

## Constance Adler

### Look

The scene of the crime was a first-grade classroom at Union Avenue Grammar School in 1968. There had been a Prague Spring, a Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, a charismatic minister who threatened white supremacy assassinated on the balcony of a Memphis hotel, another beautiful Kennedy bled on the kitchen floor of a Los Angeles hotel while a busboy cradled the dead man's head, fear and confusion plain on his face. That same year in Margate, New Jersey, I was six years old, and my teacher Mrs. Zachariades wrote the word "LOOK" on the chalkboard. Then she drew eyeballs inside the two middle letters "O" and "O" and completed the picture by adding long curly eyelashes.

From my seat I watched her and thought *What craziness is this lady up to now?* Mrs. Zachariades turned to face the room of first graders and pointed to each letter as she spoke the syllables, "El. Oh. Oh. Kay." By this time, I had learned my letters, had been dutifully singing, "Now I Know My ABCs" ... dah dah dah, but I didn't know what purpose this served. It was just a song. That day, as Mrs. Z sounded out the letters, I recognized them and thought, *Big deal, I know the alphabet. Show me something new.* I also got the eyeballs picture, *yeah seen that before*, but I was still not making the connection. Then Mrs. Z. drew a slow chalk line from left to right, underneath the letters decorated to look like eyeballs, and spoke the word in a drawn-out, vowel-heavy pronouncement, "Look."

Oh. That was it. The ciphers. The sounds. The verb. The orbs at the front of my head. This process of knitting up realities, *my* ability to see, all these truths, literal, physical, musical, and symbolic, fell overlapping onto each other and merged in one instant. A click of silver light coursed me. My body married my mind. I felt my skull expand, a perceptible, tectonic shift outward at the seams that joined these bony plates. I was going to need more room for my brain if this continued.

Mrs. Zachariades, Mrs. Zachariades, what have you done to me? A door into the adult world swung open when you wrote those letters. In that moment, I understood how I would spend the rest of my life. For that, I have you to thank or blame, Mrs. Z, you monstrous alchemist. Still, it must be noted: My innocence was lost.

First a few words about my teacher. Mrs. Zachariades was an ample woman, given to wearing bright floral blouses. Wherever she moved, she issued a faint cloud, the fragrance in her hand lotion, I imagine, a clean and soothing scent. Her hair must have been dyed because that mink brown pelt was too rich to be real. She wore heavy black glasses like Buddy Holly, although I doubt that he was her style inspiration. More likely she chose these frames for their practicality. Also Mrs. Zachariades favored fire engine red lipstick, which worked for her. She had the voice to carry that color. When she talked, she sounded like the whole trumpet section in an orchestra. When she smiled, her strong red, lip-sticky mouth stretched open to reveal a wide gap between her two front teeth. Imagine a cross between Ethel Merman and the Wife of Bath, and you're getting a sense of my first-grade teacher.

Frankly, she terrified me, and yet I loved Mrs. Zachariades. I would do anything she asked of me. In retrospect, I can see that the way to contain a herd of six-year-olds is to attain some mix of warmth and terror. My teacher held her classroom together with a surgeon's intuition for fine distinctions, when to use the scalpel of her wisdom and when to drop the hammer of her terrifying voice.

For example, she was capable of shouting Mark Grabel into abject submission. He was a sweaty boy, who ran around the room planting his wet mouth on the face of each girl. What a mess that guy was. I can still recall his crazy eyes and florid complexion, as he closed in on me. I would have shouted at him, too, had I the presence of mind to object. As it was, I remained frozen in shock and endured this assault on my face without resistance. When Mrs. Zachariades was finished with Mark, he paid for his indiscretion with a trip to the principal's office—a fate we all dreaded. Anyone who went to the principal's office might not come back. It was the Maw of Hell, or so we all imagined because that was how Mrs. Zachariades characterized that trip down the hallway. An hour later Mark did return, as a chastened, smaller boy. He didn't kiss any more girls that day or any other that I knew of. No one had the nerve to ask Mark what unspeakable horrors he had endured. It was enough to see him reduced to slumped obedience. Something powerful in the principal's office had cut the fire right out of him.

There was a day when my friend Regina and I were experimenting with tipping our chairs backwards to balance on the back two legs. It was my idea, and I had talked Regina into trying it with me. I wanted to see if it could be done. Could I hang in space, poised on my chair, not holding onto the desk, and keep shifting my weight a shade here and there, anticipating and compensating, *just*

so to keep from falling? The danger excited me. This trick required concentration. We did not notice Mrs. Zachariades approaching, until we felt her firm grasp on our backs, slamming our chairs squarely onto all four legs.

"You know, I had a kid in my class last year, who did exactly what you were doing," Mrs. Zachariades said, bending over to bring her face level with mine. Her large red lips stretched with each word, showing the gap in her teeth, so close she could eat me. And then her eyeglasses, too, that framed her black eyes, boring into mine. That voice! My bowels turned to water. "Do you want to know what happened to him?"

What could I say? Did I have a choice? Mrs. Zachariades told us what happened to the boy who balanced his chair on two legs. It didn't go well for this kid. He fell over backwards and hit his head on the edge of the desk behind him. The wound in his scalp began to bleed profusely. Soon the floor of the classroom was submerged in his blood. Oceans of blood, according to Mrs. Zachariades. No, *rivers* of blood. That was it. Rivers of red, red blood covering the floor. Regina and I sat transfixed by Mrs. Zachariades and the lurid word picture she painted for us. "Blood everywhere," she told us, sweeping her arms to encompass the whole room. "We had to bring *three* mops and four buckets to clean it all." Until this day, I had no idea that one little boy had enough blood in him to cover an entire classroom of the Union Avenue Grammar School.

"C'mere, I want to show you something," Mrs. Zachariades said, beckoning us to follow her to the door. She pointed at the floor in the hall. "There was so much blood, it even flowed like a river out to here. Hey!" She collared a girl, a year older than us, passing by in the hall. "You remember that kid who tipped back on his chair and hit his head?" The girl nodded. "And what happened? Blood everywhere, right."

"Oh yeah ... blood everywhere," the girl answered.

*Jesus Christ! Was everybody in in on this?*

"We had to take him to the principal's office," said Mrs. Zachariades. And it all came together, right there. The doom of curious children who test the limits of good behavior and knowledge. First, they bleed and then they get in trouble.

Mrs. Zachariades also knew how to employ a more delicate touch. I came to appreciate her subtlety only much later in my life, when my mother told me about my rough inauguration into my academic career. During the first grade, I would often arrive in the kitchen in late morning to inform my mother that I had done everything that was asked of me at school and had come home. If she needed me, I'd be upstairs in the playroom.

I am getting this story second-hand from my mother. Since I don't remember any of it, I've had to piece together an explanation. It seems that I did not comprehend I was expected to remain in school *the whole day*. Why would I? No one specifically *said* I had to stay put. When I finished my work, I left through the back door of the classroom and walked home. This was not an act of rebellion. I liked school well enough. I was just done early. It never occurred to me to sit still and await further instructions.

My mother walked me back to school and surrendered me to the custody of Mrs. Zachariades, who presumably gave me more work to do, enough to keep me occupied until the end of the day. That I don't remember any of this is the most crucial element of the story. My mother and my teacher managed to find a solution, sufficiently non-traumatic, that it sank without a trace. I must not have been punished or sent to the principal's office, because I would definitely remember that. The question is why wasn't I punished—you saw what happened to Mark Grabel. How did I get off so easy? How did I escape the classroom without Mrs. Z capturing me? How does a sharp-eyed martinet like her lose track of a six-year-old?

I've come to believe that she just let me go. She knew I knew the way home. I had walked the four blocks from my home to school each morning, and I could walk the same route back. It was a small town, where nothing bad happened. She figured I'd be safe, and the upside of letting me go outweighed the downside. The upside was my peaceful return a half-hour later and my continuing education.

Of course, I have no idea what Mrs. Zachariades was actually thinking. I am working with a few superficial facts and building a story from there. My own emotional imprint, springing from memory, is the thing that persuades me Mrs. Zachariades was a genius. She could be no less than that because of what she gave me—a life of words. The version of Mrs. Zachariades, who resides in my memory, is a person who saw deeply into the complexities of my forming self. She knew what the six-year-old version of me needed. Excessive force would do more harm than good. A wandering child has a restless mind to match. The only way to get me to remain at a desk was to allow me to find my own way there. And then give me a reason to stay.

**S**o, Mrs. Zachariades planted a hook in my soul that tethered me to an altogether new reality. With that one word on the chalkboard, "LOOK", she transformed me from a person who does not read into a person who does read. I am grateful for a lifetime of reading. This skill has given me an education, a career, and even more important, it placed me in a cherished community of fellow readers, the best friends

a girl can have. For example, if you stood over my friend Susan with a serrated saw blade and told her she would have to lose her ability to read or lose her left foot, she would think about it for a half-second, and then say, "Take the foot." Then she would add, "While you're at it, take the right foot, too. With the money I save on shoes, I can buy more books." And Susan loves shoes. In this matter, Susan and I are completely aligned. Impossible for us to contemplate a life without reading.

I'd never deny the necessity of learning to read. Aside from the pleasures afforded by novels, reading is a basic survival skill. It was this ardent faith in reading that prompted me to volunteer to teach adult literacy classes, where I performed an imitation of Mrs. Zachariades, minus the threats. Those adult students would be the first to tell me how fortunate I am that I learned to read when I did. Still, I'd be less than thorough if I didn't contemplate what was lost, when I gained the magical ability to read at age six. I can't help it. I was the kid who learned the story of Helen Keller and then walked around the house with eyes closed and arms extended, feeling my way in the dark, to experience what it was like to be sightless. Might there be another way of looking? My restless mind goes there.

Before I learned to read, I lived like a dog. Or so I imagine a life free of the limits imposed with adult understanding, and instead colored by a stream of supple, diffuse impressions that flowed over me, each new and utterly vibrant. A life free of structure or expectations or any sense of consequence, guided only by own spontaneous and intrinsic nature. When I saw a door, I walked out because I felt like leaving, and the outdoors intrigued me. When it rained, I waited on the porch until my mother let me indoors. I knew it was time to eat when my stomach felt hungry. I lived by sight and sound and smell. The leafy maples rattling in the wind overhead on Winchester Avenue between home and school. The morning sun piercing my eyes. The juniper shrubs offering berries, which if I pressed my fingernail into one and held it to my nose, offered a quick green scent of something with no name that pleased me for reasons I could not explain.

I could speak at age six, of course, but words at that point were sounds in the air, not written. Meaning attached to the words loosely because they were not inscribed. The written word gives permanence. The spoken word is ephemeral and webby, leaving room for interpretation, poetry, and misunderstanding. Before I learned to read, I had mixed up the words "present" and "absent." I could recognize the sounds of the words, vaguely knew what they were for, but their precise meanings eluded me. The result of this mix-up was that when my teacher took attendance in the morning and called out

my name, I raised my hand and said, "Absent." Not being a smartass, although my teacher really enjoyed it. I was just confused. It was only years later in my adulthood that I could hear something emerging from my confusion that was truer than correct and signaled my approach to education.

When the day came that Mrs. Zachariades taught me to read, she ushered me into a realm of symbols where each thing is represented by graphic signs inscribed on paper with a pen or a pencil. Things are never themselves again once you learn to read. The mind trained to operate by symbols treats the pencil marks as real instead of the thing itself. Learning to read separated me from pure existence into a habit of describing existence. I almost can't remember the life I led before I could read.

Even though I'm not sure it's possible to miss something you almost can't remember, I do miss that time before I could read. Like the dark side of the moon, I know the location of my original pre-reading self. That version of me, age six, has been folded into the woman who reads, saturated with symbols, gripped with a graphomania made normal with positive reinforcement. Social. Academic. Everything everywhere tells me it's better to read and write. I'm not making an argument against these skills, just expressing my curiosity for the person I was before I had them. Somewhere that vibrant, spontaneous non-reading girl still exists. I wish I could ask her, "What is it like? Just to live?"

I long for that kid who followed her nose out the door. She understood truths through her body that I am in danger of forgetting. I suspect there is an entire realm of immediate reality that rests below the symbol-loving mind's ability to grasp. What I lost was my innocent knowledge of each thing strictly as itself. What I gained is a mind trained to see the connectedness of all things. A sense of history. The fabric of life unfolding. Past and future. And finally, how things mean something. That's what symbolic thinking gives a person, the language to extract a summary statement on what I see, while simultaneously placing me at a remove from my own instincts.

If I could choose, I'd ask for that young part of my brain to come back to the surface and run things for a while, the part that looks at the pink morning sky and doesn't form the words "pink morning sky." And instead simply ... See? I can't even do it, right here, right now. The words for talking about not reading do not exist. I am nostalgic for a return to a state that would place me in silence. Empty of symbols, but full of something unnamable. If I get there, I won't be able to tell you about it. Wish me well.

At times, when I reach for her, that six-year-old girl, to see if she is available, a dim sense of her reaches me. I'll never cleanse my

mind of its symbol reading, but I believe that an echo of the child's innocence rises up through the brain's work. How else to see the making of a mind? That original layer helped to build this present tower of rational structure. I reach for her again and again and hope she still likes me enough to show up. Or trusts me enough. I imagine that I am holding her hand when I sit at my desk. She is near and silent.

Some credit for making me a confirmed reader must also go to my teacher's collaborator in this crime, my mother, who followed up on Mrs. Zachariades's lesson by feeding me with a steady stream of books. *Anne of Green Gables*, *Jane Eyre*, Nancy Drew Mysteries, *Harriet the Spy*, and much more. Then my mother handed me my first library card. I could get as many books as I wanted, any time. I didn't have to wait for Christmas or my birthday. My mother recognized a fellow junky, and I think she enjoyed seeing me gorge on this feast. Ravenous reading was the appetite my mother and I shared, one of the few things we could agree on.

Lately, as my mother approaches her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, the feast of words that she carried around in her head has diminished to a few remaining crumbs. When asked to sign her name, she makes meaningless scratches, which is particularly galling to see from a woman who's precise, rounded-to-perfection penmanship had been the pride of the nuns at the Marymount School for Girls. When she goes to sleep each night, I imagine that words are leaking out of her ear onto the pillow. Each day she wakes up with less language. She tries to tell me things, but she's throwing word salad now, and it's not much to dine on. I listen and hold her hand. That seems to calm her anxiety about not being able to form a sentence. We return to communicating in a way that we remember from fifty years ago when she took me by the hand and walked me back to Mrs. Z's classroom. Explaining with words would not have convinced me to cooperate, but handholding, palm to palm, her skin on my skin, like two soft animals—this touch from my mother brought me, docile at last, back to reading.

Now I hold her hand and place my other hand on her forehead, which settles her trembling. Her eyes close with relief at my touch to her brow that seems to anchor the swirling dislocated reality in her mind, while the nurse gives her a sponge bath in bed. I contemplate my mother's belly, breasts, and thighs and think: Here is the animal that produced the animal that is me. We'll always have that. I owe the physical fact of my existence to this flesh that launched me, big brain and all. Nearly wordless, I struggle to comprehend what remains, as her exquisite brain dissolves before my eyes.

Since she broke her hip, my mother has been confined to the

progressive care floor of the assisted living facility where she and my dad have an apartment. When I walk to her room, the passing scenery is like a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Women in wheelchairs line the hallway, their faces vacant, staring, some are convulsively scratching, soiled, and drooling. The nurses move them around like packages on a loading dock. No one talks to them or treats them like sentient people. My mother is not quite as bad off as the other residents of this floor. She will occasionally make a pronouncement that sets me back on my heels.

During lunch, my mother is spooning pink ice cream into her mouth. We have been listening to a woman in the hallway weep continuously for half an hour. No one does anything about it. The consensus by the nursing staff seems to be that when a resident needs to make wailing noises for a time, the best practice is to let it happen. Since the patient cannot be reached by the usual means of logical communication, there is nothing to be gained by offering comforting words.

My mother pauses with her spoon halfway to her mouth. "Is that a cat or a child?" she asks of the wailing sound coming from the hallway.

"Good question," I answer.

Most of what she says is incomprehensible, yet I get the sense that as her brain gradually shuts itself down, it is sending out urgent, eleventh-hour messages, nearly strangled by the effort to make meaning. Every so often, she utters something perfectly on target. I take these utterances as a bolt from the dark side of the moon—made more potent by their mysterious origins. I read my mother like tea leaves now. Something is there, struggling to speak.

Whenever I visit my parents, I send an email to my father with my flight information, so they know when to expect me. They both like to have these details, since it gives them a fixed target to arrange their day. A few days before I'm scheduled to arrive, I get on the phone with my dad, who says he never got the email. My mother is shouting in the background. "Tell her she has to send us the information!" I can hear her anxiety mounting, the possibility that she might not have been informed of the exact time my plane lands.

"Yes, she will send it!" my father says loudly over his shoulder to my mother, who again demands to be informed of my arrival.

"But we don't know when she's coming," comes through her muffled voice.

"I'll put it in another email right now," I yell into the phone, at her, through my father.

A three-way round of repetitive, overlapping shouts ensues, the conversational snake pit that has become standard for phone calls



with my parents. Finally, my father puts my mother on the phone. She will not be mollified until she gives me the message herself.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Assume we know nothing. Write it all down."

"Okay, mom."

"Write it and then send it to us."

"Yes, I will do that." I am a good and dutiful daughter, finally.

When Mrs. Zachariades wrote the word, "Look," on the chalkboard, she used the imperative verb form in which the "you" is silent or implied. She was not just teaching me how to understand symbols; she was also giving me an order. Well, I'm looking, Mrs. Z., really I am. Look at me, looking. I look all the time. I'm looking at you, right now—the "you" that is implied in my thoughts, the teacher that resides in my memory, forever fixed in the coils of my brain. You exhort me to "Look." You demand that I use my eyes and mind together and see as much as I can. You didn't fully explicate the next part, but it was implied in your imperative verb form, the natural next step: Write it all down. Use this skill to ensnare the essential thing before it slips outside your peripheral vision. Preserve something meaningful with the symbols I gave you.

Yet she never did tell me what meaning means. Or how these symbols make a difference when blood flows onto the floor. Or when my mother lies in a soiled nursing home bed. You see why I miss the old way? It was not just richer in experience but simpler, too, less pressure to *mean something*. But there is no going back. Mrs. Zachariades closed the door on my childhood with all its simplicity and immediacy.

Dear Teacher, you ruined me and made me in the same moment. You set me loose on the world with this instruction. Now I am looking all the time, can't stop myself, and writing it down. See what I've become? I hope you're happy.