A Juvenile Economy

Theo’s specialty was box ball, but he also enjoyed playing tag, pig, and king of the hill, especially king of the hill. The slides faced away from the shady part of the recess yard where the recess aids lounged, so the children couldn’t be seen roughhousing, and it was rough. Students would climb up the row of slides in an attempt to dethrone the king who sat at the top, who, nine times out of ten, then smote the would be usurper with a sketcher to the face. It was brutal, but the cuts and scrapes, all the black and blue bruises were worth it because of the chance to sit at the top, to look down upon all of the playground and proclaim thyself monarch. As he walked into school towards his classroom, Theo decided recess taught him more valuable lessons than math or science ever could.

Once the entire class was present and accounted for, except for Irina Slavobama who was out with pink-eye, they went about their morning routine: each student ordering their lunch of the day, attending morning meeting on the carpet, and slogging through 15 minutes of private reading time. Each student had a nook or cranny where they would be most comfortable analyzing a copy of Judy B. Jones or Warrior Cats. Max took the rocking chair while Michelle preferred a desk. Carlos and Yvette were actually forced to sit at their desks because they kept talking to each other over the teacher while trying to come to a fair agreement over trading silly bands. Theo’s absolute favorite spot was his cubby; it felt secure and allowed him to be alone with his thoughts. The cubby was clean save for a blue, rubber bracelet that was shaped in the outline of a dog, Detesting clutter, he slid it onto his wrist. He couldn’t enjoy pretending to read while surrounded by garbage.

Reading time was over with the announcement of a surprise spelling test that was supposed to take place two days after today. Not a single student refrained from airing their woes with these guerilla academics, but Mrs. Crabapple reasoned that good students study before the day of the test, and she presumed they were good students so of course they had learned how to spell words like “Affluent” and “Indigent”. The student groaned and marched back to their desks.

Theo sat down and took out a list, but was shocked to find that he had no pencil. He wanted nothing to do with that awful, awful teacher, so he couldn’t ask her to borrow a pencil. His desk was on the end of the last of the last row so Theo turned to his sole neighbor, Cassidy, and said in a very audible whisper,

“A 1000 pardons Mada’am, but might I inquire for a utensil with which to write?” His request was met with silence, but he knew she heard him, it was a very loud whisper. The teacher had begun passing out tests, and Theo was growing desperate, so he swallowed his pride and asked again.

“A 1o0o pArd0nS mAdA’am, BuT mAY i InqUirE fOR a UTenSiL WitH wHicH t0 wRItE?!” This time she turned to Theo and returning the same loud whisper said,

“A 1000 pardons is not nearly enough to forgive the most ungentlemanly manner in which you accosted me. Even if you showed proper decorum in making your plea, I doubt you could afford the utensils with which I write for they are worth more than that pea rattling around in your skull. See how they glimmer in the light and how each of the six plungers produces its own ink cartridge of varying color. Now look upon the rags that you adorn yourself with and tell me if you think you can afford my wares.”

He didn’t understand it. This situation was life or death, if Cassidy didn’t help him out, Theo would either have to turn in a blank test or ask the teacher for a pencil. The latter would result in becoming a social outcast because of his siding with the enemy, while the former would be the death of his academics. In these dire circumstances, he couldn’t rely on the milk of human kindness because apparently this wretch was lactose intolerant.

Without any other option, Theo scrounged through his bag looking for something to trade. Nothing but homework sheets and erasers. This was it. With nothing to trade, he was going to fail his test; no, “fail” is too pedestrian. He was going to bomb it so bad his parents will bury him alive. He’d write his will now except he had nothing to trade for a pen, unless…

He slid off the silly band from his wrist, and dropped it on his neighbors desk. She was unimpressed by the ball of rubber in front of her, until it resumed its original dog outline. A look like she had just seen god ran across her face before it resumed its usual smug look. Without a word, she snatched the silly band and dropped and threw the pen at Theo.

That night, in addition to packing lunches and doing homework to prepare for school, a few students looked high and low throughout their homes for silly bands. Having witnessed Cassidy’s willingness to trade her pen for the bracelet, some students sought to make a similar bargain. Cassidy, delighted to expand her menagerie, traded her pens for bracelets in the shapes of all types of animals. Over the next few days, these bargains expanded to encompass more than just pens. Silly bands were traded for erasers and snacks; JI-Won even gave Leon Gregario 7 bands in exchange for letting her copy his answers from the math test. The classroom economy allowed students who never had access to high end items a chance to purchase them and experience a taste of luxury. People were thriving in the new system; however, some students thrived more than others.

On February 8th, after a particular ill-prepared lunch of cardboard like pizza and chocolate milk, Theo was in dire need of a trip to the bathroom. After stuffing his hall pass into his pocket, he waddled out the classroom, down the hall, and right before he reached his destination, Theo was stopped by the twin hall monitors Boris and Burt. At 5 foot 4, the brothers towered over everyone in the grade, and they used their combined physical might to make every interaction… unpleasant.

Boris and Burt subjected Theo to the usual routine of making fun of him and checking for his hall pass. After the formalities, Theo stepped forward to enter the bathroom, but was once again blocked off by the twin mountains.

“Gentlemen, please move aside, for I have some very pressing matters to attend to,” Theo said as he tried not to explode.

“Hold on there mate,” said Burt, or was that Boris? Theo had a hard time distinguishing them from each other, and they were so thick he doubted they could either.

“There’s a fee to use the bathroom now, two silly bands per visitation.”

“What?!” Theo nearly exploded, “A fee to use the bathroom? What utter absurdity! What’s next, a fee to breathe the air or tread upon earth? I refuse!” He tried to shove his way through the brothers, but they easily rebuffed his advance.

“That's the way things go now” said one of them. “This bathroom’s for paying students only. Break the rules and we’ll be forced to report you to the principal.” Without any other choice, Theo slid off two silly bands and threw them at the boys.

“Of course the first thought that penetrated either of your thick skulls was that of a scam” Theo said as he brushed passed them. The twins didn’t know how to end a conversation and kept talking during Theo’s preoccupation.

“Wasn’t our idea actually. Jonathan’s paying us 5 silly bands a day to watch guard and alls we have to do is give him all the fee’s of the day.” So many students use the bathroom in a day and basic math would indicate that Boris and Burt were getting the short end of the stick; but considering the fact that they were incapable of basic math, it made sense Jonathan was able to scam them.

From there on out it only got worse, those who had taken advantage of the new economy bent it to their will. Cassidy, who had sold all of her pens for one silly band each, was horrified to find that to buy one back would cost her 20 bands for a simple pencil. She would have been consigned to turn in blank assignments and fail had Theo not returned to her the pen she gave him. The class was divided between the haves and the have-nots

The wringing of silly bands off of the students’ wrists didn’t contain itself to just the classroom. Soon the playground became divided as well. The upper-echelons of the recess yard began charging for the use of the play set, the swings, and the equipment. Anyone who attempted to forgo the fee was either physically repelled by Boris and Burt, or the recess aid was lied to and told the trespasser was breaking school yard rules and would be written up and removed from the playground. It was easy to convince the aids because those richer in silly bands could pay those who have none to corroborate with their lies.

Without funds to access any equipment, almost half the class was consigned to the sandbox. While not awful, spending recess the same way every day soon grew to be monotonous, and the students took to staring longingly at the playset. It was a far cry from its days of students laughing and swinging from monkey bars. Now, the richest students sat atop the slides and looked down upon those able to afford access to the playset. The only game played was a gladiator type ring where students paid poor students silly bands to fight one another for the kings’ amusement, who sat undisturbed atop the slides.

Theo, trying to make the most of things, was digging a hole to bury himself alive in the sand. Standing over a two foot hole that was to be his grave, he felt someone come up behind him and violently pull his arm. The offender, Bradley Broncowitz, tried pulling off the four silly bands Theo had wrapped around his wrists, but in the shock of the attack, Theo pulled his arm away and the silly bands snapped. As the strings of now worthless rubber fell to the ground beneath them, Theo thought he might implode. He had worked hard for those four silly bands and was saving them up so he could play pig during a recess, and now they were gone. He thought he might kill Bradley, Theo ran at him like he was going to, and raised his fist like he was going to; however, before he acted on his desperation, he realized Bradley was desperate too, they all were. Every single person in the sandbox wanted to have fun and play like they used to. There was certainly enough equipment for everyone to be satisfied during recess, yet somehow all of it found itself in the hands of those who took advantage of the system. Theo was still extremely angry, only now that anger was directed towards something else. So instead of beating up a desperate child, he stood up and made a proclamation to the lot of desperate children.

“Brother, sisters, hear me! Why must we grovel in the sand while those who put us here are living like kings! What have they done to earn such wealth? They cheated and coerced honest students who only wanted a chance to succeed in this silly band economy. The silly bands were supposed to enable those who work hard to taste sweet fruits of labor, yet now they only serve to shackle, to bind us to a system that keeps those without silly bands destitute and keeps the rich adorned with endless menageries. Why do we in turn steal and cheat from each other when the robber barons who have bent the economy towards their will profit off of our suffering? I say nay, no more shall we toil to receive crumbs, when we can rise up and take the cake we made. Brothers! Sisters! Comrades in arms, let us storm the playground, to reclaim not only that which we have built, but to reclaim a chance at our future!”

With nothing left to say, Theo began the charge, which soon became a stampede of angry, tired, and empowered students looking to reclaim their lot in life. Boris and Burt, stopped Theo in his tracks when he reached the playground, but they had a harder time rejecting students as more came to aid the revolution, and soon the twin mountains crumbled and fell. When they reached the slides where the richest who set the idea for silly band fees and hoarded immense wealth were, the assault on the system truly began. The first couple students to climb up were rebuffed with kicks from the kings, who held on to the playset for dear life. Yet one after another they were dragged from their high perches from which they saw the world, down to the earth. The bracelets were adorned all the way from their wrists to their shoulders, which made it hard to remove them, so instead they were ripped off, making them useless, even though they had long ago lost their value.