

Fugue

By Emery Hall

This morning marks your 137th year at Jackson State Academy for Chronic Minors.

The number shouldn't send you rolling off some emotional ravine. It isn't even pretty. Only the pretty numbers, twos, fives, tens, have ever sunk their rusted hooks in this deeply and pinned you where you lay, in hopes that you'd lose the will to struggle. Nonetheless, you feel another tug, tearing something off with it as you pry yourself out of bed. This morning, you look in the mirror, and you know this will be a day of survival.

Old boyfriends described your eyes as something to the effect of brilliant sapphire—but you see now they were just romanticizing toilet-cleaner teal. The sheen of last night's cold sweat really brings out the bags underneath. The thick black frames of your glasses can't distract from the blond vines hanging limply around your face.

You need a distraction from your greasy reflection; where better to turn than a window overlooking your glorified prison?

That's harsh. They've been good to you here. It's not their fault your voice hasn't dropped half a step since your first Memorial Day—the first Memorial Day. They're not stopping you from running; in fact, you've had God knows how many

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people tell you how excited they'll be when you reintegrate with the world outside.

Is the law stopping you? You've always been a goody-goody like that, and you've purposely avoided news headlines of authorities getting ahold of runaways. You'd rather not become one of those. But even then, one conversation with an interrogator, with all the theora and equations and *textbooks* you've memorized...they wouldn't bother with the stupid maturity test. The practiced genius would be enough to compensate for your lacking height and baby-soft cheeks; they'd neglect to examine your mental stability, and you'd be home free.

Face it. This is all you know. Jackson's pristine brick fortress of aptitude, with its perpetually power-washed pebble-stone walkways, thriving with trees of so many shapes and sizes and species that people give directions by them. Precious little contact with anyone or anything beyond the little town of the same name five miles west. You want to feel grateful to the people in this little bubble with you – they're the one reminder you're not a lost cause – but they treat you like you're still a little boy with big dreams of having a loving family that speaks to you.

You don't recall willing your leaded limbs through an imitation of your morning routine, but you blink, and suddenly you're rubbing one lens of your glasses with your jacket. It's still dewy outside. The blurry sidewalk parts a sea of emerald, and you offhandedly wish you could drown in it.

"Mornin'." Jace scares the hell out of you; he catches you from behind when you almost keel over. "Jesus, Ev, you okay?"

"Fine! I-I just didn't hear you coming." You force a quick breath of laughter, and he buys it, smirking down at you. He's a kind soul, hidden in the body of a fifteen-year-old you might

expect to steal your lunch money in the hallway. Sideswept dishwater-brown bangs, an intense hazel gaze over a smattering of sun freckles. He still wears his green letterman from high school football. All of his jeans are “worn in,” but his Converse match the letterman and don’t have a single scuff on the rubber.

“Old man gone deaf too?” Jace says.

You roll your eyes, but one corner of your mouth twitches upward. “Oh, quiet. You know I’m dead to the world until noon, usually.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“A new class focused around Hemingway. The narratives always bored me to death, but his style...well, it’s a nice departure from convention.”

Only you can make something sound so pretentious. You want to take it back but he’s looking at you, so you can’t shrink away from it.

He puts on a snobby High British impression. “*Mmmyes*, I see. Well you have fun with that – I’m gonna go doze off in Stats. See you at lunch?”

You’re not sure if you should test your sanity with the noise. “I might stay in the library...”

“Gotcha. Catch you after, then. Left at the magnolia, right?”

Well, you were going to ask him to go with you. Alas, you can’t hold him up with another cry for attention; the poor thing can’t keep his class routes straight yet. “It’s a weeping cherry. Right, then left at the little twisted maple.”

He leaves, and you’re alone.

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Things have a habit of devolving only when you look away. You forget the thread barely tethering you to the present, and you only think to look back once your thoughts have nipped it to a hair’s breadth.

It probably starts in Mr. Daniels's introductory chemistry class; he has dutifully maintained the age-old tradition of misplacing his graded 6.2 tests. "This chapter is cursed," he mumbles, salt-and-pepper hair obscuring his face as he rifles through his briefcase for the fifth time. "Mr. Monroe, my most loyal aide."

You snap to attention as if he's yanked a string behind your neck; he pulls back and blinks at the wideness of your eyes.

"Quite...responsive today. Do tell me you made note to — make note of where I left our little runaways this year?"

You shake your head.

"Hm," he says, then finds them in the desk drawer where you put them after last night's filing. He laughs, but every time you look away from him, you feel eyes glaring holes through the back of your head. You meet gazes once before the class ends; his eyebrows are furrowed.

Then comes the boy in the hallway, a Michael from 1989. You remember this one for more than his perma-tangled mop of loose brown curls; the year he came, you almost bought the same amber wire-rim readers he wears to this day. You've credited him for your dodging that bullet ever since.

Today, however, Michael Five's disdainful glare puts those gaudy frames to shame. You untuck your hair from behind your ear, then press on with the mob of students separating you. Later, you remember the swastika that someone had spray-painted on the lockers behind where you were standing.

How selfish of you — inserting yourself into Michael's thoughts, rather than contemplating something worth hating.

Then, you enter the library, sinking into the faded navy couch by the history section. You spread the contents of your bottomless book bag across the coffee table; nothing can drown out one's inner chaos quite like homework.

Unfortunately, Dr. Ackerman has other plans.

You put down your calculator, but you don't look up at the first student she sends. He's a first-year with a slight stutter, and he's running behind on a project about the March on Washington.

At least this script you have memorized. You tell him about the viewing party you organized—how many students' televisions had “broken” the week of the protest—and the attempted escapees who hoped to witness the speech in person. The first-year thanks you before scurrying away.

The next student can't have aged a day past thirteen, and she's curious about how student demographics changed around the time of racial integration. Segregation had never been a formal policy, you explain, but unfortunately the Academy would not seek to diversify its student body before affirmative action. You bite your tongue beyond that. She thanks you, and another one takes her place asking about John Kennedy's assassination.

The next about Martin Luther King's.

The next about Robert Kennedy's.

The next about Malcolm X's and the Black Panther movement, and finally you remember this is the week that Ackerman's civil rights essays are due.

“I apologize I'd really rather not discuss it have a pleasant day,” you say and you're shoving everything back into your book bag, walking away before the student can apologize himself. You slump against a wall in the corridor.

How could you rip his head off like that?

I was nice.

You know it's twenty percent of his grade, and you're the best primary source he has. Without your input he might fail.

Weren't you the one calling me an ass for overestimating my importance to other people?

You shut your eyes tightly.

I'm sorry.

Please. Just this once. Don't do this to me today.

It's too late for that. You open your eyes, and you're staring at a mirror in an empty bathroom. You try to tear yourself away from your reflection, but your heart is pounding in your ears, and the shadows are stretching up from the floor. The lights are pulsing brighter and brighter in time with the mantra you're mumbling, "Please, please, please, please –"

But a sudden jolt sends you stumbling into the stall behind you.

You know the walls aren't closing in. You know the darkness creeping beneath the door isn't real, nor the laughter bubbling up from it. It's just blood rushing to your head and air fleeing your lungs, senseless thoughts trampling in herds to fill the cavities left behind. They're drowning you.

It's stupid, you're stupid, but the *thoughts* just seem to breed and multiply and mutate into uglier and uglier things each year. You always lose. It's not fair. You wonder if you're nothing after all, with how much of you they've eaten away to sustain themselves.

You pinch yourself. No, not yet. Maybe next year?

It's silent. The shadows are gone.

You unlock the stall door to find your late mother in her nightgown screaming bloody murder in a corner, and you slam the door shut again. You press your palms over your ears and sink to the floor. You're so tired. *What do you want?*

A glint from the floor catches your eye: a stray paper clip.

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I blink, and a jacket's infusion of Axe Instinct burns my nostrils; Jace is carrying me.

...But I don't remember how. Or why. *What time did I finish filing last night?*

I shut my eyes from the fluorescent light making my temples pound, and there's something wrapped around my arm so tightly I can't feel my fingers. I'm freezing.

"Almost there," he murmurs. I try asking where, but I just make myself dizzy trying to form the words. He opens a door and (gently) drops me onto something soft. Something softer falls over me, then Jace fumbles with the constrictive mass on my arm. It falls away, too—I can't help hissing when cuts meet cold air. *When did that happen?*

That question comes out as a groggy croak.

"Evan?" Jace, who doesn't hug, is hugging me. Over his shoulder, I see my jacket draped over my duvet and my book bag hanging on the back of my door.

Mr. Daniels bursts in. "Has he awoken ye—*dear* Lord, what is that?"

"Hey, easy, it looks worse than it...did." Jace picks up my jacket, its sleeves wrinkled from stretching around my arm. He peels from it a layer of paper towels; dull red splotches cement it together like a crêpe cake.

I look at my arm.

Those are not claw marks.

I sit bolt upright, tongue flinging blasphemies faster than my brain can tell me to breathe. Finally I sputter out something intelligible, "*Fuck* I'm so sorry I didn't think it would get this bad, usually I just come back and there's ten pages of angst I don't remember writing, I've never hurt anyone please don't expel me—"

"*Expel* you?"

Mr. Daniels stuns us both silent.

He's right to be incredulous. Expulsion would be a selfish act of charity at best – freeing some godforsaken threat to society from this poor place, only for its care to fall on someone else's shoulders, then they'll get sick of it –

I cut myself off, despite not remembering what I started saying. Mr. Daniels has teleported to the chair at my desk, and Jace to his seat on the floor.

They're looking at me. Waiting.

"Evan, did you hear me?" Mr. Daniels says.

I shake my head, lest he ask me to repeat the whole thing verbatim. I brace myself for a "disrespectful absentmindedness" lecture.

"I said, to insinuate you would be *punished* for injuring yourself...I do believe that's the least sensible thing you have uttered in the century we've worked together."

...I am taken by surprise.

"Now, would you say that Jason has gained your confidence in his short time here?"

I nod.

"And given our professional history, would you say the same for myself?"

Of course. But haven't I just broken his own? Both of theirs, for that matter? Who feels remotely safe around—let alone *trusting of*—someone capable of doing what I've just done, then having no recollection of it?

But he does the same slow, sage nod he always does. He even sets his elbows on his knees and presses the tips of his fingers together. "Then perhaps we may entreat you to divulge a bit. In my work, I have become quite privy to the psychological impact that an...existence...such as this can have. However, I have known no well-adjusted student such as yourself to suffer

bouts of amnesia – certainly not a sudden propensity to wound oneself.”

I look to Jace; he offers nothing but an intent stare.

I scoff. “‘Well-adjusted.’ Let’s start there.”

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The first day he came to your door, you were nine years old and lying on your stomach, playing chess with your brother on the carpet. The Coinage Act of 1864 had just passed; you were debating how anyone would possibly fit “In God We Trust” on a dime press.

Then, the doorbell cut you off and you gasped. You were never downstairs when people came – you were in your room, nose buried in another book your brother had hand-bound for you. It had always upset you when you heard a door close and you rushed into the parlor, only to find your father hunched over his oakwood desk in the corner. He would simply sigh at you for disturbing his brilliant thoughts, then return to work.

Your brother smiled at the way your eyes lit up. He offered to let you answer the door.

Neither you nor the boy outside spoke, looking each other up and down the way kids investigate other kids. An off-white dress shirt offset his dusty-tweed coat and pants; though scuffed, his black brogans gleamed from the rising sun. You flinched at his piercing hazel stare.

“My name is Adam Emerson and I have a paper from Ironton for you.”

You said nothing.

“I have to get a dollar and fifty cents, are your parents at home?”

You nodded. You fetched your father, but you couldn’t take your eyes off Adam—even when your brother started rearranging your pieces to get out of checkmate.

Adam came every Wednesday for the next eight years; it took you two to give him your name. You did your best to make small-talk with him. He relaxed more himself over time, “Here’s your paper” reaching “Damn, you’re quiet” by around September 1866.

You shrugged, turning red. You’d grown used to it by now—the thrilling fear that shocked through your heart continuously in his presence.

Of what? you pondered past dawn every night, stuffing senseless poems beneath your mattress. You tried comparing it to being stabbed with a lightning rod over and over, perhaps shaking hands with Zeus, but it all ended up as garbled as your thoughts when you stood in front of him.

The night of your fifteenth birthday, as you shivered beneath three blankets in the December cold, you whispered to the ceiling: *Why do I like it?*

You knew the answer. But you kept answering the door anyway, didn’t you.

By January, you paid for the paper yourself. You made note of the things that made small-talk an hour long – if it hadn’t been for him, you would have missed the Fourteenth Amendment entirely (save your father wanting to rip the senators’ throats out). Adam sat you down on your porch for half the morning, just beaming as he rattled off the implications of Black men’s citizenship and how much closer to equality you all were. You wouldn’t read enough to truly agree for several decades, but the passion with which he argued was enough to make a Republican out of you.

Enough to make you admit to yourself just how deeply you’d fallen in love with him.

On August 5th, 1868, however, the fire in his eyes vanished. He let the paper unfurl as he handed it to you:

“MASSACHUSETTS OPENS FIRST INSTITUTION FOR CHRONICALLY UNDERAGE.”

Neither of you had grown an inch in at least two years.

You expected him to be angry; you certainly were. What flagrantly prejudiced nonsense—and why ensure age, *why precipitate death?*—but anyone either of you approached simply quoted the article. “As outward age ceases, so too does the development of the human intellect, dooming communities rampant with permadolescents to utter primitive chaos.”

1869, 70, 71 passed, a horrific but distant blur now. More and more headlines, more and more institutions, in more and more states, Massachusetts to New York, New York to Pennsylvania, to Maryland, to Virginia. More neighbors peered out their windows when you stepped outside, scrutinizing you—deliberating over what teenage treachery you planned next. By May 1872, Adam had noticed so many starers that he started delivering his papers in the evenings. (As if it would make him look less suspicious.)

On Saturday, September 14th, Adam’s unexpected rap at the door scared you out of your book. In his other hand, he held a copy of President Grant’s latest executive order: “*In summary, all citizens deemed chronic minors by appropriate examination shall have enrolled in a certified rehabilitation program by the month’s end.*”

That night, your father found Adam kissing you in the woods behind your house.

He said nothing. He led you into the basement; then, he beat you unconscious.

The following morning, someone pulled at a slip of paper folded between your fingers. A man shook you awake; you lay on a train station bench, and according to your ticket, you were Jackson bound.



This morning marks your 138th year at Jackson State Academy for Chronic Minors.

You're not sure which woke you first—Jace's abrupt snore across the room, or Mr. Daniels's gentle rapping at the door.

You blink, and you're standing at the open door in a clean sweatshirt and jeans. Mr. Daniels, still sweating in his terra cotta overcoat, holds the 6.2 file in one hand and a new hardback of *Hills Like White Elephants* in the other. He chuckles at his own dry wit; "If laying eyes on the former would not ease your woes, as it did mine...well, I presumed the latter might at least offer a sound afternoon nap."

He stumbles back; you've hugged him.