

MANDY

CL Bledsoe

It comes slowly. The piano key rings out like a punch in the air, and I write down the note. I'm still learning how to notate music. I still have to count the notes out—run the scale in my head—but I'm getting better. Quicker. I'm not sure if she's patient or I just can't tell if she's frustrated. One note, a pause as I write it down, then another. When I've written several down, she'll play them back so I can get the tempo. I fill in the sheet music, and we move on. Usually, after an hour or so, the notes stop. This is what makes me think it's incomplete—she's worked out a certain amount and has to stop and think. Or maybe she gets tired; I have no idea how hard this is for her. Regardless, when the notes stop coming for fifteen minutes or so, I tell her good night and take the music back to my apartment in the dorm, to safeguard it. Sometimes, I watch TV. Sometimes, I grade. Maybe I have a glass of wine, or maybe

I stare through the window into the lonely streetlight I can see at the top of the hill and think about regret.

§

My classes used to be fun, which is not to say that I appreciated them. Teenagers have an energy about them, a verve, because, I think, life hasn't beaten them down with its disappointments, yet. Some of them, anyway.

I teach literature, various kinds to various grades. Mostly boarding students with a smattering of local day kids. My students used to be funny, enthusiastic, distracted, brilliant, the gamut you'd expect. If I were being unkind, I would say Mandy was lackluster, maybe distracted would be better. She often stayed after class, which was just before lunch. This was not unusual. There were always students hanging around. There was usually a group of international students—Chinese or Korean—in one corner, eating, because other students wouldn't let them eat in their rooms. She would sit on the other side, a couple seats back, reading anime. She never talked about class, never had questions. If I asked her about an assignment, she'd smile and deftly change the subject.

Looking back, I realize there was something unsaid, an uneasiness I ignored. We all did, of course. But that has been my role, as a teacher. The troubled students, the ones who feel that they don't fit in, they linger in my room, knock on my door. Sometimes, they tell me their problems, sometimes, they sit quietly somewhere. This is the kind of thing I never thought about before. I'm not the best teacher on campus, but I don't judge. I don't joke with them the way some teachers do, which is often just mocking. I don't ask anything more of them. I just give them a space to be.

§

Mandy was late for dinner check in. The dorm parents checked her room, the classrooms, the library, everywhere you'd expect she might be.

She was in the theater. A security guard found her. The reason we have a security guard is that there have been kidnapping threats made against some of the Mexican students' families—political families. That's what they told us, anyway.

Jeanie was the second one to see her. All schools—all organizations—have a person who really runs things, who gets things done. That was Jeanie. Her official title was something like communications director, but she was really the lynchpin of the school. She wouldn't talk about it, and we didn't ask. But

it broke her, there was no question of that. Something in her was gone and would never come back.

§

I thought it was a song, at first, but it's something larger, something more complex. I had to get Jerome, who teaches music, to show me how to read and annotate music. He has a little office in the basement, but he's rarely there. He only teaches part-time, here, and part-time at two other schools. When he's on campus, he's usually in the music room, but not in the evenings, when I am. Maybe that's why she comes to me. Maybe she can only come at that time. Who is to say?

It sounds strange, but I don't try to play the song, myself. Aside from my lack of musical knowledge, it just seems wrong, like wearing another person's underwear. It's not my song to play. I was just writing it down.

§

Someone knocks on my door—the one connected to the dorm—at 2:17. It's Charlie, a junior from my American Lit class. I give her some ibuprofen and water because it's too much trouble to wake the nurse. She sits at my dining room table and cries for a long time. I keep catching myself trying to take her hand. I just want it to stop, for her. I give her tissues, a snack, pat her on

the back when she walks back to the door. I hold it open, and she wraps her arms around my torso, quickly, before I can say anything, and then she recedes into the darkness, a scared, hurt little girl we're trying to make be a young woman.

§

I never married. I was engaged a couple times, but it never stuck. I think about it often, and every few years, I attempt and fail something foolish. My situation is unusual—a single male living in a girl's dorm—but unusual paths are common in boarding schools. None of us took a straight path to get here. I make sure all the parents know me. I make sure my door is always open when kids come to my room. I avoid going into the dorms at all, unaccompanied, if I can. At very least, I get a senior to come on room checks with me. Charlie—that worries me for a couple days, her being in my dining room, alone with me. These are things I must do to protect myself, to make sure no one thinks I'm the monster some men are.

§

After class, now, students meet in my room to complain about the school's handling of "The Situation." That's what the administration calls it. The year-book staff says the Head won't let them dedicate a page to her—doesn't even

want her picture in the yearbook. Jeanie claims solidarity with the kids, but for once, she was overruled. Someone took down all the team photos in Main that included Mandy. They come to me about it, but I can't help them, officially. I tell them to celebrate her.

“No one can take away how you feel,” I say.

It doesn't help.

There's something in their eyes as they leave, something between betrayal and anger. It's disgust, I suppose. I want to tell them that most of this they're going through will fade. They're learning grief, and it's not an easy lesson. I don't really know if any of this is true or of any use, so I don't say it. Those looks—they're another feather to stack on top of the rest of it.

§

It snows, a light dusting, covering the quad. I don't see it happen, but someone stamps out the words, “We Love You Mandy” in the snow, along with a giant smiley face. We don't know if the administration sees it. All of us—the faculty—without discussing it know that this is something we must try to hide from them. When I pass students in the hall, they're red-faced, defiant. The message stays for the rest of the day, the letters growing strange as the snow

melts. Over the next few days, they become incoherent, but the smiley face stays. I try not to think about it too much.

§

One day, after classes, before sports, they all gather. None of us would've admitted to knowing the time or place it would happen, but all of the faculty knew. Some of them distribute candles, and they stand in silence until the candles burn down. Corie from admissions comes to the quad, blood rising in her cheeks. Several of us stand on the walkway overlooking the students. She looks from them to us, sputters something about how this makes the school look, which we ignore. Eventually, she walks back to Old Main, where the administrative offices are. It surprises us when she doesn't come back. After a half-hour, as though an alarm has gone off, the students blow out their candles. A couple gather the candles together and bring them to an art teacher. One girl brings several to me. I hold them carefully. It makes me feel not healed, but as though such a thing could be possible. The students disperse. Eventually, so do the faculty.

§

I'm not sure how long it lasts. Several days. A few weeks, perhaps. One evening, the keys stop. I wait, as I have each evening, but they don't start again.

I can feel it in the air—a coldness. Distance. I continue going, just in case she’s forgotten something. After two days, I ask Jerome to meet me in the practice room.

“Did you write this?” he asks, scanning the hand-written pages.

“No,” I say.

He plays a few bars, tentative at first, but with growing confidence. I feel like she’s there, listening, but I can’t really know that. When he’s done, he studies me.

“Mandy wrote it,” I say.

He holds my eyes for a long moment and then nods, clears his throat, and plays it again. When the last note rings out, I feel the tears on my cheeks. He pretends to read over the music and doesn’t say anything. Or maybe he really is reading it again. Who can know such things?

Raised on a rice and catfish farm in eastern Arkansas, CL BLEDSOE is the author of thirty books, including his newest poetry collection, *The Bottle Episode*, and his latest novel *The Saviors*. Bledsoe co-writes the humor blog *How to Even*, with Michael Gushue: <https://medium.com/@howtoeven>. Bledsoe lives in northern Virginia with his daughter.