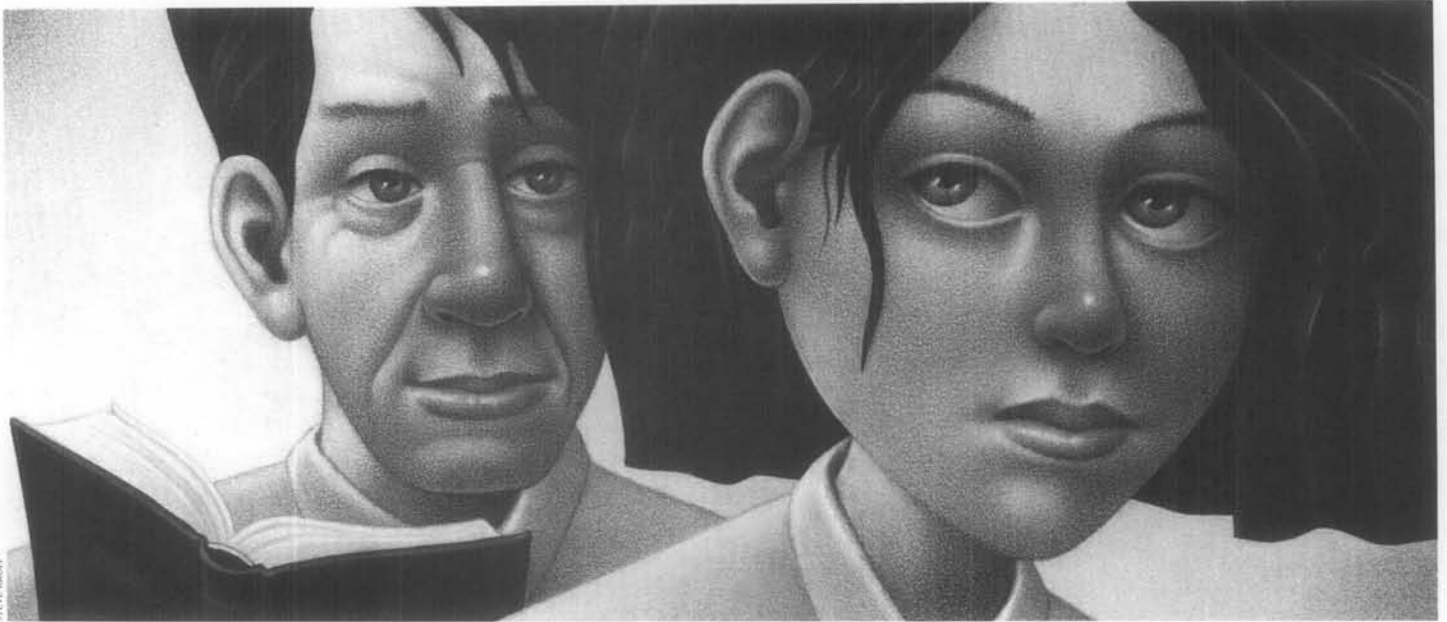


Third Place 1992 Brookie & D.K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest

PRODIGY

By Michael Fillerup



STEVE MEYOR

My daughter the genius is flunking half her classes because she refuses to submit dull boring question/answer worksheets that are nothing but unmitigated mule work and an insult to my (meaning her) superior intelligence, quote-unquote. Why, for instance, won't her physics teacher simply let her design a nuclear-powered dishwasher or a frictionless V-6 engine and be done with it?

My good wife Natalie retorts: "Why can't you just for once in your stubborn little obstinate life play the stupid game? You're slitting your own throat, can't you see that?"

"You said it," she says. "Because it's stoo-pid! And a game."

My wife hollers at her through the bedroom door she refuses to unlock: "If you don't turn in all those missing assignments, if you don't . . . I'm going to . . ."

"Going to what?" Val snickers.

What, precisely? Ground her? She doesn't drive, doesn't date, doesn't dance, doesn't do much of anything except hole up in her room playing her cello and writing scripts for TV sitcoms that are doomed to someday make her rich and famous.

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And poems—tragic sad depressing awful horrible nihilistic things, quote-unquote Natalie.

"Val, come down for dinner!" she hollers through the wood.

"Leave it outside the door!" Val hollers back.

Self-incarceration is a sign of true genius or insanity, the line between the two, she reminds us regularly, being a very fine one indeed.

She quite frankly tells us she hates church, hates Seminary, hates the Book of Mormon, hates Sister Myers her Laurel advisor. "All she ever says," Val sneers, "is get married and have babies. Make dumb babies." Val says she hates kids. Would never ever in a million years get married. "Not like that. Not like her." So why are we always compelling her to go to church? Didn't she have free agency? Wasn't compulsion Satan's plan? She can't wait until she graduates from high school and is on her own, boy oh boy. "I'll never go to church—ev-ver! Just you wait!"

"If you graduate," Natalie corrects.

Natalie can't understand her attitude. Natalie loved Seminary, loved MIA, scripture chases, youth conferences. With Val it's always pulling teeth. "What's the matter with her? Why can't we just have a normal kid? Why can't she be—"

Natalie also can't understand why no one has asked Val to

the junior prom. She's tall, blond, beautiful, long legs like a model.

"Well, would you want to go out with an ice pick?"

"A what—a *what*?"

It's a stupid, foolhardy, idiot thing for me to mumble, and I invent an instant edit: "With a nice kid?"

Sister Myers tells her Laurels, Val included, that they are special chosen spirits sent to Earth at a special chosen time for a special chosen purpose. They are the most valiant spirits, preserved to usher in the Savior's second coming.

Val rolls her eyes and groans. Her arrogance is almost as frightening as her I.Q.

"The glory of God is intelligence," she says. "Just don't ever use it."

A week ago I committed an unpardonable and sneaked into her room—just curious, prowling for nothing in particular, just clues to get inside that busy little brain of hers. I did not see the leather-bound scriptures we bought her for her twelfth birthday; no framed poster of the Young Women's Values; no *New Era* Mormonads; no certificates of Church achievement. Instead, books on astrology, handwriting analysis, palm-reading (she tells me I have a short lifeline but a creative crease), the interpretation of dreams. I see knickknacks on the walls; a poster of Magic Johnson slam-dunking a full moon below a fluorescent red caption: THE MAGIC KINGDOM (an unexpected brush with reality). Box games; a picture of a tiger stalking through the snow; the masks of comedy and tragedy, the former turned upside down, making a dour duo.

And one more: a black-light poster featuring a young woman, slender and blond, in a flowing white gown, sitting at the foot of a glittering waterfall in some unnamed fantasyland. She is gazing longingly at the far horizon where a little family of white unicorns is sipping from a bubbling stream. She holds a bouquet of pink flowers. No caption, no title.

Then I find what I suppose I have been looking for all along: her journal. I open and read: "Love is an ice pick; it is a poem which is a process which is the kid genius would-be god/prophet you must be willing to follow blindfolded through the rough and dark and slippery parts, must sometimes follow the snake into its hole. Are you with me? Are you? Or against? Then get out of your sweet skin and think for a change. Go blow your beautiful brains to kingdom come all ye weary and beknighted etceteras unto me—" I hear footsteps, shut it fast, and slip out just in time. But suspicious eyes pass me coming up the stairs.

Later that night Val asks, "Why did you quit writing?"

Natalie rushes to my defense. "He didn't quit. He never quit!"

I smile. "I'm a no-talent bum. A has-been-who-never-was."

She quietly folds up her music. It suddenly occurs to me that (a) for some peculiar reason she has deigned to practice downstairs, in the living room, among "us," and (b) she has interrupted her intense practice just to ask me, out of the blue, this question.

"I'm going to be a scriptwriter," she announces resolutely. "I'm going to write screenplays. I'm going to be famous."

I smile. Wink. Whisper, "Go for it, kid."

She almost smiles back.

Later, Natalie reminds me she's failing three classes. No hope for a college scholarship. She's burning all her bridges. Why am I encouraging her?

That night I'm up late again, in the living room, two or three A.M., fighting another bout of insomnia. Except I'm on my knees this time. I become aware of another presence in the room. I say a hasty amen and turn to find my genius daughter watching in her nightgown. She is wearing the most peculiar expression. It is identical to the look she wore ten years ago when she drifted into this same living room late one Christmas Eve and found her mother and me sneaking carefully wrapped gifts under the lighted Christmas tree. It was not a look of shock or betrayal, but a little omnipotent smirk.

"Dad?"

I smile, rise to my feet a little awkwardly, as if I am trying to stand up in a rowboat. A little self-consciously, and self-conscious of my self-consciousness.

She tilts her head at an odd angle. "Dad, I have a question."

"Shoot," I say, dusting off my knees as if I have been kneeling in the dirt rather than on shag carpeting.

She gestures toward the Book of Mormon lying open face-down on the floor, an arm's length from my feet. "Dad, can an intelligent, educated person like you really believe all that mumbo-jumbo?"

It frightens me that I have to summon up all my earthly courage to look her squarely in the eyes and say, "Yes." ☞

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