

2013

Diagnosing Kyle Grenshaw

Chris Boss

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boss, Chris (2013) "Diagnosing Kyle Grenshaw," *The Messenger*: Vol. 2013: Iss. 1, Article 33.
Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger/vol2013/iss1/33>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Messenger* by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Diagnosing Kyle Grenshaw // Chris Boss

Kyle Grenshaw walked three city blocks to his middle school on 5th Avenue. The city authorities had kept the Mishnor St. sidewalk partitioned ever since they erected the big scaffold. They claimed they did it to renovate the battered museum façade, but recently they had abandoned even the pretense of construction; the museum went under. Now that the square bases of the traffic cones had melted into the avenue blacktop, the city folk figured they might as well acknowledge it as part of the infrastructure.

Kyle crossed over at Bayard Street, the dark, claustrophobic corridor where alleyway hooligans bartered. A policeman had once prevented Kyle from patronizing Locust's Tabernacle Delicatessen, which the officer said ought to be distinguished from a place to buy kosher meats. He claimed his warning was ordinance. The shifty folk on the opposite sidewalk, where Kyle crossed over to, at least kept their shiftlessness open. Kyle then crossed back to the other sidewalk and took the route directly to school. But, sometimes, he idled on the wrong side of 5th Avenue through several traffic light cycles in hopes that the eighth graders would clear from PS 56's stoop. Sometimes they cleared out, often they didn't. They had never accosted him.

"Kyle Grenshaw," said Mr. Carry, during History. "Perk up, buddy." Kyle had difficulty sitting upright because of his back. "That a boy, Kyle," said Mr. Carry. "Now you're talking."

Mr. Carry assigned Lilly as Kyle's partner for an in-class assignment. They were to answer questions on the Civil War and write a practice introductory paragraph and thesis. Mr. Carry said that at this point in the unit, the thesis should address a critical and complex issue. "And no copying directly from the textbook, either," said Mr. Carry. "I want your own words."

He wanted their own words, and Lilly would not appreciate that, thought Kyle, because the doctors said his ADD prevented him from 'contributing meaningfully to class discussion,' which the teachers had often accused him of failing to do, at least until they learned he had ADD. ADD meant he was stupid (was Kyle's analysis), and because he was stupid he didn't know if he was stupid for believing that teachers treated him differently upon learning he had ADD, or if they were stupid for believing he wouldn't recognize

their roundabout method of criticizing him with praise. ADD also meant Lilly would roll her eyes up in the front of the room, when Mr. Carry paired her with him, and that she would have to finish all the work herself, because she was the smartest in the class and he was the dumbest. If he said the Civil War started because slavery was bad, and the north didn't want to let the south treat the slaves bad, she would pretend to write it down but she would really write down something too smart for him to understand.

"Hey," said Lilly.

"Hi," said Kyle.

"We have to answer these questions," said Lilly.

"Okay."

"And then write a thesis."

"Oh." Maybe she thought he was dumb for not knowing what a thesis was.

Kyle watched as Lilly gradually centered the paper on her side of the desk. They had conjoined their desks. Lilly had initially put the paper on her desk to avoid the crack between the desks, but still close to the middle.

After answering a few questions, she asked, "Do you know the answer to this one?"

Which army benefitted more from familiarity with local terrain? She looked to him, waiting.

"Um," he said, "nnn...North?"

"Remember they fought in the south for most of the war."

"South," he said.

"Right," she said. "The Confederate Army."

Kyle sat immediately to Lilly's left in first period English; in fourth period math, he sat to her right; period six Spanish he did the same. Kyle enjoyed the arrangement, especially days when he managed to exchange a few words with her. And Kyle often wished she would show a taste for the arrangement as well. On the first day of class, she had said, "My right-hand man." Kyle ruminated his brain frantically for a response to the effect that he was also her left-hand man for one class in four, and her two-behind-hand man during History. All he could think to say, though, was, "And my butt-hand man...", but he cut himself off mid-sentence. He clenched his fists in profound embarrassment for the remain-

der of the period, inwardly pleading she hadn't heard the remark.

The day after the Civil War assignment, Ms. Hanover from English paired Lilly with Kyle, even though she never did that before. Usually she paired Landon with Kyle and Lilly with Nick. Nick was the other smartest kid in the class. Landon was sort of smart but sort of dumb, so he couldn't answer all the questions like Lilly could. Kyle wished Landon was the third smartest in the class, because then he could answer all the questions and Kyle could listen in on Lilly's conversation with Nick. He could make sure that Nick didn't say anything that made Lilly laugh. When Nick did make Lilly laugh, usually Kyle cried at night.

When Lilly dragged her desk by Kyle's, Kyle said, "Left-hand man this time." Lilly laughed. Kyle smiled.

The urge mounted in him approach Lilly, the following day in math, and say, 'Right-hand man this time.' He feared doing it, though, because he feared over-doing it, and he had considered that maybe he had gotten lucky the previous day, when Lilly laughed, since she had never laughed at his jokes before. He clenched his fists when he remembered that jokes had questions and funny answers, and 'left-hand man this time' didn't count as a joke, so actually he had never told her a joke before, and she never laughed at him before yesterday, when he told a non-joke, throwing the prospect into uncertainty. He was too nervous to say anything to her when the moment arrived.

Landon was being not smart enough the next time Ms. Hanover paired Kyle with him, which prevented Kyle from listening to Nick in case Nick told a joke and Lilly laughed. Landon refused to answer the first worksheet question because he didn't know the answer. Kyle told him to skip it but Landon said he didn't know the answer to the second one either, or the third one, because he hadn't read the chapter. Kyle had read the chapter but for the class's purposes he hadn't, because, reading the questions, he found he knew none of the answers. He thought that that might be a good thing because maybe he could skip the questions and listen to Nick and Lilly, but it might be a bad thing because maybe Ms. Hanover would catch him and Landon staring into the distance while everyone else answered the questions, and maybe Ms. Hanover would yell at them or tell them to focus, and

Kyle didn't want Lilly to know he wasn't focusing. Whenever Kyle worked with Lilly, he pretended to focus on the questions when really he focused on looking like he wasn't focusing on Lilly's hand running across the page, and since Lilly thought he usually focused and was just ADD dumb, he didn't want Lilly to know he wasn't focusing.

He had to stop focusing for a moment when Lilly laughed. He clenched his fists because he hadn't heard what Nick had said to make her laugh. They were talking about something about the book, maybe, but James couldn't hear because Ms. Hanover started looking his direction and he had to remain focused on answering the questions.

The narrow shadow of a corridor the city called Bayard Street bustled, at times, with shifty folk conducting business behind the alleyway dumpsters. They wore pallid green hoodies, and when the men with black hoodies mingled there, there was trouble. Kyle kept his head down when he took Bayard Street home afternoons, the time of day when the hooded men grew irascible, if they stirred at all. They needed only the one time to glare in his direction, and he got the message to keep his head down.

Transfixed as he was by the image of Lilly's smile, when she laughed with Nick, Kyle forgot to tread discreetly through the Bayard Street corridor. He clenched his fists angrily and emphasized his gait, focusing not two feet ahead of him, whereupon he converged with a black hoody. The black hoody motioned to his hip and lifted the hem of his sweatshirt over his waistline, exposing a pistol grip. He then cocked his head toward the corridor exit.

Flu season ravaged PS 56's student body. Lilly, Kyle knew from first period, counted among the students affected. Only six students showed up to Mr. Carry's history class.

Mr. Carry stayed the curriculum by assigning a group-work worksheet, but instructing the students to work individually. He

made light of the fact that the majority of the class would have to catch up on their own time, a prospect which, in its strange fashion, made Kyle tremor. And when the other students started the assignment, Kyle sat sulking in his little cubic void. Mr. Carry failed to interrupt his stupor despite repeated attempts. He asked Kyle to remain after class.

“What’s been going on, Kyle?” he asked. “You coming down with the flu?”

“No,” he said.

“You’ve been listless these past few days. Sure you’re alright?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you try giving your classmates a hand sometimes, with the questions? They could use your help.”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know why you don’t give them a hand,” asked Mr. Carry, “or you don’t know the answers to the questions?”

“I don’t know!” Kyle replied.

“Alright,” he said. “Just see what you can do. You have been doing the readings, right?”

“Yes.”

“Great,” he said, “then I’m sure you can give some of your classmates a hand.”

“I might not get them right because I read ahead and I don’t want to give an answer about a section we haven’t read yet.”

“Well that’s great, Kyle! You can clue in some of your classmates who haven’t done the readings at all.”

Kyle didn’t respond.

“What do you say?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you come to the history club meeting, next Tuesday? It’s just me a few other students, all interested in history. They read ahead in the book, just like you.”

“I already read at home,” Kyle said.

“Yeah, but you don’t get to engage in our great discussions. Why don’t you try it, just once? We’d love to have you.”

“I have to go home after school,” said Kyle.

“I’ll take that as a yes?”

“No!”

The following day, under threat of fury, Kyle's mother forced Kyle, scolding at 101.9, to attend school. He had difficulty retaining consciousness in the musty Bayard Street corridor, and over by the Fifth Avenue crosswalk. In his torpor he nearly collided with a taxi, though nobody seemed to notice.

Nor did his teachers acknowledge his lethargy in class, his vacillating between dark stages of semi-consciousness, marked by wilting eyelids and dreadful cranial throbbing. Ms. Hanover, in observance of the semester shift, assigned the students new seats. Only through some remote flicker of consciousness did Kyle acknowledge the distance placed between him and Lilly. He came eventually to dread English, the class where Lilly sat a continent away.

“They bathed in constellations,” read Ms. Hanover, one day, “presiding, as the progeny of hard-won opulence did, over the cityscape: over the dew which touched on the urban canopies on cool mornings, over the arms of evolvment and its deepest roots, once tendrils, and they knew the name a thing so beautiful. They called it life, unending.” She put the book down. “Isn't that exquisite?”

Kyle thought so. And he cried.