

THE FULLNESS OF A MOMENT - Jackie Winfield

Today, for just a moment, I was ten years old. I hadn't done my homework. It was art homework. We had drawn floating bubbles and were expected to complete the design using our knowledge of colour. I hadn't done my homework. I don't know why. Maybe I didn't like the project very much. Maybe I had too much other homework to do. Maybe I was distracted by an activity more interesting or satisfying. Maybe I was too tired. Maybe I forgot. Or something had happened ...

We had art class with Mr Bransom. Howard Bransom. I know his name is Howard because he's also the head of Howard House, the yellow house. Howard House is named after John Howard, an educator and prison reformer. I'm in Stewart House because my older brother was put in Stewart when he came to the school three years before me. Mr Bransom is in his thirties with longish hair and broad sideburns. He is different to the other teachers. He smokes a pipe and puts his feet up on the desk while he's teaching us. Lots of the girls seem to like him and I think he flirts with them a little bit, especially if they're in Howard House. I'm sitting in the art room, towards the far left corner. There are easels, art materials and unfinished paintings around the room. All the desks, about thirty I would think, are placed in a horseshoe facing Mr Bransom's desk and the chalkboard. Hanging next to the board is a large wooden ruler with a geometry tool - a protractor, I think - attached to the end. It's useful for drawing straight lines and measuring angles on the chalkboard. I suppose Mr Bransom uses it for his technical drawing classes.

Mr Bransom wants to know whether we all completed our homework. My unfinished work lies on the desk in front of me. Somehow, Mr Bransom discovers that I have not done my homework. Maybe he asked me and I told him. Maybe he saw for himself. I don't know. He asks me why I haven't done my homework. Why? Why? I don't know the answer to the question. Why didn't I do my homework? I usually do my homework. I like school. I like art. I think I even like Mr Bransom. Why didn't I do my homework? I think he's asking me again. Silence. I have to give an answer but I don't know what to say. I think there's a half-smile on his face between those thick, hairy sideburns. Maybe this is just a joke or a bit of teasing. I'm sorry I haven't done my homework. Perhaps he'll let it go.

The question comes again. Why didn't I do my homework? I'm not sure if it's Mr Bransom's voice or my own that I can hear. But I can't speak. There's a hard object stuck in my throat and I'm struggling to breathe. The silence is waiting for me to fill it with something, something which will appease Mr Bransom so we can carry on with our art lesson. A thin voice manages to escape from my throat, "I didn't have the right colours." Mr Bransom is looking at me. I'm sure some of my classmates are looking too, wondering if this explanation will save me. Perhaps now, Mr Bransom will laugh and it will be over. But he doesn't look like he's about to laugh. "I couldn't finish my work because I didn't have the right colours," I blurt out as the hard object in my throat threatens to choke me. It's Mr Bransom's turn. What will he say? What will he do? I think the half-smile is still there but he isn't satisfied. He wants me to come to his desk, bend

over and be walloped by the large wooden chalkboard ruler with the protractor on the end. I keep looking at my picture of the bubbles – the unfinished picture - and all there is towards the top of the page is a large purple bubble. There are other bubbles in the picture. I can't see them but I'm aware of their presence. I can see only the large purple bubble. And Mr Bransom's large wooden chalkboard ruler with the protractor on the end. The bubble and the ruler are the only two things I can see in that room despite the other presences. My classmates. They form a blur, and I suspect, that many of them have their eyes down in sympathy with me or my shame. Mr Bransom is waiting. Maybe he's waiting for a better answer. I don't have one. "I didn't have the right colours," I repeat. Maybe if I say it enough times, it'll become a more acceptable explanation. Maybe he'll tell me it's OK, that I can do the work for next week and that he's just been joking with me. But he's asking me again to come to the front and to bend over.

I can't move. If I move, all will be lost. I know that if I go to the front of the classroom, I will die. I think the only way I'll go there is if I'm dragged from my chair by Mr Bransom. I feel my eyes darting, meeting no one's eye except the eye of the purple bubble. My throat has almost closed. I can barely breathe. How many times must I say it? "I didn't have the right colours. I couldn't finish my picture because I didn't have the right colours." Please let the joke be over. I don't know what to do. But I can't go to the desk, bend over and be walloped by the large wooden chalkboard ruler with the protractor on the end.

And suddenly, Mr Bransom seems to change his mind. Perhaps, he didn't really want me to come to the front of the class and bend over. Perhaps, he just wanted to teach me a lesson, to give me a fright so that I would do my homework. Perhaps, it was just a little joke. But nobody is laughing. There is something different in the air and every one of us in the room has breathed in its foulness. But he has let me go. I am safe again.

Today, for just a moment, I was ten years old, despite the fact that I was born almost forty years ago. I heard a woman's story of pain and fear and violation and it felt so familiar. My throat constricted so much that it hurt as though there was a hard object stuck in it. I struggled to breathe. My eyes were stinging and I hung my head in shame. I had no words. Past and present merged together. Time and space ceased to exist. I was aware of Mr Bransom and a class of my peers. I was aware of having not done my homework. And through my tears, all I could see was the large wooden chalkboard ruler with the protractor on the end and the purple bubble floating towards the top of the page.