That vein in Patrick's jaw pulses.

"Mickey!" screams a familiar voice from the editing table in the back right corner. Sleepy Josh has been driven off by his evil twin, Manic Josh. He stands with his arms outstretched, ready to embrace

their visitor. A rat pokes his nose and bristles his whiskers through the broken boards beneath the dangling feet of Hegira's girls. Since construction commenced on Columbus Avenue, the sewer vermin have sought higher ground. It was Patrick who named the first one Mickey, in hopes of defusing the situation, of evoking a kinder, gentler rodent. Until now, the rats have always stayed back by the wall, amidst the boards, often noticed only by the teacher, but Josh has succeeded in spooking this one and he hops out, sniffing the air, thrashing his hairless tail. The ledge girls, unruffled, peer down through their feet at Mickey, pull at their skirts slightly, flashing a rare glimpse of ankle. Such creatures, perhaps, had been pets in Kabul, or dinner.

The rest of Mr. Lynch's second period American Humanities class is less composed. A number of the girls and more than a few boys scramble atop their desks, hugging their knees in fear and delight as the rat darts from row to row. Abdul and his crew do the same, in parody, bleating falsetto cries, Julio leading the way, his mouth open wide, his reedy fingers framing his face in a silent Munch-scream. Jamar and Angela take in the proceedings with disgust, but their classmates, in the main, are enjoying themselves immensely. Any distraction—fight, fire drill—is a welcome change, but this is really good, surefire Topic A in the hallway.

Josh is gleeful. He leans against the editing table, shaking his shoulder-length dreadlocks, Bob Marley's beatific stoned face looking on from his chest. "Mickey," he claps his hands, "come to Papa."

"All right, everybody," Mr. Lynch says, finally, in a voice that sounds weary even to himself, giving last rites to their class discussion with that universal admission that things are irretrievably out of control: "remain calm."

Mickey finishes his circuit of the room and disappears into the broken boards. Patrick scans his options, knowing he has only one, the one he'd hoped to save for May, plan D: "Please open your texts to Chapter Six." Second period moans, but submits. As his students haul out their texts, a text their teacher loathes more than they, a text that portrays the moon landing as a recent event, Patrick notes that Sleepy Josh is back, slumped on the editing table, his Medusa head nestled in the pillow of his arms. That hard place returns to Patrick's throat. Mr. Lynch clears it with a cough. "Page 127," he announces, "A Nation Is Born."

"A nation is bored," mutters Abdul. Julio giggles.

Sleepy Josh—who lost his third American history textbook two weeks ago—sighs deeply, as if already dreaming. But as Mr. Lynch reads the first sentence aloud, "Nations, like people, are often born in turmoil," he lifts one eyelid, drops it, and puckers those fuzzy lips. ■