



Clover

BY BILLY LOMBARDO

Graham Koglin usually began his Great World Novels class with a poem. There was never any talk about the poems; the students were not permitted to analyze or discuss or even to say what they felt about them. The poems were meant only to begin the class, to welcome the students to the day, to warm them to language, to remind them they were in the presence of great men and women who were about the importance of words.

But on a Monday morning just over a week into March, Graham Koglin began his Great World Novels class at Packer not by reading poetry but by calling attention to a tuft of hair at the crown of his head. After his English 9 class earlier that morning, he had glanced at himself in the mirror of the second floor boys room to discover what his students had been staring and giggling at that morning, and there it was, wild and disobedient, thick and ridiculous, and growing from his head like a soft horn. He would have attempted to tame the thing but he was nearly late for Great World Novels, and a light stampede of boys fixing hair, peeing, laughing, changing into gym clothes, and thumbing cell phones, had charged into the boys room between classes, discouraging him from tending to the disobedient horn.

And so, on his way down the long hallway to his next class, to preempt any further awkwardness—the staring at, and the staring away—Graham decided he would call attention to the deviant clump of hair himself.

Oddly, the Great World Novels class was comprised completely of girls this semester; it was one of those things the registrar was hard pressed to explain. The gender spread at the private school was pretty balanced from year to year. These things happened, the registrar had said. There were oddities from year to year, trends and waves, and big years for things—boys in the sciences, soft athletes, tall kids, peanut allergies. The music director in the lower school had written a song one year about peanut allergies. The class of 2001 had two peanut-free tables that followed them through the cafeteria for fourteen years.

The go-around had already begun by the time Graham entered the class. What had de-



veloped in the classroom—without captaincy, it seemed—without organization or deliberation—in the two months since the course began, was an informal Monday morning sharing circle in which each student offered the best moment of her weekend with the rest of the class.

Graham entered the classroom and waited for the ritual to feather away and for the girls to take out their novels and notebooks before he cleared his throat and pointed to his hair, which a couple of the girls seemed already to have noticed. Emma Neary seemed to look everywhere but at Graham during the Monday ritual. Leigh Fanning disguised her alarm at his hair by passing it off as a crick in her neck.

“Before I begin with a poem,” Graham said. “If I might just talk about my hair a moment.”

There were smiles, there was the folding of arms across chests, the lovely and generous gestures of smart and confident young women who appreciated the perquisites that sometimes came with being smart and responsible—these anecdotal asides, for example, from teachers who treated them like grownups.

“You know, of course,” Graham began, “That I’ve been working on my house feverishly since the day I bought it two years ago.”

Of course they knew. They had been in on the ongoing saga of Graham’s home renovations from the first day of class. They knew about his plumbing issues and the crumbling chimney, the gutter debacle, the ancient wiring, the plaster and lath. They knew about the never-ending trips to Peasley’s Hardware. Graham believed in these small revealings of his life to his students; they had been part of his pedagogy from early in his teaching career. There were teachers who complained incessantly about the lack of classroom time, about the chippings away of the day, about bathroom visits and early dismissals for swim meets and soccer games, but Graham made no apologies for the few minutes he allowed his students some respite from the rigors of the day.

“You remember Previous Owner,” he said, and the girls smiled. The previous owner had taken on a kind of literary value in their class. He was a secondary character, a clown who had made a habit of taking the easy way out. The girls sat back in easeful anticipation while Graham reminded them of the time Previous Owner had painted over wallpaper and then wallpapered over that. Graham reminded them of the layers of linoleum and tile built upon each other like kitchen strata.

“Well,” Graham continued, “One of the last remnants of Previous Owner’s terrible taste in everything is the bathroom mirror.”



He couldn't say why he had kept the ancient relic up so long. He had cut his index finger twice before finally covering the bottom corner of the mirrored cabinet with duct tape. It was a rusting tin box with shelves, painted white, to which looking glass had been glued.

"Well," Graham said. "I've finally taken the mirror down."

There was applause, smattered and light. Graham nodded, right angled his arms at the front and back of his waist and bowed at their recognition of this small triumph. But there was more.

The plan was to install the new mirror last night as well, but the installation turned out to be trickier than he had anticipated. He'd purchased the new mirror months before, but had forgotten there would be electrical work involved. There were lights.

"Anyway," Graham said. "I realized late last night, that it would have to wait until another day. It's looking to become one of those projects that require numerous trips to Peasley's."

"What does that have to do with your hair," Leigh Fanning asked.

Graham set his palms in the air before him, two gentle stop signs for Leigh Fanning, and the class smiled. Leigh Fanning was not patient.

"The long and short of it is this," Graham said. "In the morning, when I showered and dried my hair and otherwise prepared for the school day, I did so without the benefit of a bathroom mirror.

"Ergo this," he said, pointing to the tuft.

"It's like an ossicone," McKenzie Caldwell said.

"I knew someone in this class would use that word," Graham said.

"What's an ossicone?" someone said.

"Giraffes have them," someone said, and Ellery White raised her hand.

Ellery was sitting that day where Caroline Dahl usually sat: between McKenzie Caldwell and Lizzy Bell. Always the first to enter the room, she took a different seat each day, and in this manner she worked her clockwise way around the oval table. Among the other ways she distinguished herself from the girls in the classroom was this: she was the only student who ever raised her hand. It had taken some time for Graham to also notice this: there was no chatter when she spoke. He had become aware of the almost unnoticeable swiveling of heads toward Ellery when she raised her hand to speak. On his drive home one day, Graham likened it to the symmetry of infielders at the instant of a pitcher's release; as though it was clear with the rise of Ellery's hand, that something was about to happen.



“Yes, Ellery?” Graham said, and Ellery’s right hand drifted slowly and lightly downward before settling on her left. She was beautiful and lovely and smart.

“Don’t you have another mirror, Mr. Koglin?” she asked.

Graham felt the shifting of girls’ heads back to him.

He would like to have told Ellery that there was another mirror. He would like to have said this: Yes, there is another mirror above his wife’s dresser in the bedroom, but that she was still sleeping when Graham left for work that morning, and it was too dark in the bedroom to deal with his hair without the light, and even if there were enough light, Leah, his wife, slept her best sleep in the morning hours, but even then, she slept so lightly that Graham was afraid the mere sound of his steps across the carpet to comb his hair in front of the mirror would wake her.

He would like to have told Ellery White that he did not want to disturb Leah’s sleep.

But all of that—most of that—would have been a lie. It was true that Graham might have done what he could to keep Leah’s sleep undisturbed. What was not true is that Leah was still his wife. She had left Graham three years ago, before he’d even bought the house, and she had taken her dresser and the mirror above it with.

The girls did not know about Leah.

Or he could have told Ellery another truth. He could have told her there were no other mirrors in the house. But for a reason he did not have time to ponder, it felt as though the truth was too intimate an item to share with them. It was one of those awarenesses—innumerable and immediate—that came to a teacher in the course of a school day. A master teacher understood, without reflection, the manifold ripples of topics innocently thrown into the classroom pond.

And so when the swiveling heads turned toward Graham, he lied. He told Ellery that the mirror in the bedroom had recently fallen, and so there were no other mirrors.

“And now,” he said, “Perhaps we should continue our discussion of Marquez.”

But not all of the students were ready to begin, and when they turned once more to Ellery to see if Mr. Koglin’s answer had satisfied, Ellery paused before lifting her hand again, and the friendly sprinkling of laughter that filled the room seemed lifted on the strength of something like helium and light, and Graham smiled.

“Yes, Ms. White?” he said.

“First of all, I think it looks just fine,” Ellery said. “Your hair.” She floated her hand down again. “It sort of fits.”

The girls were smiling soundlessly—not laughing—all of them smiling with their



lips closed.

“And it’s cute that you’re talking about this to us in class, too,” Ellery continued. “But perhaps I might ask just one more question before we turn to *Love*.”

Love was what Ellery White called *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

They were smiling still.

“May I continue?” Ellery said.

“Yes, you may,” Graham said.

“Why didn’t you fix your hair in another bathroom?”

No one would argue that Ellery was not beautiful; and though her sweetness was less conspicuous than her beauty, neither could anyone argue against that. But if there was a chemical in the human brain responsible for filtering out these tacit suggestions of privilege, there was a paucity of in Ellery White.

But it was obvious as well, even in the most cynical of the girls, that Ellery meant nothing by such statements, that she would be appalled, in fact, by the suggestion that there might be any trace of insensitivity in the things she said. And as if to prove this support for her, the tiniest shift seemed to take place in the room. It started when Ellery turned her chin in a way that proved, somehow, a tenderness, a genuine desire to know the answer.

There was something—Graham knew this from his days as the coach of the girls tennis team at Packer—that took place among girls that could not be witnessed if boys were present. This *something* was possible, Graham speculated, because girls seemed to have more options available for the expressions of love toward one another than boys did, and further proof of this something came with the shift in the room that day. All of the girls, save for Ellery, did not look to Graham again, not immediately, and not at all with the timing he expected of them. Instead, they seemed to hold Ellery in their eyes. It appeared to Graham as though they were each this close to sliding back their seats from the Harkness table and rising to draw Ellery into a group hug. He was glad they didn’t, for he feared he might have joined them if they did.

That was the other thing about them. They could do that, these girls: sweep you up in the swirl of themselves.

It was only a few seconds, perhaps less, but they stayed there with the new and airy tilt of Ellery’s question. They stayed there with Ellery’s voice and her words and her skin until it seemed they could not extend to any greater length the gift of time they had been granted to look at her for so long without reason. And in sororal collusion, then, the girls looked back to Graham who had made a conscious and immediate decision to not say the only



thing that had occurred to him to say: that in fact, Ellery, he had only one bathroom.

By the time his semester with the girls came along, Graham was fully aware of how important it was to maintain equality in the distribution of eye contact among females in his classes. The first year he assigned his students a reader's journal he'd collected them after seeing Beth Vaccaro reach over and pencil a comment in another girl's journal. Though the owner of the book erased it, he could make out the faint assumption of the scribbler: *Look at Mr. Koglin*, the note read. *He's not teaching anyone but you.*

And so Graham responded before he'd spent too much time looking at Ellery.

"I guess it didn't cross my mind," he said, and he smiled. He offered a laugh of mostly breath.

And they moved on. Graham read the poem of the day, and afterward, the girls opened their novels to page 61, to a bird shaking itself in the almond tree below which Fermina Daza held a hoop of embroidery before Florentino Ariza.

It was not the first year that Graham implemented the poem-a-day segment, but it was the first time a group of students had treated the daily event with such respect. It was almost sacrosanct. Sometimes a murmur of satisfaction would follow a poem, or an unfiltered *oh*, from another student; the sounds, it seemed to Graham, of deep satisfaction, or disbelief, even, of the profound beauty poetry put to the world. There were days when someone asked if Mr. Koglin might read the poem a second time. There were requests, weeks after he'd read a poem, to hear that poem about the doe again, or the poem about the boxer, Ruby Goldstein, or that poem about saving minutes. In the halls of that private school, there were certainly daily examples of narcissism and entitlement, of solipsism and selfishness, but how many times had one of these girls come late to class and peeked in the vertical rectangle of glass that butted against the frame of the door rather than disturb the class during the poem of the day? It felt like church used to feel, Graham sometimes thought. It was a kind of grace.

But when classes resumed at Packer after a two-week break for spring vacation, on a miserable Monday in early April, Graham Koglin did not begin class with a poem. He had spent some time over break preparing one for the girls—*I and Thou*, it was called, by a poet named Dugan—reading it over, rehearsing it, just to start the final stretch with something special, but on that first day back there were a number of distractions—exceptions to the day—that seemed to warrant the postponement of the segment until later in the period.

First, there was a new smell in the classroom. Nearly every one of the girls made men-



tion of it when they entered. They stopped at the door, they sniffed, they inquired after the smell. At each new arrival Graham speculated anew: the windows had probably been shut all break; it was damp; perhaps they had not cleaned the carpet—or perhaps they *had*, and it had not yet completely dried.

The second distraction was that one of the seats was still open—not all of the girls had arrived yet, and Graham felt that on the first day back after break, everyone should be there.

He was going to state his reasons for not reading the poem immediately, he was going to say something about his plans for that week of classes—that they would finish their discussion of *Love*, that they would wrap up the novel with an essay and a quiz, that they would enter the last few weeks of the school year, the last leg of their journey together, gently—but the girls had already slipped into what looked to be an extended go-around of the highlights of spring break.

Fifteen minutes into class, though, Graham felt he could not put off the poem any longer; he had stalled for time, allowed the go-around to linger, and updated the girls on his home improvements. And so he began.

But he had only read the first line of the Dugan poem, when Graham caught a glimpse of Ellery White peeking through the glass frame of the classroom door. There was a momentary pause—a fleeting, perhaps unnoticeable hesitation—in his interpretation of the poem, during which he considered whether he should stop his recitation in order to let Ellery in, and begin again. He wanted all of the girls to hear that poem. He wanted Ellery to hear that poem.

Would they understand, he thought, if he stopped his reading and started again when Ellery had entered? Given the oddness of the day, he thought, would they understand?

Oh, just come in, he willed her, *Just come in*. And in that flash of deliberation, that almost unnoticeable puff of will, Ellery stepped into the room without apology or excuse. She stopped just over the threshold and she waited, like a quiet latecomer to Sunday mass, as Graham continued reading the poem.

The girls looked at Ellery when the poem was finished. There seemed a completion now, a final closure to the spring breaks from which they had just returned. There came, it seemed to Graham, a collective satisfaction at Ellery's arrival. It seemed as though the girls were happy that she had broken protocol and had entered the class during the recitation of the poem, as though they were relieved now that everyone was there for at least part of the poem. The chairs would all be filled presently.



There was no chattering among the girls while Ellery, wearing her new spring clothes and her careful tan, seemed, in her intense and deliberate stillness at the threshold, to stop the passage of time. While she stood there, the gray April dampness seemed to leave the room, seemed to be replaced by a lightness and light.

Everyone was looking at Ellery White as she lifted her chin and her little nose to the silent and desirous and anticipating classroom. She was sniffing the air. Like a beautiful animal she was tracking the scent in the room.

The girls remained silent while Ellery drew clipped whiffs of air through her sun-touched nose. They had long seconds of looking at Ellery who was new and lambent and lovely while they waited. And they awaited happily, it appeared, as though Ellery's recognition of the smell somehow validated them. They waited eagerly for her to put words to the scent they had all noticed.

"It smells different in here," she said. And the girls smiled and waited for more.

Ellery stepped tinily toward the Harkness table and angled her nose tinily away, like a girl looking for better cell phone signal.

"It smells—" she said, and she sniffed again. "It smells like wet cashmere."

"Oh, my God," Leigh Fanning said.

"Yes," Caroline Dahl said. "That's it."

Graham had never smelled wet cashmere, and even if Caroline and Leigh had not seconded the smell, Graham would not have doubted that Ellery spoke the truth. He stood across the floor from her, he stood in the line of the same doorway as Ellery and felt his chin lift to the same angle as hers, felt himself sniff at the same clipped whiffs of air, and felt a venial desire to know that smell so that he might recognize it if it ever happened again.

From the nearly imperceptible swivelings of their heads, the punctual students—though silent—seemed each at the crisp and certain edge of a great giddiness. It might have been anticipatory laughter, as if, despite Ellery's innocence, this precise articulation of the classroom smell was too much to bear without laughing. Graham wondered, though, if it was simply that Ellery had been away from them for all of two weeks and two days and ten minutes of class. They had missed her. And now—novel tucked under her arm—she appeared before them like a miracle. They were like puppies in a box to see her.

But the crisp and certain edge of laughter at which they were the verge, did not last long.



Ellery White was smiling, was looking at Graham Koglin as if for confirmation of the smell she had articulated to the classroom.

If he had thought, just seconds longer, about how he might reply, Graham would certainly have said something more appropriate, something about the weather or the window or the carpet. But he was not thinking straight.

“Fear no more, girls,” Graham said, “Ellery Koglin has returned from spring break.”

If not for the stunned, the open-mouthed stillness and silence, it might not have occurred to Graham that his own last name was hanging in the air like some palpable thing, it might not have occurred to Graham that he had given his last name to Ellery White, had taken away hers and had given her his. And when it did occur to him, he was suddenly afraid that he might never laugh again, that laughter might no longer be possible in the world, that laughter was a rumor; the certainty of it so remote, that if it was a thing at all now, it was a thing to mourn.

He had recovered from blunders before. Months earlier, while teaching *The Odyssey* to his English 9 students, Graham had planned to write *Penelope* on the whiteboard but had written the word *Penis* instead. He had worried, for the splittest of seconds that he might never recover from that mistake either. Nick Foster, who learned *differently*, who qualified for extra time, an easement in classroom lighting, and everything short of a Ritalin drip, was the first student to recognize that most hilarious of words written on the board before him. The word might as well have been the image of a penis on the board—or even the real McCoy. It was possible, Graham thought, as Nick tended to the laughter and mucous that had exploded from his nostrils, that Graham might not have the chance to ever teach another child at Packer without a student recalling the time Mr. Koglin had written the word *Penis* on the whiteboard.

But Graham recovered remarkably from the penis incident. First he laughed at the blunder himself, laughed right through his explanation. He had been re-reading, just that morning, he laughed, a passage from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*—a novel he had read two and a half times and secretly hated—that took place in the newspaper office, when Penelope (Pen) is doing one thing or another, and just as Graham was preparing to write *Penelope* on the board, he happened to be thinking about how Joyce was having fun with *Pen* and *is* during chapter seven, and there you have it. Penis instead of Penelope.

Somehow there had even been a return to teaching after that. Professional work had occurred in the classroom.

But this seemed a blunder of a wildly different species. He had given his last name to



Ellery White.

He would pretend he said nothing.

What was there to say, anyway? The truth? The truth was of no help here. The truth was that Graham had been trying his last name everywhere, had been attaching it to the first names of women everywhere, just for the sound of it. Anyone else and maybe it would not have been noticed. It meant nothing. He liked how it sounded, okay? Ellery Koglin. It sounded like something.

As Graham prepared to say nothing, Ellery, bless her heart, came to the rescue like a champion.

“Have you had the go-around, yet?” she said, and the girls nodded yes.

“Well, I haven’t had a chance to speak of my vacation, yet,” Ellery said. “May I have a chance?”

Graham could have wept at her heroism, and without awaiting a reply Ellery White began to speak.

Graham was not capable of attending completely to her story, of course—something about a day she spend on a beach in California somewhere, building a sandcastle with a six-year-old boy, a cousin of hers or a stranger on the beach. It wasn’t important what she said. Ellery had rescued him. The girls were smiling widely while she walked around the classroom saying hello to the girls by touching each of their shoulders.

Afterward, in the twenty minutes that remained of that first day back, Graham reminded the girls that they had one more chapter to read from *Love in the Time of Cholera*, they would wrap it up this week. They refreshed themselves on the novel. They spoke of love, of time, of craft. Ellery said that the ambiguous antecedent was mostly thought of as a flaw in fiction, but in that scene when Florentino and Fermina boarded the *New Fidelity* it seemed clear that García Márquez used it with intention, with purpose. Graham nodded. Graham highlighted the passage on page 327. Graham wrote the phrase *ambiguous antecedent* in the margin. The girls took notes. It was an ordinary day.

But Jesus—and he hated to say this—there were times he wished he were Ryan Callahan.

Ryan Callahan went to the Hull House on Broadway where Graham had been volunteering since shortly after Leah had left him. Ryan Callahan didn’t speak. Neither did he smile. Graham had worked with Ryan for months, convinced that Ryan didn’t like him, when he asked Maricel, a teacher at Hull House, if there was



someone else he could work with instead. But Maricel encouraged Graham to hang in there. He takes some getting used to, Maricel had said. He might not ever talk, she had said, but he'll come around.

And he did come around some. In Graham's three years at Hull House, though Ryan had yet to speak a word, he had begun to communicate in the subtlest of ways. It was Gloria Ableman, another student there, who had recently taught Ryan to signal *yes* by winking and *no* by squeezing Gloria's finger, but that was it. Squeeze and wink. And he only did it for Gloria. The new development in Ryan's ability to communicate had the status of miracle among the staff.

Ryan's eyes were the blue of swimming pools, and the eyelashes over just one of his eyes—the one he winked for *yes*—were as white as cotton. He ate Goldfish Crackers with apple juice for his snack, Goldfish Crackers with milk for his lunch, and he allowed his father to feed him one pancake for dinner. And for the past year, when Graham visited on Mondays, Ryan ate green grapes, but only if Graham fed them to him, and only if Graham plucked them off the cluster and plopped them into the muscled ring of Ryan's mouth, and only if Graham flicked his middle finger against his own tightened cheek to make a suction pop sound at the exact time Ryan sucked the grape into his mouth.

On another Monday Graham might have stuck around Packer until the 4:05 bus picked him up at North Avenue, but after his blunder with Ellery, he was on the 36 Broadway at three-thirty, less than ten minutes after the bell rang to end the day. When Graham felt his thumbs rub against his forefingers he stopped himself. He rolled his fingers over the outline of grapes in the plastic bag on his lap instead. He leaned against the cold window. Spines of blackened snow, the detritus of another stubborn winter, lined the curb and curled around the blue legs of a postal box at Arlington Street.

Graham pulled *Love in the Time of Cholera* from the pocket of his coat and set it on his lap below the grapes. Maybe they would forget. Another week on the *Love* essay and then the class would move on to Flaubert. They would hear from their colleges while reading about the Bovarys, and in three months they'd be gone. In three months they'd be in Paris and London and L.A. They'd forget.

Anyway, it was a simple mistake. It meant nothing. He could just as easily have given his name to McKenzie Caldwell or to Leigh Fanning or Lizzy Bell. He could just as easily have given his name to Emma Neary. It meant nothing.



Graham checked his cell phone for the time. It was 3:36. He would be at the Hull House by four o'clock, which was too early to show up. Ryan Callahan would not be able to let that go. He would rock in place, he would look at the wall clock, he would look at his wristwatch, he would check the time on the classroom computer, he would pick up the wind-up clock on the teacher's desk. He would not let it go. Graham's lack of concern for the time would upset Ryan so much he would not even take the grapes.

The coffee house on Broadway was packed with men wearing scarves without jackets. Graham bought an espresso and stirred into it a tiny spoon of sugar. He stood at the window facing Belmont and waited until 4:29, then he walked to the Hull House a block away and signed in at 4:32 to visit Ryan and his eyes at the doorway of the third floor classroom at 4:34.

Maricel, one of the third floor teachers, opened the door for Graham, but it was Gloria Ableman who reached him first. She raced in front of Maricel to greet Graham as she always did.

"Hello, Graham Koglin with a K," she said, holding out her hand for him to shake. "Gloria Ableman."

When he had met Gloria the first time, after Graham had clarified the spelling of his name for her, Gloria had surprised him by taking his wrist in the pinch of her fingers and lifting it to her nose, and even now, after hundreds of visits to the Hull House, he thought of that moment every time she held out her hand for him to shake.

"Hello, Gloria Ableman," Graham said.

Behind her Ryan stood shifting his weight from one hip to the other, rubbing his thumbs seven times against each of his fingers before pausing and rubbing them again.

Graham waved to Ryan, and Gloria looked Graham over. "Where is your backpack today, Graham Koglin?" she asked.

"I left it at school," he said. "I was in a hurry to get here on time."

"Is that why your book is under your arm?" she asked.

"Yes," Graham said.

"What is the title of the book that is tucked under your arm, Graham Koglin?" she said.

Graham removed the novel from under his arm and handed it to her. Behind Gloria, Ryan was still rocking.

She looked at the cover for no more than seconds.

"Clover in the A-Hole of Time," Gloria Ableman said. "Good title."

"I'm sorry?" Graham said.



“Clover in the A-Hole of Time,” Gloria said again. “Good title.”

Graham looked closely at the novel and smiled at Gloria’s quick scrambling of the title. “Oh, yes, Gloria,” he said. “Very nice.”

When he met Gloria, she had guessed at the spelling of his name but had spelled Koglin with a C, and after he corrected her she had called him by an anagram of his name for nearly a month. She had called him *Gloaming Hark*. Eventually, though, and only at Maricel’s insistence, Gloria had settled upon calling him *Graham Koglin with a K*.

“Clover with a C,” Gloria added.

“Yes,” Graham said. “Clover with a C.”

In a corner of a room they referred to as the library, Graham and Ryan sat across a table from each other in wooden chairs. Though it had taken Graham a full two years before he’d been allowed by Ryan to feed him grapes, almost from the start they would sit in those chairs in the library where Graham read to him. Ryan didn’t seem to care what Graham read, and so Ryan had begun to read him the books he taught at Packer. He had read books from his English 9 class as well; he’d read him *Catcher in the Rye* at the beginning of the school year and *Ellen Foster* the year before. He’d read him *The Dead*, summer reading for Great World Novels, and *Of Mice and Men* for his American Lit Elective. And this year he had read him *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

It was Gloria who told Graham one day that Ryan would allow him to feed him grapes. And since that afternoon Graham ended each visit in this way.

When Graham opened his book and began to read from the final chapter, he laughed again at Gloria’s anagram, but across the table, Ryan, his face expressionless, stopped rubbing his thumbs, and though he settled his unmatched eyes on the novel they seemed to stare, as always, at some far-away place.

“What is it?” Graham said.

Ryan, of course, said nothing. Several seconds passed before his fingers began rolling across his thumbs again, in sibilant whispers of sevens.

Graham re-started the sentence, but looked up again at the silence of Ryan’s whispering thumbs.

Ryan said nothing.

Graham turned to look across the room where Maricel was reading silently at a table filled with bowls of sands of various colors. At the table with Maricel was Gloria Ableman, making hourglass sand timers.

Gloria looked up at Graham first and then at Maricel.



“Could you come here with Gloria for a moment,” Graham said.

“One minute,” Gloria said, and she turned over a timer she had made for a game board.

Exactly one minute had passed before Gloria and Maricel rose from their table and joined Graham and Ryan in the library.

Graham explained, mostly to Gloria, how Ryan had stopped rubbing his thumbs at the sound of Graham reading, and he wondered if Gloria might know why.

Maricel looked at Gloria. “What do you think?” she said.

“Give me the book, Clover,” Gloria said. She curled at the air with the fingers of one hand. She curled at Graham’s chair with the other.

“And the chair,” she said.

Graham smiled, handed the book to Gloria, and stood from his chair.

Across the table, Ryan Callahan was rubbing his thumbs again.

Gloria looked up at Graham. “What page?”

Graham looked at Maricel and smiled. “Two-seventy-nine,” he said. “Second paragraph.”

Gloria looked at the page for as long as it might have taken someone to read the first paragraph silently. She closed the book then and set it at the edge of the table. She scooted her chair closer to the table and looked up. She reached across the table and held out her forefinger for Ryan, and then from some capacity of eidetic memory Gloria began to read.

“She could not avoid a profound feeling of rancor toward her husband for having left her alone in the middle of the ocean. Everything of his made her cry: his pajamas under the pillow, his slippers that had always looked to her like an invalid’s, the memory of his image—”

And there, mid-sentence, Gloria stopped when Ryan reached for her fingers with each of his hands. He looked at the novel at the edge of the table.

Gloria looked at Ryan’s eyes. “Do you like that book?” she said, and Ryan winked a Yes with his white-lashed eye.

“Did Graham Koglin already read that paragraph to you?” she said, and before it happened, Graham knew that Ryan would wink again. He had indeed read that paragraph to Ryan already. He remembered, in fact, that he’d finished reading the book to Ryan while Packer was away for spring break. He had forgotten that.

“Did Graham Koglin already read this book to you?” Gloria said, and Ryan winked again.

“Okay, Sweetie,” Gloria said. She pulled her fingers from Ryan’s palms and patted the back of his hands and looked into the swimming pool of his eyes and smiled. Gloria picked up the book and stood. She handed it to Graham.



Graham looked across the table at Ryan Callahan who was looking, still, at the empty chair where Gloria had sat.

“Get another book, Clover,” Gloria said. “You’ve already read this one.”

Ryan had begun again to rub his fingertips against his thumbs, and though, in his recollection of this moment forever afterward, Graham would never be certain that it actually happened, he was quite certain in that exact moment, that the edges of Ryan Callahan’s lips lifted upward into something like a smile.

And Graham could not say what it was that happened inside of him then. At once it felt like some kind of a breaking, something had broken. And then it felt like whatever the antithesis of breaking was.

But as uncertain as he might have been about whatever it was that had happened, Maricel and Gloria and even Ryan could see the outward effect of that event, for Graham stood before them with his hand shaped into a visor above his eyes and almost covering them. He was weeping.

The tears came over him in a silver wash so copious that he could not see any of the people before him. While he wept, though, he wondered what it was that Ryan was doing. He wondered if Ryan was smiling still. He supposed that he was. He supposed that Ryan had not moved from his seat, that he was rubbing his thumbs against his fingers again at the comfort of things having been righted. He supposed that Ryan was now waiting for Graham to begin reading a new book, and that he would soon have the taste of grapes in his mouth, the suction pop sound of them.

Graham supposed, as well, that the hand trying to wipe sadness away from his back—the first hand to touch him in three years—belonged to Maricel.

But this he did not suppose—of this he was certain: he was certain now, even through his capacious and confusing cataract of tears, that it was Gloria removing the book from his right hand, Gloria taking his wrist into the palm of her hand and lifting it to her nose, Gloria handling Graham’s wrist as though it were a flower.

And it was Gloria speaking now, as if into his wrist, “It’s okay, Clover. It’s okay. Gloria Ableman is here. Gloria Ableman will help you find another book.”