

FLESHY MOUNDS

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MY SEVENTH GRADE ENGLISH TEACHER WAS NAMED MRS. CLUNDT. That was really her name. Imagine what we all called her.

For several months we had to do this assignment that entailed writing letters to a total stranger (a pen pal who had been assigned to us) at a nearby school. We couldn't get too creative with the letters or be too truthful, unfortunately, because Mrs. Clundt read each and every letter before slipping them into their envelopes. It was an exercise in futility, and everyone knew it.

I remember nothing about those letters today, except for one. My pen pal was a female, I recall that much, and for this particular letter I must have been so bored that I just decided to write what I wanted for a change. It must have been near Christmas, and I think Mrs. Clundt asked us to write a little something about our most memorable Christmas. I wrote a long letter about the time Santa Claus came down our chimney (we didn't have a chimney), tried to rape my mother and stole all our cash and appliances. I wish I still had that letter.

I remember giving it to Mrs. Clundt with absolutely no thought in my head that she would have a problem with it. I just remember thinking it was pretty funny, and being excited imagining my pen pal opening the letter, reading it, and finally having something interesting to peruse.

Mrs. Clundt collected all the letters at the beginning of class, then proceeded to read all of them while the class kept themselves busy doing something else. We had been assigned quiet reading time, and I had chosen *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Arthur Conan Doyle. Just as that phosphorescent hound is seen out on the moors for the first time, Mrs. Clundt called me

up to the front of the class. She handed me my letter. She told me she wanted to talk to me about it. I thought she was going to congratulate me. Instead she said, with a sober face, "You need to rewrite this, and I think you know why." I said nothing. I just nodded and returned to my seat.

I sat there for several minutes trying to figure out what it was about the letter that needed to be rewritten. She hadn't bothered to tell me. I didn't want to ask her for clarification, as her tone seemed to indicate I should just know somehow. So I stuffed the old letter in my backpack, pulled out a piece of notebook paper, and wrote a whole new letter while everyone else was reading. I seemed to recall it was only about one paragraph long (whereas the other one had been several pages), and simply commented on the weather we had been having lately. Sunny.

It was Southern California. It was almost always sunny.

I thought Mrs. Clundt would be so disgusted by the lack of effort that had gone into this new letter that she would allow me to send the first one.

After about five minutes I handed Clundt the new letter, returned to my desk, and went back to reading Sherlock Holmes. I sat there only half paying attention to the words on the page, expecting her to call me up and chastise me for the obvious inadequacies of the second letter. She never called my name. She folded it and put it in the envelope.

Now I felt embarrassed that my pen pal was going to receive a letter about the weather in California.

Then I was back on the Scottish moors, and the stupidity of the public school system was far behind me once more.

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A few months passed. Soon after the new year, we had a field trip to a local park where the two schools involved in the pen pal program would get together, where the pen pals could finally meet face-to-face.

I remember feeling nervous about this, as my past few letters had all been about the weather. After the Santa Claus debacle I didn't know what to write anymore, as Mrs. Clundt had never specified which subjects were taboo and which weren't. All I knew for certain was that the weather was not taboo. So I just copied the same letter over and over again and Mrs. Clundt dutifully sent each one. My pen pal probably thought I was some sort of Bobby-Fis-

cher-like freak who cared only about the weather and nothing else. I told my mother I didn't want to go, but she made me.

It was a sunny day at the park, I remember that very clearly. I remember groups of us all milling around, trying to find our pen pal. I think we all wore name tags. I tried to avoid the confrontation by hanging out near the back of the crowd. Inevitably, she found me. She was surrounded by her friends.

"Uh... hi?" she said, apparently disgusted that her life had intersected with mine for even a second.

From a single Sherlock-Holmes-like glance, I was able to process the entire scenario. For some reason God or Fate or some devilish force in between had given me the most popular girl at this other school with whom to correspond. This girl was as close to being a knockout as a twelve-year-old could attain. Her hangers-on were already giggling at me, and I hadn't even said anything yet—not just because it was no doubt obvious that I was as far from being popular as you could possibly get, but also because my Clundt-sanctioned letters had been so unmercifully stupid. If the woman had let me send the letters I'd wanted to write, we might have had something to talk about. Who wouldn't be intrigued by a guy whose mother was sexually assaulted by Santa Claus?

All the repressed anger I'd been feeling over Mrs. Clundt's unreasonable censorship of my golden and timeless ideas burst forth in that moment.

I replied to her less than enthusiastic greeting with the following question: "May I please feel your fleshy mounds?"

I'm not sure where that question came from, but there it was. The words were floating out there in the air now and had impacted with the offended ear drums of several potential prom queens. A group of guys from my school happened to be standing nearby and laughed uproariously at the question.

The gaggle of girls skittered away like a cluster of panicked ducks thrashing around in a pond that was being showered with random buckshot. I thought, Well, at least now they're gone. I thought that would be the end of it.

It wasn't. The girls told someone who told someone who told someone who told someone, and pretty soon Mrs. Clundt was charging down on top of me and grabbing my arm and thrashing me about like a soiled stuffed

animal no one wanted to deal with anymore. She told me there would be consequences, mister. There would be consequences.

What consequences could there possibly be? She had already taken my words away from me. What more could she do?

I remember nothing more about that picnic.

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The next day Mrs. Clundt told me that the girl's parents were very upset and demanded I write an apology. That was my homework assignment for the next class: Go home and write a letter apologizing for the use of the phrase "fleshy mounds." She said there was pressure coming down on her from the principal of the other school to *make this happen at once*.

It seemed clear to me that no one would be happy with me until I did as I was told.

So I went home that night and wrote the letter.

I was only twelve, and at the time had no knowledge of acrostics. I wouldn't learn that word until many years later.

And yet that's what I wrote that night. I knew I couldn't say what I really felt in the letter, which was that I didn't give a fuck about this airhead and her fleshy mounds. I knew she had to be stupid. Who else but a total mannequin would read so many letters about the same one-note topic without complaining to her teacher about the lack of originality and demanding a new pen pal? The sole exciting moment that had emerged from this entire pen pal experiment was the only one that had elicited universal complaints. How could that be? What sort of world was I living in?

So I wrote a banal letter that appeared to be apologizing sincerely for the unfortunate incident, but if you took the first letter of each sentence and strung them all together they spelled out the words "FLESHY MOUNDS." It was my passive aggressive way of protesting this Stalin-like ban on all originality and individual thought.

It was such a subtle protest that no one ever noticed it.

I handed the letter to Mrs. Clundt first thing the next morning with a poker face, not wanting to give her any reason to dig too deeply into the letter. A part of me hoped she uncovered the subversive message, while another part of me knew she never would. I was beginning to realize that people only see what they want to see.

If I had been old enough to understand Latin, I might have ended the missive with the following sentence: *Gloria Dei Est Celare Verbum*. (“It is to the glory of God to conceal a word.”)

Or perhaps this one: *Potest ego tangent carnosae aggeribus?*