

"Nor a Lender Be" by James Van Pelt June 27 @ 9:00

pm EST

Far Future Fiction

Nancy Kress and Sean McMullen.

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Nor a Lender Be James Van Pelt

"Nor a Lender Be" first appeared in the February 1999 issue.

On a park bench near the swings, the old man in an overcoat eyes the children. He's positioned himself carefully away from the parents who are talking amiably on a set of benches on the other side of the playground equipment. Near him, a pair of boys dressed in matching blue jumpers take turns going down the slide. The old man studies them for a while. They're maybe five and four, he decides, very sweet; they smile often; the same shade of blonde hair curls out from beneath their caps. On the teeter-totters, a handful of older kids, around nine or ten years old, rise then fall in rhythm. They laugh in unison at some joke. Beyond them on the grass, a couple of teens throw a football back and forth. The old man sighs and looks at his hands. Liver spots mar the knuckles and make indecipherable patterns on their backs. He imagines things crawling under his skin, moving beneath the loose parchment of his flesh. He resists the urge to scratch his fingers. When he raises his left hand from his leg, it trembles slightly. Underneath the slide, a little girl sits against a support pole, drawing patterns in the gravel. She's maybe eight, the old man guesses. Her blonde hair matches the boys going up the ladder. Her lips are thin and serious. She concentrates on what she's drawing, erasing a part of it and starting again. When she finally looks up, as if sensing she is being watched, her eyes are dark brown. "Hi," she says, not lifting her finger from the spot on her drawing. The old man glances at the parents on the other side. They're facing each other, chatting. Nobody seems to notice him or the child. He gestures to her—a come closer wave. "Hey," he says. "Hey, little girl. Do you want to know a secret?" She looks at her work for a moment, makes a final line in the gravel, then gets up, brushes the back of her dress and says, "Do you know one?" "Sure," he says. "A good one. Come a little closer so I can tell you." He keeps his hands on his legs so she won't see the trembling. The trembling might frighten her. If she knew about the things under his skin, it might frighten her. If she knew what swam behind his eyes, it would drive her off.

\* \* \*

The two observers, a black-haired woman in a grey pantsuit, and a man, sporting old-fashioned glasses, jeans and neatly pressed sport shirt had come into class at the beginning, taken seats in the rear, then not moved other than to whisper quietly to each other during William's lesson on Hamlet. William paid them little attention. Visitors came to his class regularly: parents who'd just enrolled their kids, still suspicious of a live teacher instead of a computer DeskTop unit; media people with tiny cameras who'd film for their programs ("Retro-Teaching Survives in Colorado" was the title of a piece a week earlier); board of education members, each with their own agenda, etc. They'd make notes about the semi-circular desk arrangement, how much William talked, how often students responded. The minute details seemed to fascinate them. Sometimes old folk came in to wallow in nostalgia, to remember when all schools used to be like this. William concentrated on the class of fifteen students; they were playing a quote game. "So," said William, "If I were your boyfriend and you wanted to dump me, what might you say?" Sheila, a sixteen-year-old with a splash of freckles across her cheeks and nose, nervously raised her hand. "My Lord, I have remembrances of yours that I have longed to deliver?" She paused, pantomimed handing him something, then smiled when William took it. Her fingertips brushed his palms. She said, "I'd tell you that if I returned your ring or something." William nodded again, leaning toward her. "Yes, Sheila. Exactly. But what if I denied it hurt me? What if I were a creep and said to you, 'No, not I. I never gave you ought'?" He said it gruffly, brusquely as if he really was irritated at her, as if he despised the idea of her. "My honored Lord," she said, flushing. "You know right well you did. And with them words of so sweet breath composed as made the things more rich." She sighed. "I love that part." William wandered around the room. The students watched him; he could feel their eyes-their attention-centered on him. It was always this way: the interaction, the game with the things he loved and the class, like opening a great oak door between them and the material, and he remembered again the first time he'd really understood Hamlet, facing the ghost on the stage, talking into the darkness, "King, Father, royal Dane. Oh, answer me! Let me not burst in ignorance." William shivered. Literature struck him so immediately. He could feel it in the air, shimmering out of the texts on their desks. He said, "What if I were angry with someone and wanted to call him a name? Can any of you give me an insult?" Jason, a skinny, pale boy said, "Bloody, bawdy villain! Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!" "Ouch," said William, grinning, as he stuck an imaginary dagger in his chest. Several students laughed.

Just as strong in room as the presence of Shakespeare were the kids, all of them awake for a moment in this play. William felt like a friendly conductor, punching their tickets on the Hamlet express. They'd boarded as they always did—a bit full of the world, distracted and fragmented, but the rocking of the iambic rails had lulled them into receptiveness. William had played Polonius for them at the beginning of class. He'd said, "I do know, when the blood burns, how prodigal the soul lends the tongue vows." They'd been caught. By the time he'd gone back to "Neither a borrower nor a lender be," they'd dropped every concern they'd brought to class. It was just them and Shakespeare and William playing three-cornered catch. He closed his eyes to feel it washing over him, and he almost forgot for a moment what they had been doing until Rupert, a dark-eyed boy, cleared his throat before speaking. "What if I said that you were an old man whose face was wrinkled; your eyes purged thick amber and plumtree gum, and that you have a plentiful lack of wit?" "I'd say, 'Though this be madness, yet there is method in it.'" Red-haired Tracy said, "Do you think Hamlet was mad?" Dirk, who sat behind her tapped her on the shoulder. "'I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.'" Hamlet knew what he was doing. Five hands shot up. "In quotes only," said William. A bell rang, ending class, and several students groaned in disappointment. They gathered books and headed to the door. "Good night, sweet prince," said Rupert as he left. Jason prodded him and said, "Ah, ha. I knew it. Women delight you not." Rupert's voice drifted into the classroom from the hall, "What a piece of work is a man. How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties . . . ." William chuckled and turned to his desk. "How impressive," said the woman in the pantsuit. William jumped; he'd forgotten about his visitors. The woman rose and her companion followed her, standing slightly behind her to one side. "Victoria Baseman," she said, extending a hand. "Of the Reinhart Group. This is my intern, Isaac. We'd like to talk to you about what you're doing here." She looked around the room. Student artwork covered most of the walls: painstakingly hand-drawn renditions of The Globe Theater, examples of Elizabethan dress, and scenes from Hamlet. "The students appear to enjoy learning." Isaac, who might have been twenty and easily ten years Victoria's junior, took notes. "That was . . . amazing. I was moved," said Isaac. Victoria shot him an annoyed frown. William pushed the student's papers into a pile, trying to appear calm. The Reinhart Group had swallowed Disney a decade ago, and had made massive strides into education in the last few years. Half the corporation schools in the country relied on Reinhart funding in one way or another, and they were one of

the few companies who made money in the field since the privatization of schools thirty years earlier. "They're a good class. It's easier when they're motivated."

The woman consulted a data reader in her hand. "Looks like all your classes are motivated. Best test scores in the country."

"It's the school," said William. "The curriculum works."

Victoria snorted derisively. "False modesty. You've changed schools three times with a different curriculum each time. Your students excel when you're there. They're average when you're not. It's not the curriculum; it's you."

"I just teach them one day at the time. I've been blessed with good kids."

"The Reinhart Group thinks it's more than that. We've done extensive studies of student behavior-your students-and we've made interesting conclusions. Because of them, we'd like to make you a proposition." She sat on the edge of his desk.

"I'm happy here," said William. "I like the area." He pushed essays into his briefcase. "They pay me well."

Victoria put her data reader into her jacket. "Fifty years ago, you wouldn't have been so lucky." She turned to Isaac. "Fifty years ago teachers weren't paid by their successes. Good teachers, bad teachers, it didn't matter. They were paid the same."

"That seems silly," Isaac offered quietly, "Doesn't it? Why would anyone work hard?"

"Surprisingly, many of them did anyway. Teaching's more of an avocation than a vocation, wouldn't you say, William?"

William nodded. He wondered what she was leading to.

She continued, "But the schools weren't very good, just the same. When public schools collapsed and the corporations took over, good teachers were bid for. Bad teachers got better or quit. Generally education improved, and education became big business."

"Yes," offered William. "But there are still failings-whole groups of kids who are under-served."

"Of course," Victoria said. "The corporate model has problems too. Applying management principles to classrooms hasn't made them all that much better, at least not as good as they need to be, despite the different approaches."

Isaac said, "You mean like individualized, home study."

"Yes, everything done at home through computers. No classrooms. No group contact. Interesting experiment," said Victoria. "An approach the Reinhart Group invests heavily in, but getting rid of the schools as structures hasn't done it. No, the problem is that every approach emphasizes curriculum."

Isaac looked puzzled. "Naturally. Curriculum and technique can be duplicated. It can be marketed. What else is there?"

"The teacher," said William.

Victoria nodded her approval. "Yes, the teacher. So we went big into teacher recruitment and training. That's why Reinhart is the major player in education. But it's time to make the next jump. It's time to get rid of the corporate model that relies on thinking of curriculum as product. The product model is dead."

Isaac said, "But what can replace it?"

"Yes, what?" said William.

"The pro-sports model is our new direction."

William sat on the edge of his desk. He'd read of something along these lines in the latest journals.

He said, "It's elitist, isn't it? Sell the superstar teacher to the high bidders? I'm not interested in teaching to a half-dozen rich kids."

"Of course not," she said smoothly. "We know you've turned down similar offers.

No, we're ready to take the next, logical step. The pro-sport model of education

is like a pro-sports team. We need a franchise player, though, a Babe Ruth. Someone who is so much obviously better that success rests on that person's shoulder."

"How's that different? There's only one of me."

Victoria smiled, and William realized she'd led him to this question. He admired

the technique; it seemed so Socratic.

"That's our new direction. We want you to be the franchise player, but not like

those pro stars. You are a superstar teacher, the maestro of the blackboard.

No

one is any better. You're the best. But there's no profit in selling you individually. We can't make enough. We don't want to buy you; we want to buy your style. Then we can franchise it."

Isaac said, "And we're willing to pay you really, really well."

\* \* \*

"Do you know the story of Alice?" the old man asks. He leans close so his voice

won't carry.

The little girl scrunches her hands in her lap. She doesn't appear uncomfortable, just interested in how her skirt wrinkles when she plays with it.

"I don't know an Alice," she says.

The old man looks at the parents across the play area. They're still animated in

discussion, not paying attention to anything beyond their talk. He doesn't see

any police officers. A breeze rustles the willow behind them. He says, "Alice is

a little girl, just about your age, and her story begins with a rabbit. Do you

know what a rabbit is?"

"I've been to a zoo," she says. "I saw a cat and a porcupine there, too."

"Of course you have," says the old man. "I knew you were a bright little girl."

"So, what about Alice?" she says.

"And inquisitive, too. Oh, you're a bright one for sure." He settles back in the

bench; he touches her shoulder gently. "Well, the rabbit is late to begin with,

and he has a pocket watch. Why do you think he might have a pocket watch?"

"The rabbit has pockets?" The little girl covers her mouth and giggles at the idea.

"He's a special rabbit. Do you want to know all about him?"

"Oh, yes," she says. "My dad has a pocket watch, too. It's on a big chain, but

it's a lot more than a watch. He says it's his little assistant, and it's really

expensive. He downloads it all the time, and I can't play with it. Tell me

why

the rabbit has one."

The old man checks the parents once again, slides toward her so their hips nearly touch and begins the story. Within a minute, he's forgotten about the crawling under his skin, the extra presence behind his eyes—he's into the story,

and he's into her being into the story.

\* \* \*

What sold William was Victoria's picture of the product: "Imagine your successes

happening with students all across the globe. More and more kids in love with education, with learning, helped there by our simulacrum of you."

By this time they were sitting in the bar down the street from the school.

Victoria had bought drinks for them all, and they'd talked about education for a

couple of hours. The lights hung low and dim over the tables. Victoria's eyes glistened with interest, and her face glowed. After a while, William found her

to be totally sympathetic to his views. "Teaching's about reaching," he'd said.

"You have to touch the student with the material and your enthusiasm, or nothing happens."

She'd nodded encouragingly and ordered another round. Isaac took notes and moved

empty glasses out of their way. "So how do you do it?" Isaac asked. "Are you a

stimulus-response man? Do you teach 'whole language'? Or are you into one of the

more traditional, back-to-basics modes?"

William leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands on his stomach. Over the

years he'd developed a slight paunch, but it didn't worry him; it made him feel

comfortable, like Pooh Bear or Bilbo Baggins. It was the way he imagined a forty-year-old confirmed bachelor should look. He said, "When I first started teaching, I played around with lots of theory, but I don't think much about it

anymore. I guess I'd have to say I'm pretty unconscious about technique. The kids are there; the material is there. I teach."

Victoria said, "Like Mickey Mantle."

"'Scuse me?" said William. He nearly missed the table with his elbow when he straightened up, and he realized he'd drunk a bit too much.

"Mickey Mantle was a great player. Maybe one of the best hitters ever but not much of an intellect. One day he was giving a batting demonstration for a bunch

of little leaguers, and he was trying to explain to them about foot placement and how to hold the hands and where the elbows should go, and the longer he talked the more tongue-tied he became and the more frustrated. Finally he couldn't stand it any more and said to the bunch of little kids, 'Ah, hell.

Just

hit like this,' and he tossed a ball into the air and belted it over the fence.

He couldn't explain it, but he could do it."

"Maybe I'll be no good for you, then," said William. His face sagged with sadness and the bar darkened. He'd begun to think of Victoria and Isaac as friends. They liked education. They understood the passion of teaching. They liked him, and he wasn't going to be able to tell them how he did it. The money

didn't matter. Victoria had painted a vision of thousands of students in love

with literature. He imagined them lining up for play tickets, a new audience for Shakespeare and the rest, and now they were turning away all because he couldn't tell these nice people how he taught. "I don't have a method," he said, looking into the depths of his drink. Victoria put a hand on his wrist. Her fingers felt cool and delightful, and William began to think of her like Shakespeare's dark-haired mystery woman who was a part of the sonnets. "You don't have to. That's the beauty. We can study your teaching while you're in the classroom. We can capture it, and can it, and reproduce it. All you need to do is what you've always done, which is teach. We're not buying a technique. You could teach a technique, but no one could do what you do. What we want is for you to sell us your style." A half-hour later, Isaac pulled a sheaf of contracts from his briefcase, and William signed them all. Victoria said, "You're a rich man, William. You'll never have to work again, but you'll be reaching thousands. What a legacy. What a legacy." Their knees touched under the table. William was sure that it was an accident, but he was thrilled just the same. He didn't remember the ride home. A week later, the technicians were waiting for William when he entered his classroom. They were white-suited and entirely businesslike. He could barely tell them apart as they placed dozens of silver dollar-sized disks on the walls and ceiling. "They're transceivers, William." Victoria said. She wore white like the rest, and her black hair spilled over her shoulders. "We'll be recording everything you and the students do while our computers build a model of your responses to student cues. Our programmers tell me that this part of the process will last three months." William scanned the room. The disks matched the wall's colors, and he could tell that they'd be easy to overlook. "That doesn't seem like it'd give you enough, though. A bunch of vid of a teacher won't give you everything the teacher does. So much of it's internal." He was only half paying attention. Today he'd be starting with a new group of students, and his lesson plans filled his mind. Beginnings were so much fun, he thought. Starting them off right was part of the secret. Victoria half sat on the edge of his desk. William liked the pose; it made her look long and sultry. It was distracting. He imagined writing her a sonnet. "So how are we going to get more?" she said. William recognized the strategy. She'd used it earlier on him. "You're being Socratic again." She smiled. He said, "All right, do the disks do more than vid?" "Good question. Yes, they do. What else do you think we need to capture your style?" He turned the problem over for a bit before saying thoughtfully, "Teaching is mostly responding to the audience. What works great one time might crash and

burn the next. So you've got to get inside my head, somehow. You need to see the

students the way I see them, or it will be useless."

"You come to the point readily. So how are we going to get inside you?"

Something he'd signed on one of the contracts surfaced in his memory; most of the evening was lost to him now in a blur of pleasant drink and conversation.

"A

new technique, you said, I think. Some way to, umm, more closely monitor the environment."

"Your environment, to be exact," said Victoria. "We need to monitor you, so we've designed some very special nanotech to do the job. You'll need to be injected, of course, and it will be a few days before we have everything adjusted, but by this time next week, we will be getting a complete picture of

the students and the classroom as you experience them. Not just visuals, but touch, smell, taste-all of it. All the subtle cues you use to teach from and how

you respond to them."

Behind her, one of the technicians was preparing a hypodermic. She drew what looked to be a couple of cc's from a small bottle of cloudy, white liquid.

Victoria said, "It's really no different from what the doctor might give you to

clear cholesterol from your system, or to hunt down cancer cells. Only these will attach along your nerve pathways. Totally painless, naturally. You won't even know they're there, but they'll broadcast to the transceivers while the computers build the model of your behavior. In three months, we'll have everything we need."

"That's sophisticated stuff." William bared his upper arm to receive the shot.

"It's proprietary. We'll have to keep you under surveillance outside of the school. Industrial espionage, you know. Afterwards, we'll neutralize it and you'll be free of our interference in your life. It's a small price to pay for

the price we're paying you." Victoria patted him on the arm. "There. All done now. We'll clear out before your students arrive."

The technician said, "You might run a slight fever for twenty-four hours. The mechanisms will be duplicating and some people react to that."

William's arm felt warm at the injection site. It spread up his arm into his shoulder. Not unpleasant, but a little creepy, he decided. He felt as if he were

being invaded, not like nanotech in the doctor's office, which didn't seem any

different from medicine, but like his system was filling with spies. He decided

he didn't like the idea of tiny transmitters seeing what he saw. It made his eyes itch to think of it, but he stayed calm. It's a silly reaction, he thought.

Nothing will go wrong.

\* \* \*

The police officer approaches the old man and his young companion on the bench

while the old man recites the Lobster Quadrille for the third time. "Will you,

won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?" he says to the girl.

She looks up at him and smiles.

"I wish I could join the dance," she says.

The old man glances at the officer, who stands in front of them, his arms crossed at the chest.

The old man whispers to the girl, "Remember, the further off from England, the



nearer it is to France."

She recites back to him, "What matters it how far we go? There is another shore,

you know, upon the other side." She claps her hands and laughs.

"Good girl," he says.

The officer clears his throat. "You're doing it again, William, aren't you?"

"What?" says the old man. "I'm just being myself."

"That's the crime," says the officer. "You're not going to make me cuff you this

time, are you?"

William closes his eyes. He believes he can feel the nanotech moving around behind them, quietly capturing everything he does, still broadcasting the essence of himself to unseen transceivers. They're under his skin. They're coating his heart. "No," he says. "Not this time."

He stands and says to the little girl, "The book is called Alice in Wonderland.

You can look it up if you want to know the rest of it. There are other books there too, like Shakespeare. Books for when you're a big girl. Make sure you read Hamlet when you're older. You'll like it."

"Thanks, mister," she says. "I will. Thanks a lot."

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Within a week, William had nearly forgotten about the disks. He almost never looked for them. The students didn't mention them. He was into the ebb and flow

of the class. As always, the kids started off as ciphers, completely unknown and

blank. Some had gone through dozens of educational strategies before arriving in

his room. All had been on a waiting list for at least a year. They won their spot by lottery. He was highly paid. His school marketed him and the other teachers on the staff through international advertising; like all other schools,

they competed for the students, offering a program of study and a tradition of results.

William didn't care. He'd teach in a barn. He'd teach at a bus stop. Every concern dissolved in the face of students and the material. He was in his medium. He thought about sports superstars; did they play for the money? How could they? At the top of the sport, with no human peer, they had to play for love. That old basketball legend, Michael Jordan, going for the hoop, flew for

the love of the game. William had heard stories that late at night Jordan used

to strap on old tennies and head for the neighborhood civic center in Chicago to

play pick-up ball. Some of the press knew it, but no one ever put it in the paper. At two in the morning he'd be setting picks and flicking passes to street

players who came in to run hoops instead of hanging with the gangs. Jordan just

loved to play.

So William ignored the disks. He moved from desk to desk. He set up small group

discussions. A tap on the shoulder here, a well-timed smile there, and always the shades of literati that he brought back to life for the students:

Shakespeare, Homer, Dickinson, Brontë, Carroll, and Twain.

The only disturbance in the beauty of the lessons happened in the quiet times in

class. He'd be sitting at his desk, watching the students read, and he'd feel a

shift under his skin, a subtle sliding like the slipping of a sheet of paper from the middle of a stack. Or a sudden irritation behind his eyes. He imagined

nanotechs with legs, running from one nerve ending to the next, leaving tiny footprints on the back of his retina. Even at home, without the disks, he felt

observed. They were with him, and they never went away.

William took hot showers. He scratched his skin sometimes until it was raw, then

he'd scold himself for the silliness of it. At the microscopic level the nanotech operated in, he could never really feel them. They weren't doing anything. Still, he went through several bottles of calamine. In the quiet times

of class, he'd sometimes feel like a fly in a web, and every disk held the end

of one string. He squirmed slowly in the middle, connected by the radiant lines

of the disks.

At the end of three months, Victoria and Isaac sat in the back of his room again. Except for technicians who came in occasionally to reset the disks, William had seen nothing of the Reinhart Group.

Victoria looked better than ever. She'd crossed her legs at the ankles, and William was keenly aware of her posture, the turn of her hand on the table, the

tilt of her head, the half-smile he imagined lifting the corners of her mouth when they met eyes.

"Bravo," she said, after he'd dismissed class and the last student had left.

"A

truly outstanding performance of the teacherly arts."

William blushed. "They were a good group."

Isaac said, "You have no idea."

Something in the way his comment sounded caught his attention. "What do you mean

by that?"

Isaac cleared his throat nervously.

"Oh, it won't matter now," said Victoria. "Go ahead and tell him. It was partly

your concept anyway."

Isaac held his clipboard to his chest. "We would have told you earlier, but we

were afraid it would disturb your style. Maybe it wouldn't. You did fine with all the scrutiny anyway, but this wasn't your normal batch of students."

"Not at all," said Victoria. William glanced between the two of them, confused.

Isaac continued, "We hand-picked this class for a wide range of learning styles.

Several of them were classic reluctant learners. A couple were ultra-high achievers. We tried to mix them up as much as possible. We needed your reaction

to all kinds of students, so this way we guaranteed it."

Victoria signaled to someone outside the door, and a group of technicians swarmed in and began removing the disks from the walls and ceiling. She said, "The students were nanotech-primed also, the way you were. We recorded their perceptions of the class too. It truly was remarkable. Do you know that you respond to bored or drifting students before they know they're bored? I was stunned. It has been a phenomenal display."

"Oh, yes. About that. When will you . . . you know . . . remove them?"

William

resisted the urge to scratch his forearm. Even thinking about the germ-sized observers made him itchy.

"Right now, naturally." Victoria tilted her head to one of the techs, who immediately began preparing a syringe. "They would break down on their own in the next few weeks, but this will make sure that none of our competitors get hold of them."

"I wouldn't go to any of them." William drew himself up and straightened his tie. "It would be dishonorable."

Victoria stepped aside so the tech could get to William's arm.

"We're not worried about you, William. But our competition might not be so pure

in spirit. You'd probably wake up in an alley with a tremendous bump on your head and a bruise on some vein from a sloppy shop-doc who just wanted your blood."

This shot hurt going in, but there was no warmth in his arm or shoulder like the

first time.

The last tech cleared the room in a few minutes, and only Victoria, Isaac and William remained. Victoria shook his hand.

"Don't spend all your earnings in the same place, William. I doubt you could. It's been a pleasure working with you." She waved to Isaac, and he rose to leave.

William's throat suddenly felt dry, and he swallowed a couple of times. "You mean, that's it? We're all done?"

Victoria turned back to him. "That's it. But your contribution has been invaluable." She laughed. "Don't tell the accountants that I said that."

"I thought . . ." William cleared his throat. "I thought we could talk over the

project some more. Maybe during dinner." He coughed. "Or something," he finished

lamely.

"Oh, William," she said. In the pause that followed, William felt like he was abruptly unanchored in his own room. The shot coursed through his veins, and it

seemed he could feel the company's nanotechs being neutralized within his blood:

a million deaths happening inside him at once. He realized he'd made a terrible mistake.

"You really are precious," she said.

\* \* \*

The first time he wasn't arrested.

William had prepared for his next class as he always had, rereading, writing new

notes, preparing new plans. He was excited about a vid that he'd shot a month earlier in the recreated Globe theater in South Hampton. The New King's Men had

played Comedy of Errors, Henry the Fifth, As You Like It, The Winter's Tale and

Hamlet. But as he bustled about his room, putting up posters (beautiful, brand-new art prints that his Reinhart money paid for), rearranging desks and rehearsing his introductory lecture for the next day, he felt distracted.

He'd

stop to itch the top of his hand or to rub his eyes occasionally. Even though a

check-up the day after the cleansing injection confirmed it, he imagined that not all the nanotechs were gone. It was a crawly sensation, alien-like and disturbing.

As he reached behind his ear to rub a bothersome spot, an official-looking man

in a gray suit knocked on his open door. After a brief introduction, mostly to

assure the man that William was who was named in the papers he carried, the man

served William with an injunction. Most of the multi-sheeted document was legal

gobbledygook, but the essential part was clear: "Because of considerable financial and competitive risk, and whereas The Reinhart Group did in good faith

purchase the style, mannerisms, content and appearance of the aforementioned party, he shall be forever forbidden from using the same said style, mannerisms, content or appearance."

"Essentially," the gray-suited man said, "you are no longer allowed to teach." "They can't do that," said William, sputtering.

The next day, however, he found that they could. The school's administration called his students and rescheduled them with other teachers. His classroom was

given to someone else and his posters returned to him along with a note asking

for his resignation. The principal, a woman of indeterminate age and colorless

hair, was very apologetic. "It's a copyright issue," she explained sympathetically. "They own the copyright to your style, and if we allowed you to

teach, we'd be fined or face possible criminal charges." She offered him a handkerchief to wipe his eyes. "It's all very clear in your contract. You read

the contract, didn't you?"

William shook his head.

"Oh, that's too bad. Well, you have plenty of money. You'll never need to teach

again. You can enjoy your retirement. Travel. Read. Things could be much worse."

She offered her hand, and numbly William shook it.

"They can't do this," he said again. His voice rose. "I'll take them to court.

You can't confiscate a person's style!"

\* \* \*

It took two years, and all the money that Reinhart had paid him, but he found out once again that they could.

Sitting in a book-lined office, William's lawyer, a scruffy-looking man who appeared perpetually unshaven but who was an old veteran of copyright law battles, and the absolute best man in the business, explained it to William their first conference. "The precedent is long established, but the most famous

example is The Lone Ranger."

William said, "I'm not familiar with him." None of the books on the office shelves were literary. All were legal titles. Earlier when he'd tried to take one down, he'd found that they were merely decorative. The lawyer's computer stored the centuries of copyright law, rulings and precedents that the case would be argued from.

The lawyer said, "In the middle of the last century there was a television show

called The Lone Ranger. When it went off the air, the actor who played the lead

character couldn't find steady work, and he began doing promotional gigs as the

Lone Ranger. He'd wear the costume and show up at the opening of used car lots

and shopping centers. The studio successfully prevented him from appearing in costume because they owned the character, they argued, not the actor." The

lawyer stroked the stubble on his chin. "It's a sad case, really. I think about that guy sometimes, these old Lone Ranger costumes hanging in his closet, and instead of being a hero like he was in the show's heyday, he's just a broken-down has-been who couldn't even pick up a few bucks for appearing at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for a fast-food place."

"That's bleak," said William.

Surprisingly, at the trial, Isaac offered to testify in his behalf. When it became clear that William could not beat the contract on its own merits, the lawyer tried to argue that William was drunk when he signed it. Isaac corroborated the drinking, but Victoria testified that William drank very little. On the stand she appeared imperious, unfriendly and very believable. The

day after Isaac's day in court, he quit Reinhart and joined William's defense.

"I sat in your class that day and learned to love Shakespeare," said Isaac in way of explanation.

"But your job, Isaac," said William. "You didn't need to do that."

Isaac looked thoughtful, then furrowed his brow in concentration as he recalled,

"Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak. I'll go no further."

Despite himself, William smiled. "Mark me."

"I will."

William said, "My next line is 'My hour is almost come when I to sulphurous and

tormenting flames must render up myself.' I hope it doesn't come to that."

"Alas," said Isaac. "Poor ghost."

\* \* \*

But it did come to that.

They arrested William the first time for teaching Through the Looking Glass under an assumed name at a small, family school in Mississippi. He had no money

for the fine and served ninety days instead. Reinhart lawyers successfully argued that William should be isolated from other prisoners.

A year-and-a-half later, they caught him guest-lecturing on sonnet structure in

a friend's classroom on the east coast. Ninety days again and a restraining order requiring him to stay one hundred feet from school-aged children.

William

learned that Isaac had formed a small lobbying group and was trying to change the copyright laws.

A third violation earned him a monitoring ankle bracelet. A sympathetic former

student removed it, which was supposed to be impossible, and the student wore it

for two months while William taught night classes in Shakespeare through a city-run continuing education program. Three violations put William into the scofflaw category, and he served four years.

By the time he was sixty-four, William had spent more than half of the previous

twenty years in jail, always in isolation. Teaching kids in the park had become

his favorite technique. Cops knew who he was, and he'd developed a kind of infamy with them. Most of the time they chased him off. Occasionally someone new

on the force or a grumpy veteran would haul him in, book him and hold him overnight. Victoria ascended to the Reinhart presidency and seemed to have long

forgotten her project from years past, but the meticulous wheels of the

company's legal division ground exceedingly fine and continued to prosecute him whenever he was arrested. He'd sold his books long ago, and he couldn't afford net charges for computer access, so his reading was limited to the public library. Not that it mattered. Most of the works he loved, he'd memorized. The only result of Isaac's years of work on William's behalf was finally a suspension of the isolation order in jail as cruel and unusual punishment, but the problems with the law never stopped. So, there is no surprise in him when he stands and says to the little girl, "The book is called Alice in Wonderland. You can look it up if you want to know the rest of it. There are other books there too, like Shakespeare. Books for when you're a big girl. Make sure you read Hamlet when you're older. You'll like it." "Thanks, mister," she says. "I will. Thanks a lot." The script of what is said to him at the police station seems as familiar to William as any play. He knows his part within it. He pulls his overcoat close to him as they lead him to his cell. Modern as the prison is, with its soft white walls and acoustic ceiling, it makes him cold, and when he's cold, the ghostly writhing of long-gone nanotech bothers him most.

The officer is curt, businesslike. "We have to double you up with someone tonight. A delusional kid. Shouldn't bother you." He opened the cell door. A boy, no more than twenty, sits on one of the fold-down beds, his back to the wall, legs drawn up, a shock of black hair hiding his eyes. He doesn't look when William takes his place on the other bed. The cell is narrow; William's knees nearly touch the gray blanket on the young man's mattress. Even though the cells are soundproofed, a soft clatter of noises from up and down the hall reaches William. Somewhere, someone sings. Water gurgles in the wall. For a long time, William listens while thinking of lost classrooms, students shining from within, their own light coming through, reaching for him in his darkness. Memories are vivid and sad within him. He thinks of that last class before he'd signed the contract. If he'd only known, he would have done more with them, he thinks. He would have slept less, thought deeper about each lesson, concentrated harder on individual problems, made a bigger difference. They will always be the "last" class, he thinks. There will never be another. I will never close a door again and turn to face the faces that wait for me to launch their adventures. "Why do you keep scratching?" says the young man. William flinches. The voice sounded loud in the tiny room. He stops his hands. "I didn't realize I was. Sorry." The man's eyes are still hidden behind his hair. "You're pretty old to be in here, aren't you?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "Pretty small room for two people, if you ask me." "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space-were it not that I have bad dreams," says William. "What's that?" says the young man.

William folds the blanket at the end of his bed into a pillow and rests his head. "Nothing. A bit from a play. You're pretty young. I suppose I could ask the same question. What are you doing here, if you don't mind my asking?" The man laughs nervously. "I killed my uncle." He pauses as if waiting for William to comment. "Really, I did. Or at least I think he's dead. I hope so." William closes his eyes. The bed isn't too uncomfortable: a lump under his hip that feels like it will bother him if he stays on it too long, but otherwise not bad. "You want to talk about it?" William asks, half hoping the man will not. "He deserved it," says the young man. "Nobody would behave any differently in my situation. See, he married my mother." William opened one eye and looked at the man. "Really?" "Yeah. He married her, and I think he killed my dad to get him out of the way." With some effort, William sat up. "Really?" "My lawyer says that he can get me off, though. He says I'm crazy. See, I told him that my dad's ghost told me what to do." "Did he?" William's voice cracks, and the walls of the cell begin to vanish. Everything focuses on the young man sitting with his knees up, hiding behind his hair. "But you know what's really crazy?" The man leans forward and whispers, "I did talk to my dad's ghost." The man falls back against the wall. "Now that's a story you don't hear every day," he says. "That's one for the books." William rubs his hand across his chest as if straightening a tie. He looks around him. The cell doesn't seem that small anymore. He pictures some posters on the wall, maybe the Globe Theater. Perhaps a playbill or two. "That is an interesting story," he says. "Maybe I can tell one too. It might mean something to you. What do you think?" The young man shakes the hair out of his eyes. They are bright blue and young, very young. They look like a student's eyes. "Sure," he says. "I have plenty of time." "Have you ever heard," says William, "neither a borrower nor a lender be? This is the story that it came from, and it starts with three guys talking about the ghost of a dead king. The king's name is Hamlet, and it's about his son of the same name." They talk all night, and when Isaac comes in the morning to bail him out, William refuses to go.

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