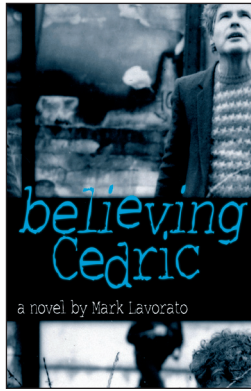


an excerpt from



believing Cedric

a novel by Mark Lavorato

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Reaching up to the frosted copper handle
and opening the door to air
so warm it stings the cheeks

Supper steaming at the window
with the sweet breath of fried onions
Mittens drying on the furnace duct
beside a lunchbox lined with breadcrumbs

Being lifted impossibly high
above the portrait frames and lamps
the sandpaper scraping
of my father's stubble
clenching my body tight
with laughter

I imagine there are questions
and answers about school
but these have all faded
unlike the tactile
The plump fingers of my
mother's hand on my head
The wet of the dog's delicate lips
as he pulled the gristle
from my fingers
under the table

This is what I would have told you
if you'd asked
what I remember first

But you never did

Melissa was seated neatly on her sofa, reading, her cat asleep on the cushion beside her, just out of reach, when a sleek car drove into view and turned with certainty into her driveway. She looked up from her book, sure that this car, which she'd never seen before, would reverse out and drive away in the opposite direction, something that happened quite often on the road where she lived, an almost dead-end lane in the small town of Haliburton, Ontario. But whoever it was had turned off his vehicle and was getting out, though with much less conviction than he'd had while pulling in. It was her father, Cedric, now slouching in her driveway, slamming the door while squinting through the front window, a hand held over his brow to function as a visor.

Melissa's lips hinged open. The last time she'd seen him was four years ago. He had gained weight since then, and had taken, she noted, to wearing a tacky gold watch. She closed her book, hesitated.

Outside in the boreal distance, a chainsaw pattered out. A crow complained in the quiet left behind. In the sky behind Cedric, a myriad of individual clouds—the kind that are only seen here in autumn, small and shaped like blotchy snails with grey-bottomed bodies and white-furrowed shells—glided through the sky, all of them moving in the same direction, from one nameless place to another.

Cedric made his way to the landing, where he gave two feeble knocks on her door. He waited for her to answer, glanced over his shoulder, looked at the clouds.

November 5, 1957

That morning—the morning it happened—Agnes O'Donnell was sitting in the window of her resource room, as she did every day before class, staring down into the schoolyard, thinking. This was her ritual. And though it differed very little from the rituals of other teachers at the school, it was something her colleagues consistently commented on. She would come in forty minutes early, pour herself a cup of tea, select one of the old *Lethbridge Herald* newspapers lying on the staff-room table, tuck it under her arm, and retreat into the tiny room attached to the front of her class. There she would sip from her cup and stare at the wide field, never reading, or even opening, the paper she'd brought along with her.

It was a Tuesday, and a thin layer of snow covered everything but the places the children had trampled on Monday, snaking footprints exposing the brown grass and lumps of earth beneath. Beyond these erratic patterns, there wasn't much distinction between where the school grounds ended and the closest farmer's field began, except for the rows of yellow stubble scarcely sticking out of the white, raking lines into the horizon where they eventually swirled with the clouds. As usual, Agnes surveyed as far as she could.

She began this routine soon after her husband died, after the initial wave of sympathy cards had subsided and were thrown away. Most of them she had barely read, folding them in half with a careless crease and dropping them into the garbage, knowing that her husband was the type of man who was neither loved, nor respected, nor likely to be missed by anyone at all. He had been a proud man: proud of his job, proud of the authority he held at the bank, and proud of the immaculate order of his tool shed, which he seldom used. They had met at a dance in the basement of a community hall only a month after she'd signed on at the school.

She was drawn to his posture, how he held his neck with an almost comical erectness, craning to look down at the room around him, and she'd made a point to stand nearby, scratching at her nape, her hair draped over her hand. They danced twice, and on the second waltz, with the base of his wrist pressing into the small of her back, it crossed her mind that this would be the man she would marry. And, as it turned out, he had a promising future, along with being the only bachelor to have ever taken an open interest in her.

When they'd made love he was swift and fervid, and she spent most of her energy, pinned below his rigid weight, attempting to calm him, to placate his mounting frenzy that bordered, in her mind, on dangerous, his expression fierce, eyes widening. He would finish by squeezing her shoulders tight with a sudden rush that seemed to drain him completely, flopping onto the sheets beside her afterwards, catching his breath in the dark. He was a man that never whispered, and slept deeply.

She had imagined her life unfolding in the same conventional way as other teachers she knew, first Normal School and her certificate, then marriage, children, perhaps a stint as a housewife, and retirement. But two years after the wedding she still hadn't fallen pregnant and had begun to be a little concerned. It wasn't serious enough to warrant seeing a doctor; no; besides, she wouldn't want her husband finding out she'd gone to see anyone, as they'd managed to carefully avoid the subject of pregnancy altogether, only having talked about it once, in the first week of their marriage. She was cleaning the plates off the table at the time, reaching in front of him to arrange the fork and knife so they wouldn't slip off. "I'd like to have a couple boys," he'd said. "One day." He picked up a carafe and poured some water into his glass, drank it down, and clunked the container back onto the table without looking up. She put the plates in the sink and started to fill the washbasin, saying nothing. That suited her just fine.

Two years later she was finding it hard to fall asleep after he

had rolled off of her, feeling the sweat of his sides cool and become clammy against her forearms, wondering if she was doing something wrong, or not doing something right, missing out on some important step. She wished she had a woman in her life close enough that she could ask these things. Her sister, who was single anyway, and happened to be a horrible correspondent—capable of answering even the longest of letters with an aloof postcard—had moved to Saskatoon, and her mother was gone, and had been since she was eight.

Agnes told herself she would wait another year before going to the doctor, which amounted to 1932 in its entirety. The months seemed to dawdle out in front of her, to slow down, and even, on certain Sunday evenings, to stop. The local news inched along on its sluggish orbit. There were strikes and the threat of communism; the Ku Klux Klan set a cross on fire in a neighbouring town, while in another, rabbit roping was introduced to their rodeo, and still there were no cells amassing in her belly. She buckled before the year was through and made an appointment, arriving at the clinic an hour early. When the test results came back a few weeks later, she went to a different physician, who came to the very same conclusion. He was sorry. He really was. But there was nothing anyone could do.

She told her husband at breakfast, the radio crackling in the background with a local show that neither of them really liked but still tuned into every morning. She spoke suddenly. “I can’t.” He was chewing his toast at the time and his jaw slowed to do the processing, trying to piece together what she might be talking about. Then, as suddenly as she’d said it, he understood. She went to the kitchen window to stare out of it while he readied himself to leave for the day. She heard him use his copper shoehorn, hang it back on the hook where it belonged, straighten his tie in the mirror, and walk out the door. She stood there for a long while, the announcer listing the city’s events and advertisements from the Philco in the corner. There was a sale on car batteries.

The following months found her spending the odd night on the chesterfield in the living room, the lamps turned out, watching the slats of light from the street standards tint the carpet, gradually brightening, then fading again as the dawn blanched the sky. And through these nights Agnes began to feel, physically, that her body had changed in some way, that it was missing something, something she would have described as being the size of a stack of nickels, and as heavy, in the space above her stomach, just before the bones of her rib cage began. And what had filled that space was a kind of hunger, which, she had found, it helped to sleep with her hand over, to have the warmth of her fingers on the skin just above. She would eventually grow used to it, and used to the way that it sometimes clinched tighter, becoming a sudden knot below her sternum that would have her standing still until it passed—in line at the grocery store, erasing the chalkboard at the end of the day, arranging flowerpots in the backyard—a hand pressed tight below her breasts, waiting.

Through the years her husband dutifully sidestepped the topic of children, even avoiding the mention of her students, but Agnes felt that it was always there, between them, a kind of onus that weighed on her side of the scale and lightened his. And adoption seemed to be out of the question for both of them, for him because the idea of raising a stranger's offspring (that no one else seemed to want) was somehow perverse, while for Agnes it was an unspoken fear that held her back, the fear of not being able to devotedly bond with a child that hadn't come from her own body, the fear that she would feel the same way toward him or her that she felt toward her students, which is to say very little. So then, a childless marriage was just something they would have to learn to live with, or through, around. Accordingly, their home became a place of hushed civility. They adopted habits that circumvented each other, moving to different parts of the house whenever the other person entered the room. And Agnes increasingly felt that they did this not because they wanted to avoid conversation, but because they

simply had nothing left to say. They had reduced their lives to the efficiency of gestures and motions, to the common understanding of wants and needs.

Until one sunny spring day in 1953, when she came home from school to find him in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet lid, staring at the towels in front of him, waiting for her to ask what was wrong. His answer was multiple myeloma, a bone marrow cancer whose prognosis was “bleak at best.” By the following week he had stopped work at the bank and was receiving treatment, which, as far as Agnes was concerned, did nothing but speed up the process of his death. He deteriorated rapidly and within a few months was bedridden, and she had to take a leave from work to look after him.

She rearranged the house so that everything, in one way or another, served to make him more comfortable, to minimize the stress of his pain. He reacted to this care and attention to detail with a kind of distant animosity, which affected her very little.

She had to be counselled on matters of nursing, to administer some of his medication and keep both his body and bedpan clean, which made her think of her mother—or what little she could remember of her—who’d been a nurse. And the more Agnes got into the routine and rituals of caring for her dying husband, the more she was inclined to recall everything she’d learned about the events leading up to her mother’s “going.” (That was the word her father had used to describe it. Gone. Your mother is gone.)

It had all begun with an argument, just before the mild winter of 1918. Agnes was eight years old at the time, her sister ten, and they were leaning out over the banister in their nightgowns, watching their parents in the front room below. Their father, always a nattily dressed businessman, had just come in the door with some news that had upset their mother to a degree they’d never witnessed before. She was agitated, a few fingers against her lips, pacing around the room in her “waist,” a simple and elegant dress that was in vogue at the time, which swept out from the hem at

her ankles with every turn she made. While she moved, her head remained fixed on her husband, who was standing near the closet.

“You must understand,” he’d said, “I’ve made an investment here.” He hung up his hat, lifted a hanger for his blazer. “If the theatre doesn’t show the play, I . . . *we*—our family—loses money. A lot of it. And at a time, as you know, that we can’t afford to. The Victory Loan drive’s coming; we’d agreed to buy as many bonds as we can . . .” He shook the hanger to settle the shoulders of his jacket onto the wood, hung it in the closet. “And the boys down at City Hall have already given it the go-ahead. I’m afraid it’s running. I’m sorry.”

Their mother stopped pacing, considering something. “Well then . . . I would like very much for you not to go.”

“Please,” he said. “Be reasonable. I have to.” He ran his fingers along the chain of his pocket watch, which drooped gold against the black of his vest.

When Agnes’s father returned from the theatre that evening, on October 11, after having congregated with hundreds of people despite the order issued that morning by the Medical Health Officer, banning all forms of public gathering—schools, churches, galleries, markets, stadiums—he took off his creaseless clothes and kissed his wife an apology on the forehead. She was probably feigning sleep.

The next day saw a cataclysmic rise of Spanish influenza cases admitted into the temporary hospitals and a myriad of houses placed under quarantine. It was so dire that the city was calling for clinical volunteers to help with the epidemic, and though her mother hadn’t worked as a nurse since the girls were born, she told her daughters that she would have to leave the house for a spell, “to help some people out.” She readied the household for her absence, cramming the medicine cabinet: oil of eucalyptus, antiseptic throat gargles, nasal douche, formaldehyde atomizers, liver pills, iron pills, gin pills, and “miracle” vegetable compounds. She made the girls promise to stay inside, and to never let any of their

friends through the door. She kissed them goodbye, strapped a piece of cheesecloth over her mouth and nose, and left the house with a small suitcase.

Two days later, with the breaking news that an armistice of some kind was to be signed, the city erupted into what would turn out to be a premature celebration of the end of the First World War. More than half the population left their houses and quarantines, flooding the streets to parade with every noise-producing mechanism that could be found on hand. When the next three days saw a helpless increase in the number of cases, it was announced that the entire city would be placed under quarantine, trains forbidden to open their doors while passing through, and police controlling all points of entry, permitting only dairy and mail beyond their barricades. Before it could take effect, Agnes's father drove her and her sister to the train station and told them they were going to Taber, where their aunt would be taking care of them for a while, until the flu had passed out of the city. It was safer there, he'd said. If need be, they'd be able to leave that town, to go to another one, a safer one. If need be.

The girls returned two months later but to a very different father, a man who was withered and sunken-eyed, who had sat depleted in his armchair as soon as they got through the door, his hat dangling from his fingertips. He told them the news with little delicacy. "Your mother's gone. She was . . . around it all day. Said she even napped downstairs, with the corpses. Said it was the only place to rest and . . ." His hat accidentally dropped from his hand and he leaned tiredly forward to pick it up. "And she's gone."

Agnes doesn't remember mourning her mother's death as much as she remembers moments of her childhood when she distinctly felt her absence. She found there were experiences that she didn't want to share with her schoolmates, or father, sister, just with her mother, which meant that, sometimes, there were events in her life that went untold. She had also never thought about the particulars of her mother dying, about what their home

might have looked like in those months that she'd been away. But while caring for her husband, that all changed. She considered the understanding that her mother must have had, after watching so many vigorous people die from the same sickness she'd contracted. As well as thinking of her father, wondering if he'd nursed her while she was slipping away; if, like Agnes, he had put all of his dedication and energy into caring for her, given himself wholly to her state of decline, to a decay that worsened, always worsened, regardless of anything he did, or of anything that was in his power to do.

There was a day during her husband's disease when, in only a few hours, their marriage changed. Agnes had brought him some lunch and had sat down beside him to help him eat when she realized that the frustration over his illness had reached a kind of critical point. He was scowling at the end of the bed, at his feet bulging under the covers like two dormant volcanoes, long, deliberate breaths hissing through his nostrils. When he turned to look at her, it was with an indignant expression, as if she had snuck up on him, as if she had been spying on some private moment where she wasn't welcome. Impulsively, he reached over and pushed the tray of lunch onto the floor. Both the plate and glass shattered, shards sticking out of the food, a finger of milk jutting under the dresser.

Her reaction surprised them both. She stood up, slowly, with the marked sensation that she was becoming lighter, somehow released. Then she spoke in a low, commanding voice, not unlike the one she used to discipline her pupils. "Well then. That's what I made for you. If you don't like it, you know where the kitchen is." She looked out the window. "Now. I'm going for a walk."

She left the food on the floor, exactly as it was, put a shawl on, and stepped outside. When she reached the end of their lane she stood on the corner, hesitating. While she stared down the long block she imagined herself continuing on, imagined wandering through the grid of streets, beside the rows of flimsy poplars

and planked fences, in the thick air of freshly cut grass, walking until her feet were tired. But she found she could not. Instead, she returned to the house and started cleaning, bleaching the sinks and cupboards, scrubbing the stove, putting the chairs on the table to mop the kitchen linoleum, the bathroom mirror, the bathtub, noisily cleaning everything she could think of, except the mess on the floor in his room.

Eventually, late in the evening, she heard him mumble her name. Agnes pushed the door open and leaned casually against the frame, the slat of light she was standing in crawling up the side of his bed. With his hands gathered into a knot on the blankets in front of him, he fumbled through an apology. "I . . . I . . . You . . ." He sighed. "Okay," he said, nodding. "Okay."

From that evening on, almost consistent with the deterioration of his body, he became increasingly gentle and, for the first time in their married life, somewhat affectionate. At times he would abruptly grip on to her hand in his gruff way and then spend a quarter of an hour staring out the window, blinking, unable to let go of it, both of them settling in the silence, in the warm light that bled through the edges of the orange curtains, listening to the hum of the cars passing by, to the unseen sparrows chirping from the neighbour's hedge.

At his funeral, sitting on a frigid pew at the church, staring into his coffin, she realized something that disturbed her: that she was going to miss, not the person she married, but the frail being who was lying on the rumpled satin, the man he'd become when he was most decrepit. Looking at him then, she was forced to admit to herself that the best months of her marriage were the months when her husband was suffering the most. What kind of person, she wondered, did that make her?

When she returned to work, some of her colleagues at the school made a point of inviting her for their weekly Saturday afternoon of bridge, but she'd hated every minute of it. They'd sat outside, around a table on the patio that was much too large,

a dish of Nuts and Bolts and a bowl of Jell-O salad jiggling in the middle of it. They adjusted and readjusted themselves on the lawn chairs, the straps of webbing cutting into their thighs, all the while talking about the same conventional things Agnes had always imagined herself talking about but had somehow never gotten around to. The buying of appliances on “the instalment plan,” the automated washers, barbecues, vacuum cleaners, motorized lawnmowers. Then on to neighbourhood rumours and hearsay: “You know what *I* heard?” one of them leaning in and folding over her bridge hand as if it were the incriminating evidence itself.

She became taciturn, looking around at the other women. She felt old, boring, especially watching two of the newer teachers who could have been teenagers for all Agnes could discern. They were girlish, stylish, confident, using words they must have learned from their newly purchased televisions or those radio shows that she now switched off. Gee whiz. Neato. Swell. “This salad is just *ideal*, Erla.” They raised their hands every now and then to pat their hair into place, beehives and bouffant flips, providing glances down the short sleeves of their blouses, confirming that they took to shaving their armpits, wore bullet bras. Agnes noticed that even the older women looked more fresh and vernal than she remembered them being, every one of them disciples of *Chatelaine* Magazine no doubt, embracing its tips and secrets with devotion, with faith. Lipstick, bubble bath, blow dryers, Clairol, Noxzema, all of it, ensuring they resembled Marilyn Monroe as close as was womanly possible.

The following week, she turned down their invitation, as she did every week afterwards, until they stopped asking. No, she had decided, the only place she felt at ease anymore was in her house and when she was alone. And she was fine with that. She would resolve herself to a life of domestic solitude, to rituals that avoided people, to mornings spent sitting on windowsills before class, thinking.

And really, it was surprising the wonders that one could find

while alone. Only last week Agnes had had an experience that could only be described as extraordinary. She'd been on her way back from some grocery shopping, and had decided, for the first time, to take a shortcut that skirted a marsh on the border of her neighbourhood. Along the way, she'd noticed some cattails jutting out of the marsh's edge, most of them having gone to seed, their brown velvet splitting along a seam that seemed to bleed out with a type of downy cotton. She decided she wanted to touch one of them, or maybe even pick it, but as soon as she put down her grocery bags and walked into the reeds she found herself stepping onto a ground that was veiled and unnaturally soft, which had her rethinking the idea. She stopped, looked around. A few remnants of fall colours were standing out against the browns and greys of early winter, a yellow leaf caught in the sepia culms, a brush-dab of maroon, a fist of rust. There were also birds, she realized, twittering and chirring in the rushes in front of her, hidden. On a whim, she clapped, just once, never for a moment imagining that it would have the effect that it did.

The entire marsh seemed to erupt, and the sky darkened with hundreds, maybe thousands, of small black birds. They formed a bleary cloud that spread and thinned itself one moment, then condensed and folded in on itself the next; but it was always whorled and synchronous, always acting as one. There was a point when the flock passed low over her head, and she was sure she felt the wind of their countless wings, and flinched beneath its tremolo, ducking low into the sedges. Then the flock collected and spiralled above the marsh that was farthest away from her and, rather abruptly, sunk into the reeds again, leaving the autumn air empty but for their sounds, now remote and muted.

When she stepped out of the rushes several minutes later, stooping to collect her grocery bags, she was struck with a strange sensation, a thought. It occurred to her that there might be someone else, maybe even somewhere out there in Canada, who'd experienced exactly what she just had, who had stood in some rushes

mesmerized and half-frightened by a swirling flock of blackbirds. And for some reason—she couldn't even begin to say why—it was important that this person existed, that they were out there. She continued on, thinking of who they might be, imagining a younger woman, an older man, crouched in another marsh, another time.

She hoped to spend many a morning thinking about this experience, sitting on her windowsill before class. It would be so much better than the petty way she sometimes found herself counting down the years (and even the months and weeks) before she could retire. And even better than spending this time, as she had been lately, infuriated and thinking of Lyle.

Lyle was a fated pupil of hers, whom, she knew, no one would ever be able to reach. He came from one of “*those families*” living in the river bottom, where houses, which were unwisely strewn along the floodplain of the Oldman River, were the very cheapest to come by. She'd once had the misfortune of meeting his parents at the supermarket, which provided a glimpse as to how he most likely spent his evenings, breaking the bottles his father threw into the backyard—a child testing the weight of a stone in his hand while scouring the ground for others, distractedly circling the patchwork of lawn with its spots of yellow grass where the dogs squatted to urinate, the bottles lined up like pickets, poking above the neighbour's side of the fence. She imagined this as a fairly accurate depiction because Lyle seemed to deal with people in the same way he dealt with the objects of his playground vandalism, as a constant experiment to inflict the greatest amount of damage with the least amount of effort. He'd found the most effective ways to terrorize his classmates almost systematically and had even stumbled upon a way to browbeat Agnes.

He had discovered it innocently enough, asking her one lunch hour, likely out of simple curiosity, if she had any children. She made the mistake of reacting, of being affected, beginning with stammering the fact that it was none of his business and ending with walking away from him abruptly.

In the weeks that followed, Lyle was cautious with what he said, slowly testing the waters, choosing the timing of his questions to coincide with as many witnesses as possible. Agnes O'Donnell recognized it as simple manipulation, as a classic power struggle similar to others she'd dealt with in the past, only this time it felt like she was losing the skirmish. With each calculated question he asked, she could feel her authority slipping, her respect, her judgment.

"Mrs. O'Donnell? You said I could keep my jar of worms for fishing in my desk, right?"

"No, Lyle."

"Yes, you did. Jeremy was there. Didn't she, Jeremy?"

"It doesn't . . . I'm saying no now. It doesn't matter what I said yesterday."

"Oh. It doesn't? Never?"

And for the first time in her scholastic career, she wasn't sure if she could deal with the problem in a calm or composed way. It incensed her, and she wanted nothing more than to put him back in his place, to shut him up before any of the other teachers or administration started whispering about it—even if it was already a little late for that. Recently, she'd taken to stalling in her resource room until well after the bell had rung, the teachers of the adjoining classes hearing the bedlam of her students escalate to the point where they were probably on the verge of walking into the room and restoring order themselves.

Agnes heard two sets of small feet shuffle into the classroom and sit down at their desks. She reached over and picked up the morning paper, holding it in front of her face in case either of the children decided to lean out of their seats and peek around the corner. Inadvertently, she found herself focusing on one of the headlines. It was about Sputnik, a satellite that had been launched by the Soviet Union in October, and the expected response of the United States to outshine it with a far superior craft. Somehow, this information did nothing but add to the

instability she already felt that day, and this, before the class had even begun. She was barely clinging to the authority she'd once held in her third grade classroom, and meanwhile, somewhere above the veil of blue sky over the school, astronauts were peering out of their windows and watching the Earth shrink like a playground ball that had been kicked impossibly hard into the air. She flopped the newspaper onto her lap and turned to look down at the schoolyard again, where students were arriving in ever-increasing numbers, fanning out across the snow like ants whose colony has been disturbed, funnelling through the small opening of the front door and into the network of corridors, filling what was serene and wooden and quiet with their collective bustling. She breathed a tired sigh.

As the children made their way into the classroom and hung up their coats, she leaned farther away from the gap where she could see the main room, hoping to avoid acknowledging any of them prematurely—which was the gesture that finally signalled how far she had let herself slip. This couldn't go on. She had to do something, had to take a stand. She was an experienced teacher who had somehow allowed herself to be strong-armed by a child, who had succumbed to the same juvenile tactics she had spent years effectively suppressing. Yes, she thought, reluctantly standing from the windowsill, yes, she had no choice but to end this Lyle business, and today, definitively, in a way that was severe enough that it would never come up again.

She tossed the newspaper onto the table and walked out of the resource room, standing beside her desk and giving a slow nod to the students. "Good morning, class."

The children droned in unison, "Good morning, Mrs. O'Donnell."

"Let us stand and say the Lord's Prayer."

The class rose and stood facing the cross, hands clasped in front of their chests, and proceeded to mutter the syllables in a perfect monotone. She joined them as she always did, hitting a slightly higher note in an attempt to give the words weight and

meaning, but doubted it worked. While she recited the prayer, she eyed a few of her students: Julie, already staring out the window, something she would continue doing for most of the day, mouth ajar, her gaze remote and unfocused; Carol, rocking back and forth on her feet, whom, once sitting, would not stop fidgeting for a consecutive thirty seconds throughout the morning; and then there was Lyle, watching his feet as if he were already bored, no doubt wishing he could be out in the playground where he was lord of all he surveyed. He was wearing two poppy pins today, probably in response to the lesson she'd given the day before. She had told them that the pins were made in "Vetcraft" workshops in Montreal and Toronto, by ex-servicemen who'd fought in the wars, then went on to explain the poppy's symbolism, that the red was for the blood shed in battle, the green for the hope of a better future, and the bent pin for the broken bones and suffering endured. It seemed the kind of thing that Lyle wouldn't be able to undermine, but he'd somehow found a way. He'd asked why the poppies were made of plastic and not of flowers—did the plastic mean anything? He wanted to know. She'd answered, quite simply, that it was owing to there being no real poppies in Alberta. They didn't grow here. At which point every student paused to look down at his or her pin doubtfully, at this emblem that had no connection to their immediate world, or even to their landscape entire. It had suddenly become something disassociated, outlandish. She could have sworn she saw Lyle fighting back a smirk.

When the children finished the Lord's Prayer they hurriedly crossed themselves and broke into the singing of God Save the King, which they finished off-time and off-key, sat down, and waited for her to begin. She asked them to take out one of their workbooks, and there was a collective creak as they all hinged open their desks and took them out, closing the lids with many a raucous bang and ruffling their pages to where they had left off. The unit was about professions, about the correct naming of vocations and common careers.

The lesson began and continued unremarkably, until twenty-three minutes later, when her eyes happened to fall upon Cedric Johnson. There was something about him that struck her as odd in that moment. He had always been an inconspicuous student, unexceptional, one of those children who made up a rather plain colour in the mosaic, who made it easier for others to stand out. He was, now that she thought of it, the kind of child a teacher could spend an entire year with and, within a month after he left, forget that he'd ever existed, forever requiring the prompting of a photo to put a face to the name. Yet right now, this normally indifferent boy looked decidedly awake, his eyes shifting around with a kind of distraction, if not wonder, from one corner of the room to the next, focusing on the most commonplace objects as if they had just miraculously appeared out of thin air. He was particularly focused on the snowflakes Scotch-taped to the windows, the shapes of paper the students had folded, snipped, unfolded, and held up to the light before sticking there. Well, she thought to herself, something must be going on at home—fighting parents, nightmares, a dead relative—something out of the ordinary. She looked away, back down at her book.

A few seconds later, Lyle raised his hand to ask a question about careers, his other hand reaching across to brace the one in the air, as if it were unbearably heavy. Mrs. O'Donnell tilted her head to the side impatiently, half-wondering who had ever come up with the phrase "There is no such thing as a stupid question," because whoever it was had clearly never spent time in a third grade classroom, where the days were saturated with them.

She did little to mask her irritation. "What, Lyle?"

"Um . . . Mrs. O'Donnell? Um . . . did *you* always wanna be a teacher?"

She had almost answered him before recognizing what his question really was. He was prodding into her private past, into her life. It was an attempt to rattle her. Yes. This was it, this

was the moment she had promised herself, twenty-four minutes earlier, that she would not, could not, shrink from.

She noticed her arms trembling. Then she looked down into her hand and saw that there was a piece of chalk in it, and, as if it were some kind of bloated insect larva that had wriggled between her fingers without her knowing, she gave it a quick, disgusted look and hurled it at the ground. It broke into several pieces, the fragments scattering under the students' desks, bouncing between their feet and under the heating registers. The children all seemed to press their backs against their seats in perfectly choreographed unison, eyes opening wide.

"I have had"—she pointed her finger at Lyle's face like a pistol—"enough of you!"

Then she let herself go. She began with yelling the age-old disciplinary spiel about how Lyle had a problem with authority, and that he had better learn to toe the line or else. But somewhere along the way she lost herself. She started ranting about how far he was going to get in life. "If—if, do you hear me?—you can learn to listen, and respect others, and quell your aggressiveness, you *might* get to the end of grade nine. After which, I have no doubt, whatsoever, that you will go on to be a gas attendant, or have some such menial job. You, Lyle, will be bringing the change to the windows of your former classmates until you are old and grey."

When she finished, she seemed to come back to herself, seemed to realize that she was standing in front of a roomful of children. She straightened up, smoothed the sides of her dress down, hearing, in the sudden silence, the clack of shoes in the hallway, walking slowly past her door. She could imagine the gossip: "The old woman's finally coming undone," they would be saying later in the staff room, murmuring in a volume just loud enough for everyone to hear. "I mean, we all know she's been losing her grip for a while now . . . ever since Frank died really. Poor thing. She can't even bring herself to come to our bridge games."

But Mrs. O'Donnell didn't care. What was important was that it was over. It was clear that Lyle wasn't going to be causing problems any time soon. He was slumped over in his seat, trying hard to hold back tears. True, she wasn't proud of her outburst, nor of the cruel bite of some of the things she'd said, but it had been necessary. That much she knew. And now it was over, and time to move on, time to release the class from the tension she had created and return to the lesson. She cleared her throat and was getting ready to turn around when a noise came from Cedric, a noise that didn't fully register at first.

"Jesus *Christ*," he whispered as if to himself.

She felt her neck pivoting slowly in his direction, her expression wildly dumbfounded.

Cedric was shaking his head, looking at the rim of his desk. But when he realized that the teacher had heard him, he looked up at her, levelly, calmly, and spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. "That was a touch excessive, don't you think?"

The other students shifted, not knowing whether to look at Cedric or Mrs. O'Donnell. Some of them looked back and forth at the two of them in rapid succession, as if watching a ping-pong match, trying to get the look on both of their faces at the same time.

"*What*," she spat, "did you just say to me?"

He grinned, raised an eyebrow. "I—uh . . . was just pointing out that you might've been a little out of hand there. That's all."

Mrs. O'Donnell's eyebrows were moving in strange ways on her forehead. Her mouth was agape, but it seemed very unlikely that any sound was going to come out of it. She turned to make eye contact with a few of the other children, as if checking to see that they were hearing what she was hearing. It seemed so. They were almost giddy with excitement, watching to see what would happen next, enthralled.

"I mean," Cedric's voice broke into the quiet again, everyone turning back toward him mechanically, including Mrs. O'Donnell.

He waved a flippant hand in the air as he relaxed in his seat, “That’s my take on it, at least.”

Mrs. O’Donnell swallowed. She noticed that her breathing had become quick and that there was a musty taste in her throat, the taste, in fact, that precedes the acrid tang of bile. Then she heard her voice, speaking as if it were far away, dampened and muffled like something was covering her ears. “Cedric, I want you to go out into the hall. Right now. Do you hear me?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Sure.” He stepped out of his desk and walked through the classroom, slowly, with a confident gait—not cocky, not a strut, but like someone who knew how to walk away from a confrontation with the air that he had won.

She followed closely behind him, almost drunkenly, the heels of her shoes catching on the floor in ways they never had before. When she closed the door behind her, she led Cedric into a book room across the hall. There was a single chair in it that the teachers sometimes used to stand on, to reach the books on the higher shelves. She pointed at it, feeling like everything she was saying and doing was automated, empty. “I want you to sit there until I come back. Understand?” She watched him carefully as he stepped past her, and without even meaning to, she added another banal disciplinary remark: “And I want you to think about what you said to me.”

Cedric got comfortable on the seat; and once he had made sufficient bodily adjustments, he turned to her, smirking.

“And just what are you grinning at? Do you think this is funny? Is that it?” She hadn’t meant to challenge him either. In fact, the only thing she wanted to do was leave him be, contain him in a place where he couldn’t be heard, and walk away. But now, after having explicitly confronted him, those same eyes were fixed on her again, teasingly clever, knowing. His smirk grew into a half-hearted smile, as if, yes, there really was something that was funny, a private joke that belonged to him and him alone. Then he looked away, beginning to inventory the rest of the room

with the same hungry attention that she'd noticed in him a few minutes prior.

She didn't dare say another word. Instead, she closed the door and made her way to the ladies' room, where she leaned against the tiled wall and watched her reflection gawk back at her in the mirror. What exactly did this all mean? Was she going crazy, finally losing her grip, like everyone thought she was? Because, being honest with herself, as it stood, the only thing she could be absolutely certain of was that the child who was holed up in the room a few doors away from her was not a child at all. She shook her head. No, she knew children, understood them. She could recognize when a child was simply reciting adult words, repeating things he'd heard his parents say, trying out snippets that he'd picked out from restaurant conversations and bus-stop arguments, but this was different. There was a cognizance with the language, a natural ease with it that could only come from profound maturity, from worldliness. And this, this was the only thing she could be sure of.

So what was she supposed to do now? There was no one to help her, no one to ask advice from. It wasn't as if she could just stroll up to the principal's office and let him know that there was a man in the skin of a boy locked in the book room downstairs. It would be a matter of minutes before she was injected with sedatives and wheeled away to some institution for the rest of her life. No. She had to deal with this alone. And quickly.

She noticed that her reflection didn't look healthy, her complexion pallid, sickly. She stepped forward to the sink and turned on the taps, splashing her face with lukewarm water. When she was finished, she put a hand on the cold porcelain of the basin and leaned closer to the mirror. Her other hand wormed between the third and fourth buttons of her blouse and found the skin above the empty space there, pressing down on it, her fingers cold as a stack of nickels.

The thought crossed her mind to just leave, to walk out the

front doors and never return; let someone else clean up the mess. But she also knew that, if she did, she would be admitting to herself that she was insane, or at least incredibly unstable. Besides, if she just walked out now, wouldn't they try to take away some of her retirement fund? And if so, how many friends did she have on the school board who would stand up for her, speak in her defence? Few. Maybe none.

No, what she needed to do was to look at this problem with rational eyes, as something real, as something that actually happened to people. Then she could deal with it.

She considered how he'd addressed her, the way he'd held her gaze as if he were on the same ground, the same standing, and it came to her that the best thing to do was to confront him in that light, as an equal. She would have to walk into the book room and have a rational, grounded conversation with him, a conversation that was going to be every bit as squeamish and gawky as standing her ground with another adult; one of those cumbersome situations that everyone has been in at some point, a colleague who has overstepped his or her boundaries, a supervisor who has made a mistake. This was going to be about diplomacy, about reasoning, about seeing where the other person was coming from and, possibly, even admitting wrongs and apologizing. This is what it had come to. It was the only reasonable way out that she could think of.

She felt edgy as she walked out of the bathroom and down the hall, where she paused for a slow minute before putting a hand on the door of the book room. She opened it quickly and stepped forward, standing tall, holding her chin as high as her husband would have. However, she could tell instantly, just by looking down at him, that this wasn't the same person she had left in the room.

Cedric was standing in the middle of the floor, gawping up at her, his face long, eyes glossy, his shoulders seeming to hang from his neck. His hair was somewhat dishevelled, like he'd been holding his head for some time, squeezing tufts of it in his fists.

“Mrs. O’Donnell?” His voice was pitched high, meek, submissive. “Um,” he looked around at a few of the shelves, “why am I in the book room? I don’t . . . I . . .” he paused, as if wondering whether or not he should admit this next part, “I don’t remember coming in here.” Then he broke off, looking at the floor, and within seconds had started to cry, quietly, shamefully, like he’d wet his pants.

She let him whimper for a while, watching him skeptically, churning over the absurd thought that this could possibly be a grown-up in a child’s body just pretending to be a child. But she heard the pathetic ring of paranoia and delusion in this reasoning. No. Intuitively, she understood that this was just a boy in front of her, a boy who was confused and afraid.

Agnes crouched down and held on to his shoulders. “It’s all right. Everything’s going to be all right now. Okay?” But Cedric couldn’t look her in the eyes as she reassured him. He was discomfited, embarrassed.

She flattened one of the raised clumps of his hair. “Come on,” she said, standing up. “Let’s get you back into class.”

For the next hour, Mrs. O’Donnell’s movements were stiff and awkward, her instructions to the students imprecise and confusing. She found herself constantly checking to see that Cedric was still in his seat, still watching the class with his usual appeasing eyes, still writing in his usual complacent way. And, to her relief, he always was.

The day passed without further incident. As did the next. And then the next. Until, eventually, Agnes began to have a hard time believing that anything strange had ever happened at all.



[Mark Lavorato](#) is a musician, photographer, and professional nomad. His freelance work has been published in over twenty-five magazines including *Ascent*, *Orange Room Review*, and *Poetry Canada*. Mark is also the author of a collection of poetry called *Wayworn Wooden Floors* (2012), and his first novel, *Veracity* (2007) is available on his website at marklavorato.com. Mark currently resides in Montreal, but his wandering habits may soon take him elsewhere.