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# the strange odyssey of sammy oliver

by daniel ross goodman

When Sammy Oliver awoke one morning from disturbing dreams, he saw his first-period history class teacher and all twelve other students from his tenth-grade class sitting in his bedroom. His classmates were sitting quietly at their desks, and his teacher was standing in front of a blackboard and lecturing about Napoleon Bonaparte. Sammy, believing he was still sleeping, and assuming that this was yet another disconcerting dream of the kind that had been bothering him of late, rolled his head around to the other side of the pillow and closed his eyes.

“Mr. Oliver.”

Sammy could have sworn he had heard a deep, stern male voice calling his name, but he disregarded it.

“Mr. Oliver.”

There was that voice again. Gravid, clear, and solid, like the sonorous blast of an alto saxophone blowing a C-sharp. It was the voice of Dr. Schneider, his tenth-grade history teacher, a short, stoutly built bug-eyed man with small ears, thick lips, pince-nez glasses, a small, straight, wide-nostril nose, a sallow, anemic complexion, and receding raven-black hair.

“Mr. Oliver, this class won’t wait for you any longer. And quite frankly, even I am starting to lose my patience with you. If you don’t turn your head back around and start paying attention this instant, I will take five points off of the final grade of your next test. Which, I don’t think I need to remind you, is in two weeks—and is also, I don’t think I need to remind you, the midterm, Mr. Oliver.”

Sammy, still groggy from an inadequate night’s sleep, turned his head back around, rubbed his eyes, and wearily wiggled himself into an upright position on his bed. A few of his classmates fidgeted in their seats, twirling their pencils in their fingers; Emily coughed and Jacob sniffled, but an otherwise uncomfortable silence prevailed in the room.

“I am waiting, Mr. Oliver ... I am waiting for your full attention.”

“Uh, um,” Sammy began indolently, trying to say something, forcing the words through his dried throat. “What’s going on here? Why are you all in here?”

“Mr. Oliver,” said Dr. Schneider, his high-browed forehead furrowing demonstrably, “I will not allow you to waste any more of this class’s time. Goodness knows you’ve already wasted enough of it. Now you will sit up and pay attention or you will lose ten points off of the midterm. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Oliver?”

Sammy nodded his head, too tired to do anything else, and gave Dr. Schneider a bleary-eyed look of

umble assent.

“Very good, Mr. Oliver, thank you,” said Dr. Schneider, his solid, steady voice laced with undisguised sarcasm. “I’m grateful to have your permission to continue ... very well, ladies and gentlemen,” continued Dr. Oliver, turning his back to the class and beginning to write something in chalk on the blackboard that was now on the bedroom’s far-side wall, where Sammy’s Michael Jordan posters had been the night before. “Napoleon Bonaparte was born in Corsica in 1769. He was not a member of the aristocracy. During the French Revolution, he fought against the First Coalition and....”

Sammy tried to pay attention to Dr. Schneider’s lecture, but his bedsheets were itching him. He tossed and turned in his bed for a few moments, trying to move himself into a better position, but it was no use. He lunged the rumpled sheets off of his body and sat fully upright in bed, assuming that once he was in a more comfortable position he would be able to concentrate.

“... which led to the Treaty of Campo Formio in 1797, in which France gained control of—um, Mr. Oliver,” said Dr. Schneider, interrupting his lecture and causing all of the students to rotate their heads in Sammy’s direction, curious to see what he had done now to provoke Dr. Schneider’s ire. “I don’t think you are dressed appropriately for class. This school, I need not remind you, has a dress code. If you continue to deliberately violate this school’s dress code, I will deduct three points off of your midterm exam.”

“Oh ...” said Sammy, looking down at himself and realizing that nothing was covering his bare, bony body except a pair of plaid boxer shorts. “Yes, Dr. Schneider.”

Naomi tried to stifle a giggle, Jamie raised her eyebrows in mischievous enjoyment, and Eli unsuccessfully suppressed a gleeful chortle. A few other laughs escaped from the lips of his other classmates before they regained their composure and settled back into docile silence. Sammy, his fair face suddenly turning tomato-red in embarrassment, and his stomach fluttering as if all of those butterflies had made a beeline for his belly and settled inside his intestines, moved quickly to his dresser, where he slipped on a white undershirt, white socks, navy-blue corduroy pants, and a light-blue dress shirt, all while his classmates, looking at him out of the corners of their amused eyes, and pleased to have a small, entertaining diversion from Dr. Schneider’s boring lecture, watched him quickly try to dress himself with the inept alacrity of a clumsy race-car pit crew trying to put tires on a helicopter.

Needing to go to the bathroom, Sammy scurried through the tight spaces between the desks of his classmates like a caterpillar scuttling through a miniature maze, but just as he was about to enter his bedroom’s bathroom—he had always been thankful that his parents had given him a bedroom with its own private bathroom—he heard that brusque, intrusive voice once again.

“Mr. Oliver,” said Dr. Schneider, once again causing the class to swivel their heads and see what the class troublemaker was up to now, “may I ask what is the matter? You already started off this class on the wrong foot. And now you choose to leave?”

“I ... uh ... no, sir ... I ... I just need to use the bathroom,” said Sammy, his voice quavering and his knees shaking, trying with great difficulty to hold in his urine and prevent his bladder from bursting.

“Very well, Mr. Oliver,” said his teacher. “Just make it quick.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

Sammy quickly ducked into the bathroom and closed the door on the barely audible—yet all too clear—nickers and jeers of his classmates. Still slightly sleepy, and still utterly baffled at the predicament he now found himself in, he almost tripped on the bathroom rug on his way to the toilet, but grabbed the handle of the shower door just in time to break his fall. As he released a torrent of urine into the toilet, emptying his bladder with the deep relief of a mountain climber taking off a fifty-pound backpack from his shoulders after an eight-hour journey, the gush of liquid made a loud splashing sound as it hit the toilet water, and he immediately heard a few more muffled laughs. Still urinating, he quickly and carefully shifted his aim to the upper rim of the toilet bowl and away from the water, letting the urine trickle from the rim into the water and hoping that his bladder-relief process was now proceeding in a quieter, less obtrusive fashion.

He washed his hands, quickly combed his messy mane of mahogany-brown hair, and dabbed his soft face and plump, babyish cheeks with lukewarm water, trying to wash out the gunk from his cornflower-blue eyes and the muck from his sluggish, somnolent mind, but he still didn't feel fully alert. Sammy knew he couldn't really wake up until he had his breakfast. Thus, after exiting the bathroom, he gently closed the bathroom door and, woozily wending his way through the web of desks, tried, as inconspicuously as possible, to exit his bedroom.

“...and so in 1801, Napoleon signed the Concordat, which—Mr. Oliver, what is it now?” said Dr. Schneider, tugging on the narrow-notched lapel of his gray pinstriped jacket in evident frustration, a nervous tick of his that Sammy had recently noticed.

“I ... uh ...” Sammy began, struggling to get the words out of his parched throat and clammy mouth. He looked around, his face reddening again as he became aware of Jamie and Carly laughing at him. Andrew and Eli were smiling maliciously, manifesting their malevolent merriment over their friend's mess as if Sammy were a base-runner caught in a pickle and Andrew and Eli were the two infielders who had the helpless runner cornered. “... I just need a drink of water ... you know, to clear my throat from all the sleep-crust, is all ... I promise, Dr. Schneider, that's it ... I won't really be able to fully pay attention until I, you know, wash the sleep-crust out of my mouth.”

“Well, Mr. Oliver,” said Dr. Schneider, raising his eyebrows and squinting suspiciously at the helpless base-runner as if he were trying to steal home, “I've never heard of ‘sleep-crust’ in the mouth—maybe in the eyes, but not the mouth ... but then again, I am a history teacher, not a biology teacher ... very well, Mr. Oliver. Go get your glass of water and then return immediately to class.”

Sammy mouthed an inaudible ‘thank you’ toward Dr. Schneider, exited his bedroom, and loped down the stairs and into the kitchen. Intent on making and eating his breakfast as quickly as possible, he forgot about the glass of water and instead took a rectangular container out of the freezer and popped two circular waffles into the toaster. While waiting impatiently for the waffles, he looked at the sports page that his parents—who had already left for work—had left out for him on the kitchen counter. As soon as the waffles were ready, he scarfed them down as quickly as he could, nearly choking on them in the process—in his haste to make his breakfast, he had forgotten to spread butter and pour syrup on his waffles, and his mouth was shocked by their eggy, doughy dryness—and washed down the dehydrated whole-grain morsels with a full glass of orange juice.



He climbed back up the stairs, taking two steps per vaulting stride, and when he re-entered his bedroom and closed the door, Dr. Schneider was still lecturing about Napoleon, and his classmates, who were carefully taking notes and paying close attention, had hardly noticed his re-entry. Andy looked at him with a crooked smile, and Jonah raised his eyebrows in a “how were you able to get out of class for that long?” look, but his re-entrance into the class otherwise occurred without causing any great disruption.

As Sammy tiptoed toward his bed, which was the only seat available to him, a toxic smell of stale morning breath combined with dry egg waffles wafted up to his nostrils, and he realized that it was his own breath. And so, instead of taking his seat in the back of the classroom—for his bedroom really was now a classroom, Sammy was begrudgingly forced to admit—he walked back into his bathroom to brush his teeth. He left the door open as he attended to his morning dental hygiene necessities so that he wouldn’t miss any more of Dr. Schneider’s lecture.

“... Sweden joined England, Austria, and Russia to form the Third Coalition, which lasted from 1803-1805,” Dr. Schneider was saying. “but they were defeated by Napoleon at the Battle of Austerlitz, where Austria surrendered and was forced to sign the Treaty of Pressburg, which stipulated that ...”

But when Sammy gargled and spat out the cloudy mixture of water, saliva, and liquefied toothpaste into the sink, he heard a few more muffled laughs.

“Mr. Oliver,” said his teacher in a firm, remonstrating tone, Sammy’s overly loud morning dental care routine having provoked enough of a stir among his classmates for Dr. Schneider to have to interrupt his lecture. “I thought we were done with this kind of disruptive behavior. I will wait for you, Mr. Oliver, to take your seat and pay attention; all of the material we’re going over today—all of it—you’ll be responsible for, whether you’ve been taking notes or not. Anything that I talk about in today’s class could be on the midterm.”

Sammy heard a few more subdued snickers as he submissively strode back to his bed, climbed under the crumpled covers, propped himself up against two pillows, took out a notebook and pen, and set his right arm in the standard note-taking position, placing the notebook on his lap and his tense right arm poised on his right leg.

“Thank you for your permission to continue, Mr. Oliver,” said Dr. Schneider, his strident sarcasm grating on Sammy’s ears. “Now ... as I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted: in 1806, at the Battle of Jena, Napoleon defeated the Prussians and ...”

And in this exact position—sitting snugly in his bed and taking notes, careful to not do anything that would further disrupt the class or rouse Dr. Schneider’s ire—Sammy remained for the rest of the forty-seven-minute class.

When the class was over, all of his classmates followed Dr. Schneider in an orderly line out of the room, and Sammy trailed closely behind them. They walked down the stairs, grabbed their backpacks—which they had deposited prior to class at the foot of the stairs—left the house through the front door, and made their way into a small yellow school bus that took them back to school, where the rest of the school-day proceeded as normal: second-period biology, followed by a short recess; third-period geometry, followed by lunch; fourth-period English; fifth-period study hall, followed by another brief recess; sixth-period gym class, and finally seventh-period electives (Sammy was taking Introduction to Psychology for his elective). When the school-day

was over, Sammy and his classmates got back into the bus, which dropped off each of his classmates at their own respective houses. Sammy was dropped off alone at his house, where he proceeded to follow his normal after-school routine: having a snack—chips and salsa when it was hot, hot chocolate and blueberry muffins when it was cold—playing basketball on the hoop in his driveway, watching his favorite television show, eating dinner with his parents, doing his homework, watching another of his favorite shows, followed by showering, brushing his teeth, reading in bed, and going to sleep. It was a completely normal day for Sammy Oliver. Aside from whatever had happened with his first-period history class, nothing incredibly out of the ordinary had occurred.

After his bedtime reading had made him sufficiently drowsy, Sammy turned off his bedside lamp and went to sleep, confident that whatever it was that had happened with his first-period history class would not occur again. Sammy was sure that, like a bad dream, it would wash over and pass—and why shouldn't it? After all, there were other odd disruptions that sometimes occurred during a normal school-day—fire drills, surprise assemblies, snow-days, early dismissals—which, though strange when they were happening, tended to be fleeting, lasting only for a few moments before fading into memory. And whenever such unexpected occurrences had happened in the past, they typically lasted no longer than one day. Like the rule of an absolute monarch, the autocratic, uncompromising school schedule was quick to reassert its unlimited power over its subjects. And Sammy, as one of this sovereign's seventy-plus subjects, was certain that, like a boring educational field trip to the post office or the box factory, he would quickly forget about it, and his school life would return to normal—completely, one-hundred-percent normal—the next day.

When Sammy awoke the following morning from pleasant dreams, he saw his first-period history class teacher and all twelve other students from his tenth-grade class sitting in his bedroom. His classmates were sitting quietly at their desks, and his teacher was standing in front of a blackboard and lecturing about Napoleon Bonaparte. Sammy, believing he was still sleeping, and assuming that this was yet another in the round of amusing dreams that had been entertaining him the past night, rolled his head around to the other side of the pillow and closed his eyes.

“Mr. Oliver.”

‘Again?’ Sammy thought to himself, hearing the stern, sonorous voice of Dr. Schneider. ‘Really?’

“Mr. Oliver.”

Sammy rolled his head back to the other side of the pillow, opened his crusty eyes, and saw Dr. Schneider standing in front of the blackboard that had been placed over his Michael Jordan posters.

“Pssst,” his friend Robbie, sitting closest to Sammy's bed, tried to whisper to him. “You better get up ... Dr. Schneider's gonna get ma—”

“Missster Oliver,” said Dr. Schneider once again, his hands aggressively perched on his hips and his diamond-shaped face convulsing in irritation, “must I really ask of you once again to stop disrupting this class? If I do not have your complete, undivided attention this instant, you will lose five points off of the midterm.”

Sammy swiftly sat straight up in bed. Groggy-eyed and grouchy, as he usually was in the morning

Before he'd had his orange juice and waffles, he dutifully grabbed his notebook and pen and set his arm in the ninety-degree note-taking position. To his surprise—but only modest surprise, because he knew that sometimes things like field trips, fire drills, and spur-of-the-moment assemblies could go on for longer than expected—this unannounced room change of his first-period history class from Room 214 to his bedroom was continuing for a second day. Shrugging his shoulders as if he just heard that his school district had declared that school would be canceled due to snow for a second consecutive day, Sammy tossed his tousled bedsheets off of his bare body—he preferred to sleep almost entirely in the nude, wearing only his dull plaid boxer shorts—and ambled to his bathroom. Even though Dr. Schneider was lecturing about Napoleon, Sammy had a whole night's fluid to unload, and he had just woken up—what else was he supposed to do? This time, he was careful to aim his industrial-strength stream of urine at the upper rim of the toilet, letting it slide from the top edge of the porcelain bowl into the small pool of water that nestled at the bottom of the toilet like a puddle in a pothole, thereby preventing himself from making any disruptive splashing sounds with his bodily fluids.

After washing his hands and face, he opened the door to the bathroom and found his classmate Jonah waiting outside.

"I gotta go," whispered Jonah, standing on his tiptoes to speak into Sammy's left ear—Sammy was a head taller than him. "You better get your butt back in your seat and start paying attention, 'else pretty soon Schneider's gonna be real pissed at you. I can see it on his face. Just warning you."

"I know," said Sammy, also whispering—less by choice than by dint of his throat being so dry—but in an apologetic, almost plaintive tone. "But I really gotta get a drink of orange juice and have breakfast ... I can't function in the morning until I eat and drink something."

"Whatever, man," said Jonah, scratching the back of his buzz-cut ash-blond hair. "Do what you need to do. But don't say I didn't warn you."

"Alright, little corporal. I get it. Thanks."

"Gentlemen?" said Dr. Schneider, furrowing his brows and narrowing his reprimanding gaze at Sammy and Jonah. "Do I need to post a 'no loitering' sign outside the bathroom? If you need to use the restroom, please do so quickly and efficiently. Anyone caught talking outside the bathroom from this point forward will lose ten points off of their midterm exam."

As Jonah closed the bathroom door, Sammy sauntered to his dresser, his slender, exposed figure and smooth butternut skin catching the attention of Jamie, whose own cocoa-colored face became as red as a habanero pepper upon seeing his body. Sammy slipped his legs into a pair of khaki pants, slid his arms into a forest-green button-down shirt, and moseyed out of his bedroom and down into the kitchen, where he ate his breakfast of two toasted waffles—this time making sure to butter them after learning that dry waffles did not sit well with his esophagus—and drank his full glass of pulp-less orange juice in great haste, barely even glancing at the sports page that his parents had left out for him on the kitchen counter. Minutes later, he strode back upstairs, walked back into the classroom, carefully made his way around and through the tight configuration of twelve desks that crowded his small bedroom like clowns in a circus car, and took his seat at the back of the classroom in his unmade twin-sized bed.

"... soon after signing the Peace of Tilsit with Russia in 1807, Napoleon merged the thirty-five German

states into the Confederation of the Rhine,” Dr. Schneider droned on, “... and consolidated the ten Italian states into three: Naples, the Papal States, and ...”

Sammy suddenly smelled his breath and remembered that he needed to brush his teeth. He got up from his seat, and after taking a few steps he was back in his bathroom, where he quickly brushed, flossed, and rinsed—this time omitting the gargling, mindful of his classmates and not wanting to make any disruptive noises. As he stepped back toward his seat on his bed, Sammy realized that during this entire time, Dr. Schneider had been continuing to talk as if nothing had happened—as if Sammy had been invisible to his normally discipline-conscious teacher, a man normally hyper-sensitive to any disruption of the smallest degree. It was the strangest, most bizarre thing in the world, Sammy thought, that his teacher had either not noticed Sammy’s getting up to brush his teeth and his short walk back to his bed, or had simply chosen to disregard it and continue with his lecture. Whatever the explanation was, Sammy did not much care; he was happy to have avoided a five- or ten-point deduction off of his midterm test grade, and that was reason enough for him to sit quietly in his bed, resume his copious note taking, and avoid any further questioning of the matter at hand.

After the class was over, he once again followed his classmates and Dr. Schneider in an orderly line out of the room. They walked down the stairs, grabbed their backpacks, left the house through the front door, and made their way into the small yellow school bus that took them back to school, where the rest of the school-day proceeded as normal. When the school-day was over, Sammy and his classmates got back into the bus, which dropped off each of his classmates at their own respective houses. Sammy was dropped off alone at his house, where he again proceeded to follow his normal after-school routine. It was another completely normal day for Sammy Oliver. Aside from his first-period history class’s room change continuing for a second consecutive day—and aside from whatever had happened with Dr. Schneider’s odd change of behavior—it had simply been a normal, boring, completely ordinary school-day. It didn’t seem like there was anything that had happened that day that should concern him in the least; after all, Sammy reasoned, there were occasional field trips that lasted for more than one day: last year, his ninth-grade class had taken a field trip to that lake by the mountain, where they had slept over in rustic cabins before heading back to civilization the next day. And there were also occasional school assemblies that lasted longer than expected. Whatever had happened with his first-period history class, he reasoned, did thus not seem like anything to trouble himself over. And what business of his was it to worry about Dr. Schneider, especially if his teacher’s unusual alteration of his normal disciplinary procedures was redounding to Sammy’s benefit?

After his bedtime reading had made him sufficiently drowsy, Sammy turned off his bedside lamp and went to sleep, confident that whatever it was that had happened with his first-period history class would not occur again—and why should it? Even that field trip to that lake by the mountain had not lasted longer than two days. His school’s headmaster was a stickler for conformity and routine, and it was precisely because this deviation from normal school procedure had now extended beyond one day that Sammy was all the more confident that his school life would return to normal—completely, one-hundred-percent normal—the next day.

When Sammy awoke the following morning from the same strangely amusing dream that he had been having of late, he once again saw his first-period history class teacher and all twelve other students from his ninth-grade class sitting in his bedroom. His classmates were once again sitting quietly at their desks, and his teacher was once again standing in front of a blackboard and lecturing about Napoleon Bonaparte. Sammy,



now knowing that the fact that he was no longer sleeping was as incontestable as the morning cockcrow, and knowing without a doubt that this was no dream, rubbed his eyes, lightly cleared his throat, and slowly roused himself up and out of his bed.

“... leading to the Battle of Leipzig in 1813, after which Napoleon was forced to abdicate, and was exiled to ...” Dr. Schneider was saying, as Sammy gingerly meandered into the bathroom, emptied his bladder, which had been accumulating liquid waste over the course of the previous eight hours like a bucket under a leaking sink, lackadaisically washed his hands and face, and then zigzagged his way through the tightly bunched desks—nodding and mouthing a few polite ‘hellos’ and ‘good mornings’ to his friends Andy and Tony in the process—until he reached his dresser. Not caring to see if any of the girls in his class were looking at him in his half-naked state, and with his flickering eyes still sandy with sleep, Sammy put on a pair of gray slacks, slid his arms into a white button-down shirt, slipped his bare feet into a pair of open-heeled fleece-lined slippers, and strolled idly out of the room. As he walked into the kitchen and made himself a leisurely breakfast of waffles and orange juice, he briefly pondered how strange it was that Dr. Schneider had not said anything to him when he had woken up and headed straight for the bathroom without even asking permission to use it. And it was even more bizarre, Sammy thought as he bit into his buttered, toasted waffle and scanned the sports page in search of last night’s basketball scores, that Dr. Schneider had directed nothing more than a cross look at him when Sammy had left the room after getting dressed. Dr. Schneider had not even threatened to take any points off of his midterm test grade, Sammy realized, as he poured himself a second glass of orange juice. Perhaps Dr. Schneider had simply decided to ignore him, Sammy thought, as he slipped a third waffle into the toaster; perhaps that was Dr. Schneider’s new method of disciplining him—the ‘silent treatment,’ as his friends liked to call it. Perhaps Dr. Schneider had finally realized, Sammy thought, as he started to read his favorite sportswriter’s column while nursing his second glass of orange juice, that the best way of preventing his class from experiencing disruptions was to simply not cause any disruptions; if Sammy was doing things that were disruptive—like gargling, or making splashing sounds with his urine when he went to the bathroom, or attracting the attention of the class when he got dressed—the best way of continuing the class without disrupting it was to simply, well, continue the class. To continue the class as if nothing had happened. From Dr. Schneider’s perspective, Sammy thought, as he polished off his third waffle and flipped to the newspaper’s comics section, the most important matter at hand was to finish the material he needed to get through in order to have the class prepared for the standardized state history exams at the end of the year—and if Sammy’s antics were an obstacle in his path of having the class fully prepared to take those exams, then ‘who cares about Sammy Oliver?’ Sammy imagined Dr. Schneider thinking; ‘let Sammy Oliver miss the material and fail my tests. I have a curriculum to get through. I can’t sacrifice the whole class for the sake of one renegade student.’ That must’ve been it, Sammy reasoned, as he washed his dishes in the sink and started to slowly, unhurriedly make his way back upstairs toward the classroom; Sammy could imagine no other explanation as logical and sensible—albeit coldly, almost harshly practical—for the bizarre, well-nigh uncanny behavior of his world history teacher.

When he re-entered his bedroom, he still made sure to close the door as unobtrusively as he could, trying to make the least amount of noise possible. Even though he had come up with a reasonable explanation for his teacher’s peculiar conduct, he was still too conditioned by years of standard school discipline—threats of losing points off of his final grade, detention, calling his parents, losing recess privileges—to dare to risk inciting the wrath of Dr. Schneider. “Better to let sleeping dragons lie,” Sammy vaguely remembered reading

n one of his books—or something of that nature; he couldn't remember the exact quote.

As he languidly made his way through the tangle of desks, heading back to the bathroom to brush his teeth, Naomi and Robbie lifted their hands and raised their eyebrows upon making eye contact with him, as if to say, “Sammy, what do you think you are doing?! How do you think you're gonna get away with this?!” But Sammy merely shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and rambled into the bathroom, where he brushed his teeth, quietly spat out the liquefied toothpaste, water, and saliva concoction that he involuntarily made in his mouth each time he brushed his teeth, and wiped his wet lips on the hand towel, all the while making sure he was paying attention to Dr. Schneider's lecture.

“... which became known as the Seventh Coalition, and it was led by England and Prussia. In 1815, Napoleon took his troops into Belgium, where ...”

He then took his seat on his bed, where, propped up by two pillows, he comfortably took notes and followed the lecture as best he could for the remainder of the class. After the conclusion of the class, he followed his classmates out the door of his bedroom and—since he had by now been accustomed to the new drill—picked up his backpack at the foot of the stairs, followed his classmates into the small yellow school bus, and rode with them to school, where his second-period biology class quickly commenced, followed by the rest of his normal school-day schedule.

When Sammy awoke the following morning, he was groggy, his throat was dry, he needed to go to the bathroom, the twelve other students from his tenth-grade class were sitting quietly at their desks in his bedroom as Dr. Schneider lectured about Napoleon Bonaparte, and he was hungry; all of these things were now part of Sammy's normal school-day morning experience—nothing was unexpected; nothing was out of the ordinary. In fact, as such mornings wore on, one after the other after the other, Sammy expected nothing less than a morning wake-up experience where all of these elements were to be found. The only significant deviations from this, his new yet already old-seeming morning routine, occurred when he woke up not feeling hungry, likely on account of having had a bigger-than-usual dinner the night before. The strangest thing that occurred to Sammy over the next several days was that when he woke up one morning, he hadn't even needed to go to the bathroom; all he did was wash his face, go downstairs to eat breakfast, and come back upstairs, where he rejoined Dr. Schneider's already-in-progress history class. After the succession of several such mornings, he had stopped keeping track of how many mornings it was that he had woken up with his first-period history class in his bedroom, and only considered it odd when he awoke without a parched throat or with no need to empty his bladder. He had so quickly gotten used to this new morning routine, and had so easily accustomed himself to his first-period history class's room change, that after several days he had become somewhat of an expert at urinating without having any of his steam-hose-strength stream directly touch the pool of water at the bottom of the toilet bowl, and he had become as skilled as a dental hygienist at brushing his teeth as quietly as possible, listening to Dr. Schneider's lecture all the while; he had shifted his gargling and flossing to his nighttime dental care routine in order to cut down on whatever possible disruptions his dental care necessities might cause. He still couldn't avoid needing to get dressed in front of his class, but he no longer felt even a tinge of embarrassment or awkwardness when doing so, and neither did his classmates eye him with bemused, comical looks any longer. He still needed to go downstairs and eat breakfast, but he took his time, not wanting to choke on his food and wanting to read the newspaper recaps of the previous night's basketball games; having made a deal with Jonah for Jonah to give him his history notes

n exchange for Sammy's English class notes, whatever he had missed from Dr. Schneider's class while eating breakfast, he simply made up for later in the day by reading the notes of the top student in the class. Jonah's handwriting had barely looked legible to Sammy at the outset, but he quickly got used to it as well, becoming a Champollion-scale specialist at deciphering Jonah's wild, chaotic scrawl.

Sammy had settled into his boring new school-day routine the same way he settled himself into a proper note-taking position for class on his bed: he had had to tinker with the sheets and pillows at first, making sure his arms and legs were in decent positions, and it had taken him a few days to get used to placing his notebook on his lap instead of on a desk, but before long he quickly got used to all these things, too, which had become as routine and comforting to him as his bed-time routine of reading a few pages from his novel before turning off his bedside lamp and shutting his eyes for the night.

To entertain himself during his boring school-day schedule—he especially needed the diversions during Dr. Schneider's history lectures, which he found as dry as his own throat before he'd had his morning orange juice—Sammy would watch the backs of the heads of his classmates while thinking about the strange dreams from which he had just awoken. Over the next several mornings during his first-period history class, while lazing splendidly in his bed and taking notes on Dr. Schneider's lecture about Otto von Bismarck and Napoleon III, and while looking at Andy's wavy, waxen black hair, he happened to notice the cute way Jamie's two beribboned braids of cappuccino-brown hair were looped around her cinnamon-skinned neck. He had been thinking about how strange it was that the same dream that he had had during the first night after his history class's room change was still recurring. As he watched Jamie take notes with a pen while a pencil was dangling out of her mouth like a cigar, he briefly replayed the images of that dream to himself in his mind. In his dream, he had gone with his mother and sister to a restaurant for brunch. They each ordered omelettes, but when the waiter returned from the kitchen minutes later, he told them that the kitchen was out of eggs. His sister was so upset that she almost broke out into tears; his mother also showed signs of distress, as did Sammy at first, before he realized that it wasn't such a big deal—they could order something else, or they could go to another restaurant. But yet, secretly, deep down, he was rather upset that they couldn't have omelettes. So what was it? Was he upset or was he not? Did he want an omelette or did he not? He wasn't sure; as he watched Jamie twirl the pencil around her mouth with her arched, pointy tongue, he wondered whether it was strange to be unsure of one's feelings about something. With his eyes twitching, he watched her lefty and tactfully slide the pencil out of her mouth and place it on her desk next to her notebook, and he thought about whether it was normal for a seemingly normal dream—such as the one he was continuing to have night after night about the omelettes—to recur for more than three days. If you have the same dream for over a week—for almost two weeks now—he asked himself, even if the dream isn't such a strange dream, doesn't the fact of having had it for so long, over and over, make it strange? As he watched the way the copper-tinged streaks of hair on the back of her head twinkled under the incandescent light of his overhead bedroom light bulbs, he wondered how much longer this could possibly go on—he had had enough of this dream about the omelettes, and he was ready for something else. But he had no control over the matter, he knew; it would end when it would end, and a new dream would take its place. Best not to trouble himself about it, Sammy thought, as he suddenly felt the tips of his toes stiffening and going numb; best to let things take their natural course. As he felt his internal temperature rising, feeling as if his body was baking bread in the oven of his bowels, while lower down he felt even hotter, as if his midsection was full of molten lava, he reasoned that in the end, it ultimately didn't matter at all; his dreams had as little effect on his life as his morning routine of

getting dressed, leaving class to eat breakfast, and re-entering class to brush his teeth was having on Dr. Schneider—all were inconsequential to the flow of events in his normal, waking, school-routine-dominated life. As he watched Jamie raise her arms around her head to tie her two beribboned braids into one unified ponytail, he resolved to let the matter rest at that and to start paying attention again to whatever it was that Dr. Schneider had been uttering about Napoleon III—that, after all, and not the content and meaning of his dreams, was what the school and the state considered important enough to test students on.

On the morning before his history midterm, Sammy awoke from his dream about the eggless restaurant, rubbed his eyes, reached for his notebook and pen, which he had placed conveniently on his bedside stand, and opened his notebook, preparing to take notes on Dr. Schneider's lecture on the Franco-Prussian War. But when he opened his eyes, he saw his Michael Jordan posters hanging on the far-side wall. The blackboard had disappeared, his classmates were not in the room, there were no desks spread across his sky-blue carpet, and Dr. Schneider was nowhere to be found.

"What is this?" Sammy asked himself, as he groggily and stupefiedly sauntered to the sink to wash his face, empty his bladder, and wash his hands. "What's going on? Where is everybody? I can't believe this. This is the strangest thing...."

Sammy slipped into his corduroy pants, put on his white pointed-collar long-sleeve button-down shirt, and went downstairs to have a quiet breakfast of two waffles and a tall glass of orange juice. Too dazed and befuddled to read the sports page, he walked slowly and carefully back upstairs to brush his teeth, and tried to wrap his mind around just what exactly was going on. After he gargled and rinsed, he purposefully scratched himself and splashed water all over his face and body, trying to make sure he was not still sleeping and that this was not yet another bizarre dream like that one he kept having about the lack of eggs at the restaurant.

Because it was warm outside, he had left his bedroom windows open during the night, and he could now hear the sounds of squirrels scampering up the sides of the dogwoods that flecked the front of his house. Robins were chirping, cars were pulling out from their driveways, adults were heading to work, and a landscaping company's pickup truck had pulled up alongside the well-trimmed front lawn of the house across the street. Aside from the uncanny occurrence of whatever it was that was going on—or not going on—in his bedroom, it was otherwise a fairly normal spring morning in Sammy Oliver's neighborhood.

A moment later, he heard the shrill sound of a school bus horn honking. "Sammy! Hey Sammy!" he could hear Andy and Tony shouting through his open window. "C'mon! You're late! The bus is gonna leave without you if you're not down here in thirty seconds!"

Sammy speedily wiped his face and mouth, raced downstairs, grabbed his backpack at the foot of the stairs, ran out the door, and leapt into the small yellow bus just as it was about to pull out of his driveway. Sammy, his heart racing and his breathing becoming troubled, crawled into an open seat between Andy and Tony.

"You ready for the test?" Tony asked, his stringy arms crossed over his thick world history textbook.

"I thought the test was tomorrow," Sammy said, utterly disoriented, as an unsettling sensation swept through his body.



“It is,” said Robbie, who was sitting behind him.

“He’s just kidding with you, Sam,” Andy assured him.

“Ah, thank God,” said Sammy, taking a deep breath and exhaling as if he was expelling a demon. “Jeez, guys, don’t scare me like that again. Seriously. That was not cool.”

His friends laughed—a good, deep-bellied, unmuffled laugh—something Sammy had not heard in weeks. The bus, in which they were for the moment the only passengers, then picked up Jonah, and then Andrew, Eli, Jacob, Naomi, Emily, and Camilla; in a matter of minutes, the bus had become full of bright, eager, good-natured students, talking excitedly among themselves, happy not because they were on the way to school but because they were surrounded by each other. When the bus reached the final house on its route, it was Jamie who stepped onto the bus, taking a seat near the front next to Emily. Sammy caught a glimpse of Jamie and immediately withdrew from the conversation he had been having with his four friends. While Andy, Tony, Robbie, and Jonah were chatting about last night’s basketball game and the movie that they were going to see after school, Sammy noticed that Jamie’s hair, which was usually worn in a tight bun at the back of her head, had been let down, and its full, lustrous length was spread out upon her slender shoulders and swinging softly across her upper back like silky willow branches swaying in the breeze. Sammy was astonished at how beautiful of a girl Jamie had become; like all of his friends on the bus with him at that moment, he had known her since they were kindergartners, and now she had turned into a comely, lovely young girl, possessing all the pleasing, well-formed features and all the wondrous gifts of curvature, charm, and effortless allure to which her sex was heir. Now completely silent and fully conscious of a blossoming desire in his body and in his heart, he thought that this would be a good day to ask Jamie out on a date. And it was like a fulfillment of his sweetest dreams and deepest desires when, at the end of the bus ride, Jamie rose from her seat, turned around, caught him looking at her, and smiled.