

Selection from RIVERS RISE, Work In Progress, by Robert J. Hanks, Jr.

Clatter. Dr. Myrmidon inadvertently empties her medium-sized designer purse onto a table at the front of the room. Cellphone. Sunglasses. Prescription bottle. Cigarettes. Keys. Dayquil and Nyquil tablets. Flask. Tissues. Lipstick. Checkbook. Chicklets. Flash drive. And a green plastic tampon case.

She shovels her things back into her purse. Red tints her cheeks. But that's not all I notice about her face. Black bags hang around her eyes. A yellow cast taints her white complexion.

She bags up everything except for the flash drive. That she inserts into Mr. Gekkehuis's laptop. Above us, the projector's fan hums. She stands, looking at us with dead eyes. Her hands hang at her sides, trembling.

Mr. Gekkehuis moves to the podium. "Alright, settle down students. Thank you. We've been talking about the rise of public education in America. A few weeks ago, Dr. Rivers suggested to me that we bring in a real education expert. Someone who has been part of the changing vista of United States education. Today we welcome Dr. Alexandra Myrmidon, Headmistress of River's Bend's Knobbler's Knob Charter School, to Hannah High School."

Tepid applause.

"Am I right, Dr. Myrmidon, that this past August, fifty-four Hannah students transferred to Knobbler's Knob?"

"That is correct, Burt."

"Ten percent of our students left our district. Accompanied by their state aid. Food for thought. "Class, Dr. Myrmidon."

Tepid applause.

Gekkehuis doesn't seem too pleased about hosting his guest speaker. Probably union. Another teacher being volen-told to do something. Is Dr. Rivers really like that?

Myrmidon's eyes flash. A toothy bright-white smile blooms across the bottom half of her face.

"Thank you, Hannah students! What a pleasure! So glad to be with you today! Such an honor. How are you all?" She takes a swig from a Poland Springs clear plastic water bottle. "I'm so pleased to meet every one of you today. Name of the education game in 2016. *Individualization*. Down to brass tacks. What do you like about Hannah Area School District?"

Students shout out responses. Myrmidon lists them on the Smartboard. Sports. Lunch. Pep rallies. Mr. Murray. Summer. Welding class. FFA. Band.

"Okay, friends. Now. School procedures you could do without?"

Student tardies. Number of mandatory credits. Bells. Can't leave the building for lunch. No smoker's area. Tests. Papers. Reading. Math. Boring teachers. Detention. Assemblies. Parking passes. Gym. No eating in classrooms. Insubordination ...

Many hands still raised.

"I'll stop, but, as y'all saw, there are plenty other concerns. Why must school be like that? Not a rhetorical question. For one, your method of schooling isn't designed for you. It was created over a hundred years ago by people very different from us. School's goal back then was to prepare people for factory jobs. So. Okay. Whose mom or dad works in a factory? Show of hands?"

None.

"So, how really useful to us are 1916 schools?"

A few chortles. Students murmur. People turn in their seats.

Sally Bunch, whose mother teaches fifth grade at Hannah's Eastern Hemlock Elementary, raises her hand.

"My older brother Tommy went to Knobbler's Knob for high school. He didn't do one blessed thing the whole four years. No homework, no reading, no writing, no math. He just went in, played computer solitaire, went home."

"Well. Of course it's not like that." She closes her eyes, and regroups. "Knobbler's Knob students self-pace. We don't take students and then jam them into little sardine cans. At Knobbler's, we believe every student should follow his or her own unique path."

Carol Lindbergh's hand shoots up and waves like a flag in a stiff wind. "In defense of Knobbler's, my eighth-grade sister at Hannah Middle School brags she hasn't done a darned thing since second grade."

"Yes," croaks out Mr. Gekkehuis. "Some of my students will tell you they've done absolutely nothing in my class. Usually, they're telling the truth. However, that doesn't mean nothing was *assigned*."

"What's your prom like?"

"Don't offer one. Yet," Dr. Myrmidon says. "For dancing, you still have to go to Arthur Murray Dance Studio."

Gekkehuis laughs out loud. No one else does. Who's Arthur Murray?

"Is your cafeteria food good?"

"At the moment, we're too small to provide lunch. All our students brown-bag it. We do have a number of vending machines, though. Everything, ice cream bars to protein drinks. How's the food here at Hannah?"

Now everyone including Gekkehuis roars.

An oldie song plays. Madonna sings "Material Girl." Half the class checks their phones. But it's Myrmidon's. She opens her purse and pulls out her iPhone. She looks down at her screen. The slight color in her face evaporates. Still looking at the phone, her face falls, like she just read her dog died.

The room goes silent. I wait for her to burst into tears. She stands there, her eyes fixed on the top of the table.

Ear-splitting buzzing. Intense white Morse Code flashes.

Fire drill.

Again I feel like someone flushed the toilet, and we, like pieces of poop, swirl out the classroom door. Someone behind me runs into me. I step on the back of the shoe of the boy in front of me, causing his cloth back of his shoe to fold under his heel. Stop. Shuffle. Bang into someone's arm. Wait. Get shoved. Break forward. Walk. Stop. Repeat.

"One of the principal's surprise drills." The guy in front of me with the bad shoe looks back at me. "Right, Kelsey?"

I don't know this guy.

"No idea," I yell over the incessant buzzing. "Had they scheduled it, the Hannah rumor mill would have blabbed it and posted it."

... As I walk between the cars towards the football field, the town fire siren begins its weeee-woooo weeee-woooo dirge. Dr. Rivers and Dr. Myrmidon shoo students off the parking lot and onto the field.

Low-pitched sirens go higher, get louder. Fire trucks, on their way.

... "Kelsey Webb?"

A tap on my shoulder. I turn towards it.

Dr. Myrmidon. Standing next to me, on my right. Holding her stilettos in her right hand. Shorter than me now. She stands in the beige grass, nothing on her feet but pantyhose. The breeze has inflated her already big black hairdo.

“Thanks for coming here today and making your presentation, Dr. Myrmidon.”

“Thank you. Between you and me, I thought I sucked. Then there’s the fire drill ... I was looking for you. You covered my talk today for the school paper, am I right? Dr. Rivers told me a ginger with braids, wearing overalls.”

“That’s me.”

“Awesome. Chilly out here.” She pulls her blazer tight. “Mr. Dugal was your English teacher?”

The wind blows cold in my face.

“Taught me everything I know about student journalism, the past three years.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Kelsey. Very sorry. Dr. Rivers, Mr. Dugal, a few other Hannah teachers, and some others, including Chief Shikellamy, all palled around together. Ever since I was hired at Knobbler’s Knob and moved to River’s Bend. Though I’ve known Drake Rivers off and on for years. Long story. Anyway. Listen. May I have your email address? In case I think of something that needs to be in your article.”

“Sure. Can I—may I—type it into your phone? Don’t have anything to write with, or on. They tell us to just leave everything behind and just get out of the building.”

“Please.” She hands me her iPhone. As she passes it to me, the school bell rings, signaling the end of the fire drill ...

“Oh—not your school email, Kelsey. If you don’t mind. Give me your private email.”

“Okey dokey.”

“In case I have something unflattering to say about the district. Wouldn’t want a record on the school’s server.” She smiles her sickly grin as I thumb in my information.

She’s shaking. Shivering? Or still trembling?

“All done. I also put in my phone number. Email or text me. Doesn’t matter.” I hand her phone back.

“You also covered Chief Shikellamy’s visit last fall.”

“You saw the article on that?”

“Yes. Seen him around lately? With Dr. Rivers? Or in River’s Bend, preparing things for the resettlement?”

“No. You?”

“No.” She rubs her left eye with the knuckle of her index finger. “Not since before Thanksgiving.”

The breeze has all but quit. Now it’s just still and cold.

“Kelsey, it’s been very, very good meeting you.” A phlegmatic shake. Though long-lasting. Myrmidon releases my hand, and smiles a pustular grin at me. “Enjoy the rest of your day, Kelsey Webb. Go in now and warm up. Adieu.”

I watch her cross the parking lot, stop on the sidewalk, slip on her stilettos, put on her sun glasses, and reenter the school.