

# Oliver

My mother walks with me the block-and-a-half to my first day of school at Oliver Elementary. I am wearing stiff Levi's with legs that are rolled up at the ends because they are too long, and a shirt my mother has made at her sewing machine. She always makes four shirts with the same material and pattern, in different sizes, and when we go anywhere she makes my three brothers and me wear the same shirt. We feel ridiculous and don't want to look like one another and it makes us want to fight each other, but my mother likes it and she makes us do it. On this trip to Oliver Elementary there aren't any brothers, and I am happy they are too young for school and must stay at home.

My mother carries the things we bought for school, a Big Chief writing tablet and a cigar box containing paste, blunt scissors, Crayons, a rubber eraser, and two fat pencils.

The week before, my father had taken me downtown to get the cigar box from a blind man who sells newspapers, candy, and cigars from a little shop. My father explains to the man, whom he calls Ambrose, that his boy is heading off to first grade and needs a cigar box. Ambrose sits behind a low counter with his cane between his knees. His shop is dim in the dusky light of a bare low-wattage bulb that hangs from the ceiling behind him. A little electric fan hums at one end of the counter, ruffling the pages of a magazine laid near it. I smell old newspapers and the sweetness of tobacco. Ambrose is wearing dark glasses and smoking one of his cigars, which he carefully places in an ashtray on the counter.

"Ah, the first grade!" says Ambrose, holding up a finger. "Yes, yes." He moves his cane aside and reaches under the counter. He grunts and moves his hands about until he finds an empty cigar box, which he holds in the air. He shakes it lightly next to an ear and then holds it close to his nose and sniffs.

"I like the cigars that came in this box," he says. "Ten cents each, and worth every nickel." He and my father laugh, and I think this must be some kind of cigar joke. He extends the cigar box, and my father takes it from him.

My father buys a newspaper, which I think is strange because he never reads a newspaper, and he allows me a candy bar – and this is truly strange.

"All I have is a five, Ambrose, I'm sorry," he tells Ambrose.

"I can trust you," Ambrose says, and he extends his hand. My father places the five-dollar bill in his palm. Ambrose rolls his chair forward and opens a drawer. He finds a roll of tape and carefully places a piece on the bill near one end, then puts the bill into the drawer. He moves his hands around in the drawer, not looking down. Then he gives my father his change, some one-dollar bills and some coins.

After we leave, my father hands me the cigar box. "You see Ambrose put that tape on the five-dollar bill?"

"Yeah, how come he did that?"

"Ambrose only takes one-dollar bills, usually. He put the tape on the five so he would know it's a five later on," my father tells me.

"How come he only takes one-dollars?" I ask.

My father stops walking. He gives me a familiar look, the one he gives when he is about to explain something that he thinks I should already understand. Standing there with a mouthful of chocolate, I try to think quickly, but I can't think of anything. I just look up at my father.

He shakes his head. "Close your eyes," he tells me. He takes the cigar box from me. Then he tells me to hold out my hand. Soon he has put something into my outstretched palm and I close my fist around it. "Keep your eyes closed," he warns. "Now, tell me if that's a one-dollar bill or a five-dollar bill."

"I don't know," I say through the chocolate. I rub the paper between my thumb and fingers, and hope I don't have chocolate on my hand.

"Well then," says my father, and he takes the bill from my fingers. I open my eyes and he shows me a ten-dollar bill. He raises his eyebrows, and I nod that I understand. He starts walking again. I wonder why everyone can't just tell Ambrose if they have a one-dollar or a five-dollar bill, like my father had done. I decide to think about it for a while before mentioning the idea to my father. My brothers and I have learned that it's best to suggest only good ideas.

My mother and I walk into Oliver Elementary, a long single-story building stretching along Oliver Street from one end of a block to the other, with classrooms on both sides of a central hallway, and a cafeteria at one end. The first grade rooms are down the hallway to our left as we come through the doors. I stay close to my mother as we walk down a dim corridor that smells of bleach and floor wax and chalk, but I don't hold her hand. During the summer, Oliver Elementary has been scrubbed and waxed and buffed like an old table. The woodwork gleams. The dark floor tiles are polished to a shimmering, shining onyx. Looking down, I see a hint of my image reflected in their glow, vague and featureless, like a shadow.

A jumble of voices, younger and older, mixes with footfalls and the scratching of my new Levi's as we wind around clumps of teachers and mothers and boys and girls. We skirt a bouncing, chattering knot of girls bigger than me, all talking at the same time about their summers and which teacher they have. One of them looks at me and I quickly look away. I see a snaggletooth boy with jug-handle ears that will one day become a college roommate, a dark-haired brown-eyed girl that will become, in a few years time, the object of my first crush. I see faces whose names I will learn and remember for nearly half a century. There is the tough kid in the scruffy clothes that will tell me on the playground that this is his second time for the first grade, and that he doesn't much like school. There is the girl who will get pregnant in our junior year and drop out of school and disappear. There are the boys who will take over their fathers' farms, and the girls they will marry. Their children will someday walk this hallway.

There are three rooms for first-graders, with lists of printed names taped beside their doors. My mother stands with other mothers to scan the lists, and finally she sees my name.

I am to be in Mrs. Cole's room. She is tall and very thin, a bony, wrinkled woman with papery skin, a hint of lips, and a stern squint. I think she might be the oldest woman I have ever seen. I take the Big Chief tablet and the cigar box of school supplies from my mother and look for a place to sit. There are five rows of desks running from the front of the room to the back, with six desks in each row. I think it best to sit in the middle row halfway back. I see other children putting their Big Chief tablets and their cigar boxes in a hollow space below their seats, and I do the same. My mother waves goodbye to me and I do a quick little wave and wish she would just go and not make a big thing out

of me going to Oliver Elementary. I try to sit still in my desk while other mothers and kids arrive and meet Mrs. Cole. Dried chewing gum is stuck to the bottom of my desktop and I pick at it with a finger. I look around. At the front of the classroom Mrs. Cole's desk sits next to a bank of windows spanning the length of the room. A blackboard is built into the front wall. Above the blackboard, shapes are printed on colored cards that are affixed to the wall in a row.

I stretch my neck and look out the windows and see my mother walking back toward home. I feel something in my throat and have the sudden urge to run after her, but I don't move. I have begun to notice that my mother is uncommonly pretty. She is small and dark-haired and thin. The summer sun has turned her skin into gold. On our rare trips downtown I walk close to her along the sidewalks and feel the eyes of the men on us. I shoot the men sullen looks under knitted brows. I don't know if my mother notices their stares, but she looks straight ahead and walks with purpose, her gold calves shining below her skirt.

I know the boy who sits in the desk to my right. His name is Louis. He lives across the street from my brothers and me. I am happy to see him, a familiar face in a sea of strangers. But I soon grow anxious and try to ignore him. He has taken the bottle of paste from his cigar box and is eating the paste, looking at it closely and licking it from his fingers. He takes the new Crayons from their little box and smells them, and picks away their paper sleeves. He takes the blunt scissors from his box and begins cutting Blue into small pieces, squeezing hard on the little scissors with both hands. Then he cuts Brown into small pieces, and puts the pieces into his paste bottle. He takes a little bite of Red and grins at me.

There was a problem with Louis during the summer. He developed the habit of running away from home. From across the street in the evening, we would hear his father marching around outside and yelling, "Louis!" over and over, and sometimes "Goddamned, Louis!" Then Louis' father would stomp off into their house, and come out again with Louis' mother, the both of them cursing and stomping. They would get into their rusty old car and slam the doors and drive around the neighborhood looking for Louis, the car exhaust smoking and the engine making a terrible racket. They always found him, because there he would be the next day, outside in their front yard, digging with a little shovel and filling a toy dump truck with dirt.

Sometimes we would hear shouting from across the street, and know that Louis' father and mother were fighting again. His father had a job working on cars and his mother stayed inside their house for the most part, and sometimes when the father came home he and the mother would start the shouting. Louis would come tearing out of the house and run off somewhere and they would have to go find him. Sometimes Louis' parents would come outside in the evening and get into their car. "Louis, you stay here and don't run away again or I'll beat your ass," his father would say, pointing at Louis, and they would drive away and Louis would keep digging away in the front yard, filling his toy dump truck.

Mrs. Cole wants to find out if we know something called the alphabet. She takes a long stick and moves to the blackboard. She has sharp bumpy shins under thick nylons that sag with little wrinkles near her ankles. She is all neck and arms and elbows and feet, like someone stuck a wig and a watch on a pair of stilts. She points the stick at the girl in the first seat in the first row, and then she points at the first shape on a card above the blackboard.

"What is this?" she asks the girl. She gives a stern look.

“A,” says the girl in the first seat in the first row.

Mrs. Cole moves the stick to the next shape.

“B,” says the girl.

Mrs. Cole moves the stick.

“C,” says the girl.

Mrs. Cole points the stick at the boy in the second seat in the first row. She points to a shape above the blackboard.

“What is this?” she asks the boy. She gives a stern look.

“D,” says the boy in the second seat in the first row.

This goes on for a while. I have no idea what the shapes are. I know Mrs. Cole will soon progress to the middle row of desks, and then halfway toward the back of the room, and to me. My heart beats hard in my chest. What am I to do? I don’t know these shapes. I feel panicky and want to cry. Already on the first day at Oliver Elementary I am no good at school and everyone else knows everything and I know nothing at all. I am going to be one of the dumb kids, just like I knew I would be.

When Mrs. Cole reaches the end of the row of shapes, she walks to the first shape again. She points to the boy in the desk in front of me.

“What is this?” she asks the boy. She looks stern.

“A,” says the boy in the desk in front of me.

She moves the stick.

“B,” says the boy.

Mrs. Cole points her stick and her pale arm at me.

“What is this?” Her stern look blazes.

I remember the girl in the first seat in the first row.

“C,” I say.

She moves the stick.

I remember the boy in the second seat in the first row.

“D,” I say. But I know that is all I can remember. I don’t know what I will say when she moves the stick again and looks at me with her stern look. But she points the stick at the girl behind me, and I can breathe again.

At night my father comes home and asks me about school. I tell him I am one of the dumb ones and I don’t know this alphabet like everyone else in the class. I tell him I don’t want to go back to Oliver Elementary with the stern teacher with the bumpy shins and Louis who ate his paste and Crayons, and whose mother had to come for him before school was over. He tells me that’s what school is for, to teach me things I don’t know, and by God I will be going back to Oliver Elementary, and for a good long time, and that’s that.

My mother tells me that some kids went to kindergarten last year and that’s why they already know the alphabet. I have never heard of kindergarten. She tells me it doesn’t matter. She tells me I am smart and I will learn fast, and she reminds me that I should not be eating my paste and Crayons like Louis, by the way.

“That Louis is a idiot,” my father mumbles from his chair in the den. I look over my shoulder and see him sitting in his recliner, the outline of a big arm lifting a beer can, a silhouette in the gray-white glow of the television.

My mother ignores him. “You know the song about the ABC’s, you just don’t know you can write down the ABC’s,” she says. She tells me the ABC’s are what words are made of, and anything at all you can say you can write using the ABC’s.

I know about words and books, but I don’t know they are made of the ABC’s. Could this be true? I ask her if she is sure. I don’t want to make a mistake at school.

“Yes,” she laughs. “I’m sure. Let me show you.” She takes a pencil and writes something on a piece of paper in large shapes. She spells it out aloud, pointing to each of the shapes, giving each a name. I look for a minute.

“That’s your name,” she tells me.

“That’s me?” I look at the paper and then at my mother. She nods. I like the way my name looks. There are straight lines and rounded lines. They go across, and up-and-down, and at a slant, and one bends and another goes all around. I think it looks very nice. I trace the ABC’s with a finger.

“Yes, that’s you.” She sees that I like the look of my name. My mother has many types of smiles. She does the one that is real and rare, that I am careful to watch for, and I am happy.