The Palace Thief

An Excerpt

By Ethan Canin

1 I tell this story not for my own honor, for there is little of that here, and not as a warning for a man of my calling learns quickly that all warnings are in vain. Nor do I tell it in apology for St. Benedict’s School, for St. Benedict’s School needs no apologies. I tell it only to record certain foretellable incidents in the life of a well-known man, in the event that the brief candle of his days may sometime come under the scrutiny of another student of history. That is all. This is a story without surprises.

2 There are those, in fact, who say I should have known what would happen between St. Benedict’s and me, and I suppose that they are right; but I loved that school. I gave service there to the minds of three generations of boys and always left upon them, if I was successful, the delicate imprint of their culture. I battled their indolence with discipline, their boorishness with philosophy, and the arrogance of their stations with the history of great men before them. I taught the sons of nineteen senators. I taught a boy who, if not for the vengeful recriminations of the tabloids, would today have been president of the United States. That school was my life.

3 This is why, I suppose, I accepted the invitation sent to me by Mr. Sedgewick Bell at the end of last year, although I should have known better. I suppose I should have recalled what kind of boy he had been at St. Benedict’s forty-one years before instead of posting my response so promptly in the mail and beginning that evening to prepare my test. He, of course, was the son of Senator Sedgewick Hyram Bell, the West Virginia demagogue who kept horses at his residence in Washington, D.C., and had swung several southern states for Wendell Wilkie. The younger Sedgewick was a dull boy.

4 I first met him when I had been teaching history at St. Benedict’s for only five years, in the autumn after his father had been delivered to office on the shoulders of southern patricians frightened by the unionization of steel and mine workers. Sedgewick appeared in my classroom in November of 1945, in a short-pants suit. It was midway through the fall term, that term in which I brought the boys forth from the philosophical idealism of the Greeks into the realm of commerce, military might, and the law, which had given Julius Caesar his prerogative from Macedonia.
to Seville. My students, of course, were agitated. It is a sad distinction of that age group, the exuberance with which the boys abandon the moral endeavor of Plato and embrace the powerful, pragmatic hand of Augustus. The more sensitive ones had grown silent, and for several weeks our class discussions had been dominated by the martial instincts of the coarser boys. Of course I was sorry for this, but I was well aware of the import of what I taught at St. Benedict’s. Our headmaster, Mr. Woodbridge, made us continually aware of the role our students would eventually play in the affairs of our country.

My classroom was in fact a tribute to the lofty ideals of man, which I hoped would inspire my boys, and at the same time to the fleeting nature of human accomplishment, which I hoped would temper their ambition with humility. It was a dual tactic, with which Mr. Woodbridge heartily agreed. Above the door frame hung a tablet, made as a term project by Henry L. Stimson when he was a boy here, that I hoped would teach my students of the irony that history bestows upon ambition. In clay relief it said:

I am Shutruk-Nahhunte, King of Anshan and Susa, sovereign of the land of Elam.

By the command of Inshushinak,

I destroyed Sippar, took the stele of Naram-Sin, and brought it back to Elam,

where I erected it as an offering to my god, Inshushinak.

—Shutruk-Nahhunte, 1158 B.C.

I always noted this tablet to the boys on their first day in my classroom, partly to inform them of their predecessors at St. Benedict’s and partly to remind them of the great ambition and conquest that had been utterly forgotten centuries before they were born. Afterward I had one of them recite, from the wall where it hung above my desk, Shelley’s “Ozymandias.” It is critical for any man of import to understand his own insignificance before the sands of time, and this is what my classroom always showed my boys.

As young Sedgewick Bell stood in the doorway of that classroom his first day at St. Benedict’s, however, it was apparent that such efforts would be lost on him. I could see that he was not only a dullard but a roustabout. The boys happened to be wearing the togas they had made from sheets and safety pins the day before, spreading their knees like magistrates in the wooden desk chairs, and I was taking them through the recitation of the emperors, when Mr. Woodbridge entered alongside the stout, red-faced Sedgewick, and introduced him to the class.
I had taught for several years already, as I have said, and I knew the look of frightened, desperate bravura on a new boy’s face. Sedgewick Bell did not wear this look. Rather, he wore one of disdain. The boys, fifteen in all, were instantly intimidated into sensing the foolishness of their improvised cloaks, and one of them, Fred Masoudi, the leader of the dullards—though far from a dullard himself—said, to mild laughter, “Where’s your toga, kid?”

Sedgewick Bell answered, “Your mother must be wearing your pants today.”

It took me a moment to regain the attention of the class, and when Sedgewick was seated I had him go to the board and copy out the emperors. Of course, he did not know the names of any of them, and my boys had to call them out, repeatedly correcting his spelling as he wrote out in a sloppy hand:

- Augustus
- Tiberius
- Caligula
- Claudius
- Nero
- Galba
- Otho

all the while lifting and resettling the legs of his short pants in mockery of what his new classmates were wearing. “Young man,” I said, “this is a serious class, and I expect that you will take it seriously.”

“If it’s such a serious class, then why’re they all wearing dresses?” he responded, again to laughter, although by now Fred Masoudi had loosened the rope belt at his waist and the boys around him were shifting uncomfortably in their togas.

From that first day, Sedgewick Bell was a boor and a bully, a damper to the illumination of the eager minds of my boys and a purveyor of the mean-spirited humor that is like kerosene in a school such as ours. What I asked of my boys that semester was simple—that they learn the facts I presented to them in an “Outline of Ancient Roman History,” which I had whittled, through my years of teaching, to exactly four closely typed pages; yet Sedgewick Bell was unwilling to do so. He was a poor student and on his first exam could not even tell me who it was that Mark Antony and Octavian had routed at Philippi, nor who Octavian later became, although an average wood-beetle in the floor of my classroom could have done so with ease.
Furthermore, as soon as he arrived he began a stream of capers using spitballs, wads of gum, and thumbtacks. Of course it was common for a new boy to engage his comrades thusly, but Sedgewick Bell then began to add the dangerous element of natural leadership—which was based on the physical strength of his features—to his otherwise puerile antics. He organized the boys. At exactly fifteen minutes to the hour, they would all drop their pencils at once, or cough, or slap closed their books so that writing at the blackboard my hands would jump in the air.

At a boys’ school, of course, punishment is a cultivated art. Whenever one of these antics occurred, I simply made a point of calling on Sedgewick Bell to answer a question. General laughter usually followed his stabs at answers, and although Sedgewick himself usually laughed along with everyone else, it did not require a great deal of insight to know that the tactic would work. The organized events began to occur less frequently.

In retrospect, however, perhaps my strategy was a mistake, for to convince a boy of his own stupidity is to shoot a poisonous arrow indeed. Perhaps Sedgewick Bell’s life would have turned out more nobly if I had understood his motivations right away and treated him differently at the start. But such are the pointless speculations of a teacher. What was irrefutably true was that he was performing poorly on his quizzes, even if his behavior had improved somewhat, and therefore I called him to my office.

In those days I lived in small quarters off the rear of the main hall, in what had been a slave’s room when the grounds of St. Benedict’s had been the estate of the philanthropist and horse breeder Cyrus Beck. Having been at school as long as I had, I no longer lived in the first-form dormitory that stood behind my room, but supervised it, so that I saw most of the boys only in matters of urgency. They came sheepishly before me.

With my bed folded into the wall, the room became my office, and shortly after supper one day that winter of his first-form year, Sedgewick Bell knocked and entered. Immediately he began to inspect the premises, casting his eyes, which had the patrician set of his father’s, from the desk to the shelves to the bed folded into the wall.

“Sit down, boy.”

“You’re not married, are you, sir?”
“No, Sedgewick, I am not. However, we are here to talk about you.”

“That’s why you like puttin’ us in togas, right?”

Frankly, I had never encountered a boy like him before, who at the age of thirteen would affront his schoolmaster without other boys in audience. He gazed at me flatly, his chin in his hand.

“Young man,” I said, sensing his motivations with sudden clarity, “we are concerned about your performance here, and I have made an appointment to see your father.”

In fact, I had made no appointment with Senator Bell, but at that moment I understood that I would have to. “What would you like me to tell the senator?” I said.

His gaze faltered. “I’m going to try harder, sir, from now on.”

“Good, Sedgewick. Good.”

Indeed, that week the boys reenacted the pivotal scenes from Julius Caesar, and Sedgewick read his lines quite passably and contributed little that I could see to the occasional fits of giggles that circulated among the slower boys. The next week, I gave a quiz on the triumvirate of Crassus, Pompey, and Caesar, and he passed for the first time yet, with a C plus.

Nonetheless, I had told him that I was going to speak with his father, and this is what I was determined to do. At the time, Senator Sedgewick Hyram Bell was appearing regularly in the newspapers and on the radio in his stand against Truman’s plan for national health insurance, and I was loath to call upon such a well-known man concerning the behavior of his son. On the radio his voice was a tobacco drawl that had won him populist appeal throughout West Virginia, although his policies alone would certainly not have done so. I was at the time in my late twenties, and although I was armed with scruples and an education, my hands trembled as I dialed his office. To my surprise, I was put through, and the senator, in the drawl I recognized instantly, agreed to meet me one afternoon the following week. The man already enjoyed national stature, of course, and although any other father would no doubt have made the journey to St. Benedict’s himself, I admit that the prospect of seeing the man in his own office intrigued me. Thus I journeyed to the capital.

St. Benedict’s lies in the bucolic, equine expanse of rural Virginia, nearer in spirit to the Carolinas than to Maryland, although the drive to Washington requires little
more than an hour. The bus followed the misty, serpentine course of the Passamic, then entered the marshlands that are now the false-brick suburbs of Washington, and at last left me downtown in the capital, where I proceeded the rest of the way on foot. I arrived at the Senate office building as the sun moved low against the bare-limbed cherries among the grounds. I was frightened but determined, and I reminded myself that Sedgewick Hyram Bell was a senator but also a father, and I was here on business that concerned his son. The office was as grand as a duke’s.

I had not waited long in the anteroom when the man himself appeared, feisty as a game hen, bursting through a side door and clapping me on the shoulder as he urged me before him into his office. Of course I was a novice then in the world of politics and had not yet realized that such men are, above all, likeable. He put me in a leather seat, offered me a cigar, which I refused, and then with real or contrived wonder—perhaps he did something like this with all of his visitors—he proceeded to show me an antique sidearm that had been sent to him that morning by a constituent and that had once belonged, he said, to the coachman of Robert E. Lee. “You’re a history buff,” he said, “right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then take it. It’s yours.”

“No, sir. I couldn’t.”

“Take the damn thing.”

“All right, I will.”

“Now, what brings you to this dreary little office?”

“Your son, sir.”

“What the devil has he done now?”

“Very little, sir. We’re concerned that he isn’t learning the material.”

“What material is that?”

“We’re studying the Romans now, sir. We’ve left the Republic and entered the Empire.”

“Ahh,” he said. “Be careful with that, by the way. It still fires.”
“Your son seems not to be paying attention, sir.”

He again offered me the box of cigars across the desk and then bit off the end of his own. “Tell me,” he said, puffing the thing until it flamed suddenly, “What’s the good of what you’re teaching them boys?”

This was a question for which I was well prepared, fortunately, having recently written a short piece in The St. Benedict’s Crier answering the same challenge put forth there by an anonymous boy. “When they read of the reign of Augustus Caesar,” I said without hesitation, “when they learn that his rule was bolstered by commerce, a postal system, and the arts, by the reformation of the senate and by the righting of an inequitable system of taxation, when they see the effect of scientific progress through the census and the enviable network of Roman roads, how these advances led mankind away from the brutish rivalries of potentates into the two centuries of Pax Romana, then they understand the importance of character and high ideals.”

He puffed at his cigar. “Now, that’s a horse who can talk,” he said. “And you’re telling me my son Sedgewick has his head in the clouds.”

“It’s my job, sir, to mold your son’s character.”

He thought for a moment, idly fingering a match. Then his look turned stern. “I’m sorry, young man,” he said slowly, “but you will not mold him. I will mold him. You will merely teach him.”

That was the end of my interview, and I was politely shown the door. I was bewildered, naturally, and found myself in the elevator before I could even take account of what had happened. Senator Bell was quite likeable, as I have noted, but he had without doubt cut me, and as I made my way back to the bus station, the gun stowed deep in my briefcase, I considered what it must have been like to have been raised under such a tyrant. My heart warmed somewhat toward young Sedgewick.

Back at St. Benedict’s, furthermore, I saw that my words had evidently had some effect on the boy, for in the weeks that followed he continued on his struggling, uphill course. He passed two more quizzes, receiving an A minus on one of them. For his midterm project he produced an adequate papier-mâché rendering of
Hadrian’s gate, and in class he was less disruptive to the group of do-nothings among whom he sat, if indeed he was not in fact attentive.

51 Such, of course, are the honeyed morsels of a teacher’s existence, those students who come, under one’s own direction, from darkness into the light, and I admit that I might have taken a special interest that term in Sedgewick Bell. If I gave him the benefit of the doubt on his quizzes when he straddled two grades, if I began to call on him in class only for those questions I had reason to believe he could answer, then I was merely trying to encourage the nascent curiosity of a boy who, to all appearances, was struggling gamely from beneath the formidable umbra of his father.

52 The fall term was by then drawing to a close, and the boys had begun the frenzy of preliminary quizzes for the annual “Mr. Julius Caesar” competition. Here again, I suppose I was in my own way rooting for Sedgewick. “Mr. Julius Caesar” is a St. Benedict’s tradition, held in reverence among the boys, the kind of mythic ritual that is the currency of a school like ours. It is a contest, held in two phases. The first is a narrowing maneuver, by means of a dozen written quizzes, from which three boys from the first form emerge victorious. The second is a public tournament, in which these three take the stage before the assembled student body and answer questions about ancient Rome until one alone emerges triumphant, as had Caesar himself from among Crassus and Pompey. Parents and graduates fill out the audience. In front of Mr. Woodbridge’s office a plaque attests to the “Mr. Julius Caesars” of the previous half-century—a list that begins with John F. Dulles in 1901—and although the ritual might seem quaint to those who have not attended St. Benedict’s, I can only say that in a school like ours one cannot overstate the importance of a public joust.

53 That year I had three obvious contenders: Fred Masoudi, who, as I intimated, was a somewhat gifted boy; Martin Blythe, a studious type; and Deepak Mehta, the son of a Bombay mathematician, who was dreadfully quiet but clearly my best student. It was Deepak, in fact, who on his own and entirely separate from the class had studied the disparate peoples, from the Carthaginians to the Egyptians, whom the Romans had conquered.

54 By the end of the narrowing quizzes, however, a surprising configuration had emerged: Sedgewick Bell had pulled himself to within a few points of third place in my class. This was when I made my first mistake. Although I should certainly have known better, I was impressed enough by his efforts that I broke one of the cardinal rules of teaching: I gave him an A on a quiz on which he had earned only a B, and in so doing, I leapfrogged him over Martin Blythe. On the fifteenth of March, when the three finalists took their seats on stage in front of the assembled
population of the school, Sedgewick Bell was among them, and his father was among the audience.

The three boys had donned their togas for the event and were arranged around the dais, on which a pewter platter held the green silk garland that, at the end of the morning, I would place upon the brow of the winner. As the interrogator, I stood front row, center, next to Mr. Woodbridge.

“Which language was spoken by the Sabines?”

“Oscan,” answered Fred Masoudi without hesitation.

“How composed the Second Triumvirate?”

“Mark Antony, Octavian, and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, sir,” answered Deepak Mehta.

“How was routed at Philippi?”

Sedgewick Bell’s eyes showed no recognition. He lowered his head in his hands as though pushing himself to the limit of his intellect, and in the front row my heart dropped. Several boys in the audience began to twitter. Sedgewick’s leg began to shake inside his toga. When he looked up again, I felt that it was I who had put him in this untenable position, I who had brought a tender bud too soon into the heat, and I wondered if he would ever forgive me; but then, without warning, he smiled slightly, folded his hands, and said, “Brutus and Cassius.”

“Good,” I said, instinctively. Then I gathered my poise. “Who deposed Romulus Augustulus, the last emperor of the Western Empire?”

“Odoacer,” Fred Masoudi answered, then added, “in 476 A.D.”

“How introduced the professional army to Rome?”

“Gaius Marius, sir,” answered Deepak Mehta, then himself added, “in 104 B.C.”

When I asked Sedgewick his next question— Who was the leading Carthaginian general of the Second Punic War?— I felt some unease because the boys in the audience seemed to sense that I was favoring him with an easier examination. Nonetheless, his head sank into his hands, and he appeared once again to be straining the limits of his memory before he looked up and produced the obvious answer, “Hannibal.”
I was delighted. Not only was he proving my gamble worthwhile but he was showing the twittering boys in the audience that, under fire, discipline produces accurate thought. By now they had quieted, and I had the sudden, heartening premonition that Sedgewick Bell was going to surprise us after all, that his tortoiselike deliberation would win him, by morning’s end, the garland of laurel.

The next several rounds of questions proceeded much in the same manner as had the previous two. Deepak Mehta and Fred Masoudi answered without hesitation, and Sedgewick Bell did so only after a tedious and deliberate period of thought. What I realized, in fact, was that his style made for excellent theater. The parents, I could see, were impressed, and Mr. Woodbridge next to me, no doubt thinking about the next Annual Fund drive, was smiling broadly.

After a second-form boy had brought a glass of water to each of the contestants, I moved on to the next level of questions. These had been chosen for their difficulty, and on the first round Fred Masoudi fell out, not knowing the names of Augustus’s children. He left the stage and moved back among his dim-witted pals in the audience. By the rule of clockwise progression the same question then went to Deepak Mehta, who answered it correctly, followed by the next one, which concerned King Jugurtha of Numidia. Then, because I had no choice, I had to ask Sedgewick Bell something difficult: “Which general had the support of the aristocrats in the civil war of 88 B.C.?”

To the side, I could see several parents pursing their lips and furrowing their brows, but Sedgewick Bell appeared to not even notice the greater difficulty of the query. Again he dropped his head into his hands. By now the audience expected his period of deliberation, and they sat quietly. One could hear the hum of the ventilation system and the dripping of the icicles outside. Sedgewick Bell cast his eyes downward, and it was at this moment that I realized he was cheating.

I had come to this job straight from my degree at Carleton College at the age of twenty-one, having missed enlistment due to myopia, and carrying with me the hope that I could give to my boys the more important vision that my classical studies had given to me. I knew that they responded best to challenge. I knew that a teacher who coddled them at that age would only hold them back, would keep them in the bosoms of their mothers so long that they would remain weak-minded through preparatory school and inevitably then through college. The best of my own teachers had been tyrants. I well-remembered this. Yet at that moment I felt an inexplicable pity for the boy. Was it simply the humiliation we had both suffered
at the hands of his father? I peered through my glasses at the stage and knew at once that he had attached the “Outline of Ancient Roman History” to the inside of his toga.

I don’t know how long I stood there, between the school assembled behind me and the two boys seated in front, but after a period of internal deliberation, during which time I could hear the rising murmurs of the audience, I decided that in the long run it was best for Sedgewick Bell to be caught. Oh, how the battle is lost for want of a horse! I leaned to Mr. Woodbridge next to me and whispered, “I believe Sedgewick Bell is cheating.”

“Ignore it,” he whispered back.

“What?” Of course, I have great respect for what Mr. Woodbridge did for St. Benedict’s in the years he was among us. A headmaster’s world is a far more complex one than a teacher’s, and it is historically inopportune to blame a life gone awry on a single incident in childhood. However, I myself would have stood up for our principles had Mr. Woodbridge not at that point said, “Ignore it, Hundert, or look for another job.”

Naturally, my headmaster’s words startled me for a moment; but being familiar with the necessities of a boys’ school, and having recently entertained my first thoughts about one day becoming a headmaster myself, I simply nodded when Sedgewick Bell produced the correct answer, Lucius Cornelius Sulla. Then I went on to the next question, which concerned Scipio Africanus Major. Deepak Mehta answered it correctly, and I turned once again to Sedgewick Bell.

In a position of moral leadership, of course, compromise begets only more compromise, and although I know this now from my own experience, at the time I did so only from my study of history. Perhaps that is why I again found an untenable compassion muddying my thoughts. What kind of desperation would lead a boy to cheat on a public stage? His father and mother were well back in the crowded theater, but when I glanced behind me, my eye went instantly to them, as though they were indeed my own parents, out from Kansas City. “Who were the first emperors to reign over the divided Empire?” I asked Sedgewick Bell.

When one knows the magician’s trick, the only wonder is in its obviousness, and as Sedgewick Bell lowered his head this time, I clearly saw the nervous flutter of his gaze directed into the toga. Indeed I imagined him scanning the entire “Outline,” from Augustus to Jovian, pasted inside the twill, before coming to the answer, which pretending to ponder, he then spoke aloud: “Valentinian the First, and Valens.”
Suddenly Senator Bell called out, “That’s my boy!”

The crowd thundered, and I had the sudden, indefensible urge to steer the contest in young Sedgewick Bell’s direction. In a few moments, however, from within the subsiding din, I heard the thin, accented voice of a woman speaking Deepak Mehta’s name; and it was the presence of his mother, I suppose, that finally brought me to my senses. Deepak answered the next question, about Diocletian, correctly, and then I turned to Sedgewick Bell and asked him, “Who was Hamilcar Barca?”

Of course, it was only Deepak who knew that this answer was not in the “Outline,” because Hamilcar Barca was a Phoenician general eventually routed by the Romans; it was only Deepak, as I have noted, who had bothered to study the conquered peoples. He briefly widened his eyes at me— in recognition? in gratitude? in disapproval?—while beside him Sedgewick Bell again lowered his head into his hands. After a long pause, Sedgewick asked me to repeat the question.

I did so, and after another long pause, he scratched his head. Finally, he said, “Jeez.”

The boys in the audience laughed, but I turned and silenced them. Then I put the same question to Deepak Mehta, who answered it correctly, of course, and then received a round of applause that was polite but not sustained.

It was only as I mounted the stage to present Deepak with the garland of Laurel, however, that I glanced at Mr. Woodbridge and realized that he too had wanted me to steer the contest toward Sedgewick Bell. At the same moment, I saw Senator Bell making his way toward the rear door of the hall. Young Sedgewick stood limply to the side of me, and I believe I had my first inkling then of the mighty forces that would twist the life of that boy. I could only imagine his thoughts as he stood there on stage while his mother, struggling to catch up with the senator, vanished through the fire door at the back. By the next morning, our calligraphers would add Deepak Mehta’s name to the plaque outside Mr. Woodbridge’s office, and young Sedgewick Bell would begin his lifelong pursuit of missed glory.

Yet perhaps because of the disappointment I could see in Mr. Woodbridge’s eyes, it somehow seemed that I was the one who had failed the boy, and as soon as the auditorium was empty, I left for his room. There I found him seated on the bed, still in his toga, gazing out the small window to the lacrosse fields. I could see the sheets of my “Outline” pressed against the inside of his garment.
“Well, young man,” I said, knocking on the door frame, “that certainly was an interesting performance.”

He turned around from the window and looked at me coldly. What he did next I have thought about many times over the years, the labyrinthine wiliness of it, and I can only attribute the precociousness of his maneuvering to the bitter education he must have received at home. As I stood before him in the doorway, Sedgewick Bell reached inside his cloak and one at a time lifted out the pages of my “Outline.”

I stepped inside and closed the door. Every teacher knows a score of boys who do their best to be expelled; this is a cliché in a school like ours, but as soon as I closed the door to his room and he acknowledged the act with a feline smile, I knew that this was not Sedgewick Bell’s intention at all.

“I knew you saw,” he said.

“Yes, you are correct.”

“How come you didn’t say anything, eh, Mr. Hundert?”

“It’s a complicated matter, Sedgewick.”

“It’s because my pop was there.”

“It had nothing to do with your father.”

“Sure, Mr. Hundert.” Frankly, I was at my wits’ end, first from what Mr. Woodbridge had said to me in the theater and now from the audacity of the boy’s accusation. I myself went to the window then and let my eyes wander over the campus so that they would not have to engage the dark, accusatory gaze of Sedgewick Bell. What transpires in an act of omission like the one I had committed? I do not blame Mr. Woodbridge, of course, any more than a soldier can blame his captain. What had happened was that instead of enforcing my own code of morals, I had allowed Sedgewick Bell to sweep me summarily into his. I did not know at the time what an act of corruption I had committed, although what is especially chilling to me is that I believe that Sedgewick Bell, even at the age of thirteen, did.

He knew also, of course, that I would not pursue the matter, although I spent the ensuing several days contemplating a disciplinary action. Each time I summoned my resolve to submit the boy’s name to the honor committee, however, my conviction waned, for at these times I seemed to myself to be nothing more than one criminal turning in another. I fought this battle constantly—in my simple
rooms, at the long, chipped table I governed in the dining hall, and at the dusty chalkboard before my classes. I felt like an exhausted swimmer trying to climb a slippery wall out of the sea.

Furthermore, I was alone in my predicament, for among a boarding school faculty, which is as perilous as a medieval court, one does not publicly discuss a boy's misdeeds. This is true even if the boy is not the son of a senator. In fact, the only teacher I decided to trust with my situation was Charles Ellerby, our new Latin instructor and a kindred lover of antiquity. I had liked Charles Ellerby as soon as we had met because he was a moralist of no uncertain terms, and indeed when I confided in him about Sedgewick Bell's behavior and Mr. Woodbridge's response, he suggested that it was my duty to circumvent our headmaster and speak directly to the boy's father. Of course, this made sense to me, even if I knew it would be difficult to do. I decided to speak to Senator Bell again.

Less than a week after I had begun to marshal my resolve, however, the senator himself called me. He proffered a few moments of small talk, asked after the gun he had given me, and then said gruffly, "Young man, my son tells me the Hannibal Barca question was not on the list he had to know."

Now, indeed, I was shocked. Even from young Sedgewick Bell I had not expected this audacity. "How deeply the viper is a viper," I said, before I could help myself.

"Excuse me?"

"The Phoenician general was Hamilcar Barca, sir, not Hannibal." The senator paused. "My son tells me you asked him a question that was not on the list, which the Oriental fellow knew the answer to in advance. He feels you've been unfair, is all."

"It's a complex situation, sir," I said. I marshaled my will again by imagining what Charles Ellerby would do in the situation. However, no sooner had I resolved to confront the senator than it became perfectly clear to me that I lacked the character to do so. I believe this had long been clear to Sedgewick Bell. "I'm sure it is complex," Senator Bell said, "But I assure you, there are situations more complex. Now, I'm not asking you to correct anything this time, you understand. My son has told me a great deal about you, Mr. Hundert. If I were you, I'd remember that."

"Yes, sir," I said, although by then I realized he had hung up.

And thus young Sedgewick Bell and I began an uneasy compact that lasted out his days at St. Benedict's. He was a dismal student from that day forward, scratching at
the very bottom of a class that was itself a far cry from the glorious yesteryear classes of John Dulles and Henry Stimson. His quizzes were abominations, and his essays were pathetic digestions of those of the boys sitting next to him. He chatted amiably in study hall, smoked cigarettes in the third-form linen room, and when called upon in class could be counted on to blink and stutter as if called upon from sleep.

But perhaps the glory days of St. Benedict’s had already begun their wane, for even then, well before the large problems that beset us, no action was taken against the boy. For Charles Ellerby and me, he became a symbol, evidence of the first tendrils of moral rot that seemed to be twining among the posts and timbers of our school. Although we told nobody else of his secret, the boy’s dim-witted recalcitrance soon succeeded in alienating all but the other students. His second- and third-form years passed as ingloriously as his first, and by the outset of his last with us he had grown to mythic infamy among the faculty members who had known the school in its days of glory.

He had grown physically larger as well, and now when I chanced upon him on the campus, he held his ground against my disapproving stare with a dark one of his own. To complicate matters, he had cultivated, despite his boorish character, an impressive popularity among his schoolmates, and it was only through the subtle intervention of several of his teachers that he had failed on two occasions to win the presidency of the student body. His stride had become a strut. His favor among the other boys, of course, had its origin in the strength of his physical features, in the precocious evil of his manner, and in the bellowing timbre of his voice, but unfortunately such crudities are all the more impressive to a group of boys living out of sight of their parents.

That is not to say that the faculty of St. Benedict’s had given up hope for Sedgewick Bell. Indeed, a teacher’s career is punctuated with difficult students like him, and despite the odds one could not help but root for his eventual rehabilitation. As did all the other teachers, I held out hope for Sedgewick Bell. In his fits of depravity and intellectual feebleness I continued to look for glimpses of discipline and progress.

By his fourth-form year, however, when I had become dean of seniors, it was clear that Sedgewick Bell would not change, at least not while he was at St. Benedict’s. Despite his powerful station, he had not even managed to gain admission to the state university. It was with a sense of failure, then, finally, that I handed him his diploma in the spring of 1949, on an erected stage at the north end of the great
field, on which he came forward, met my disapproving gaze with his own flat one, and trundled off to sit among his friends.

108 It came as a surprise, then, when I learned in the Richmond Gazette, thirty-seven years later, of Sedgewick Bell’s ascension to the chairmanship of East America Steel, at that time the second-largest corporation in America. I chanced upon the news one morning in the winter of 1987, the year of my great problems with St. Benedict’s, while reading the newspaper in the east-lighted breakfast room of the assistant headmaster’s house. St. Benedict’s, as everyone knows, had fallen upon difficult times by then, and an unseemly aspect of my job was that I had to maintain a lookout for possible donors to the school. Forthwith, I sent a letter to Sedgewick Bell.

109 Apart from the five or six years in which a classmate had written to The Benedictine of his whereabouts, I had heard almost nothing about the boy since the year of his graduation. This was unusual, of course, as St. Benedict’s makes a point of keeping its graduates in the yearly alumni notes was due to an act of will on his own part. One wonders how much of the boy remained in the man. It is indeed a rare vantage that a St. Benedict’s teacher holds, to have known our statesmen, our policymakers, and our captains of industry in their days of short pants and classroom pranks, and I admit that it was with some nostalgia that I composed the letter.

110 Since his graduation, of course, my career had proceeded with the steady ascension that the great schools have always afforded their dedicated teachers. Ten years after Sedgewick Bell’s departure I had moved from dean of seniors to dean of the upper school, and after a decade to dean of academics, a post that some would consider a demotion but that I seized with reverence because it afforded me the chance to make inroads on the minds of a generation. At the time, of course, the country was in the throes of a violent, peristaltic rejection of tradition, and I felt a particular urgency to my mission of staying a course that had led a century of boys through the rise and fall of ancient civilizations.

111 In those days our meetings of the faculty and trustees were rancorous affairs in which great pressure was exerted in attempts to alter the time-tested curriculum of the school. Planning a course was like going into battle, and hiring a new teacher was like crowning a king. Whenever one of our ranks retired or left for another school, the different factions fought tooth and nail to influence the appointment. I was the dean of academics, as I have noted, and these skirmishes naturally were waged around my foxhole. For the lesser appointments I often feinted to gather leverage for the greater ones, whose campaigns I fought with abandon.
At one point especially, midway through that decade in which our country had lost its way, St. Benedict’s arrived at a crossroads. The chair of humanities had retired, and a pitched battle over his replacement developed between Charles Ellerby and a candidate from outside. A meeting ensued in which my friend and this other man spoke to the assembled faculty and trustees, and though I will not go into detail, I will say that the outside candidate felt that, because of the advances in our society, history had become a little more than a relic.

Oh, what dim-sighted times these were! The two camps sat on opposite sides of the chapel as speakers took the podium one after another to wage war. The controversy quickly became a forum concerning the relevance of the past. Teacher after teacher debated the import of what we in history had taught for generations, and assertion after assertion was met with boos and applause. Tempers blazed. One powerful member of the board had come to the meeting in blue jeans and a tie-dyed shirt, and after we had been arguing for several hours and all of us were exhausted, he took the podium and challenged me personally, right then and there, to debate with him the merits of Roman history.

He was not an eloquent man, and he chose to speak his plea first, so that by the time he had finished his attack against antiquity, I sensed that my battle on behalf of Charles Ellerby, and of history itself, was near to lost. My heart was gravely burdened, for if we could not win our point here among teachers, then among whom indeed could we win it? The room was silent, and on the other side of the chapel our opponents were gathering nearer to one another in the pews.

When I rose to defend my calling, however, I also sensed that victory was not beyond my reach. I am not a particularly eloquent orator, but as I took my place at the chancel rail in the amber glow of the small rose window above us, I was braced by the sudden conviction that the great men of history had sent me forward to preserve their deeds. Charles Ellerby looked up at me biting his lip, and suddenly I remembered the answer I had written long ago in The Crier. Its words flowed as though unbidden from my tongue, and when I had finished, I knew that we had won. It was my proudest moment at St. Benedict’s.

Although the resultant split among the faculty was an egregious one, Charles Ellerby secured the appointment, and together we were able to do what I had always dreamed of doing: We redoubled our commitment to classical education. In times of upheaval, of course, adherence to tradition is all the more important, and perhaps this way was why St. Benedict’s was brought intact through that decade and the one that followed. Our fortunes lifted and dipped with the gentle rhythm to which I had long ago grown accustomed. Our boys won sporting events and prizes, endured minor scandals and occasional tragedies, and then passed on to good
colleges. Our endowment rose when the government was in the hands of Republicans, as did the caliber of our boys when it was in the hands of Democrats. Senator Bell declined from prominence, and within a few years I read that he had passed away. In time, I was made assistant headmaster. Indeed it was not until a few years ago that anything out of the ordinary happened at all, for it was then, in the late 1980s, that some ill-advised investments were made and our endowment suffered a decline.

Mr. Woodbridge had by this time reached the age of seventy four, and although he was a vigorous man, one Sunday morning in May while the school waited for him in chapel he died open-eyed in his bed. Immediately, there occurred a Byzantine struggle for succession. There is nothing wrong with admitting that by then I myself coveted the job of headmaster, for one does not remain five decades at a school without becoming deeply attached to its fate; but Mr. Woodbridge’s death had come suddenly, and I had not yet begun the preparations for my bid. I was, of course, no longer a young man. I suppose, in fact, that I lost my advantage here by underestimating my opponents, who indeed were younger, as Caesar had done with Brutus and Cassius.

I should not have been surprised, then, when after several days of maneuvering, my principal rival turned out to be Charles Ellerby. For several years, I discovered, he had been conducting his own internecine campaign for the position, and although I had always counted him as my ally and my friend, in the first meeting of the board he rose and spoke accusations against me. He said that I was too old, that I had failed to change with the times, that my method of pedagogy might have been relevant forty years ago but it was not today. He stood and said that a headmaster needed vigor and that I did not have it.

Although I watched him the entire time he spoke, he did not once look back at me.

I was wounded, of course, both professionally and in the hidden part of my heart in which I had always counted Charles Ellerby as a companion in my lifelong search for the magnificence of the past. When several of the older teachers booed him, I felt cheered. At this point I saw that I was not alone in my bid, merely behind, and so I left the meeting without coming to my own defense. Evening had come, and I walked to the dining commons in the company of allies.

How it is, when fighting for one’s life, to eat among children! As the boys in their school blazers passed around the platters of fish sticks and the bowls of sliced bread, my heart was pierced with their guileless grace. How soon, I wondered, would they see the truth of the world? How long before they would understand that it was not dates and names that I had always meant to teach them? Not one of
them seemed to notice what had descended like thunderheads above their faculty. Not one of them seemed unable to eat.

After dinner I returned to the assistant headmaster’s house in order to plot my course and confer with those I still considered allies, but before I could begin my preparations, there was a knock at the door. Charles Ellerby stood there, red in the cheeks. “May I ask you some questions?” he said breathlessly.

“It is I who ought to ask them of you” was my answer.

He came in without being asked and took a seat at my table. “You’ve never married, am I correct, Hundert?”

“Look, Ellerby, I’ve been at St. Benedict’s since you were in prep school yourself.”

“Yes, yes,” he said, in exaggeration of boredom. Of course, he knew as well as I had never married nor started a family because history itself had always been enough for me. He rubbed his head and appeared to be thinking. To this day I wonder how he knew about what he said next, unless Sedgewick Bell had somehow told him the story of my visit to the senator. “Look,” he said. “There’s a rumor you keep a pistol in your desk drawer.”

“Hogwash.”

“Will you open it for me,” he said, pointing there.

“No, I will not. I have been a dean here for twenty years.”

“Are you telling me there is no pistol in this house?”

He then attempted to stare me down. We had known each other for the good part of both our lives, however, and the bid withered. At that point, in fact, as his eyes fell in submission to my determined gaze, I believe the headmastership became mine. It is a largely unexplored element of history, of course, and one that has long fascinated me, that a great deal of political power and thus a great deal of the arc of nations arises from intellectual advancements nor social imperatives but from the simple battle of wills among men at tables, such as had just occurred between Charles Ellerby and me.

Instead of opening the desk and brandishing the weapon, however, which of course meant nothing to me but no doubt would have seized the initiative from Ellerby, I denied to him its existence. Why, I do not know; for I was a teacher of history, and
was not the firearm its greatest engine? Ellerby, on the other hand, was simply a gadfly to the passing morals of the time. He gathered his things and left my house.

That evening I took the pistol from my drawer. A margin of rust had appeared along the filigreed handle, and despite the ornate workmanship I saw clearly now that in essence the weapon was ill-proportioned and blunt, the crude instrument of a violent, historically meager man. I had not even wanted it when the irascible demagogue Bell had foisted it upon me, and I had only taken it out of some vague sentiment that a pistol might eventually prove decisive. I suppose I had always imagined firing it someday in a moment of drama. Yet now here it stood before me in a moment of torpor. I turned it over and cursed it.

That night I took it from the drawer again, hid it in the pocket of my overcoat, and walked to the far end of the campus, where I crossed the marsh a good mile from my house, where I removed my shoes, and stepped into the babbling shallows of the Passamic. *The die is cast*, I said, and I threw it twenty yards out into the water. The last impediment to my headmastership had been hurdled, and by the time I came ashore, walked back whistling to my front door, and changed for bed, I was ecstatic.

Yet that night I slept poorly, and in the morning when I rose and went to our family meeting, I felt that the mantle of my fortitude had slipped somehow from my shoulders. How hushed is demise! In the hall outside the faculty room, most of the teachers filed by without speaking to me, and once inside, I became obsessed with the idea that I had missed the most basic lesson of the past, that conviction is the alpha and the omega of authority. Now I see that I was doomed the moment I threw that pistol in the water, for that is when I lost my conviction. It was as though Sedgewick Bell had risen, all these years later, to drag me down again. Indeed, once the meeting had begun, the older faculty members shrunk back from their previous support of my bid, and the younger ones encircled me as though I were a limping animal. There might as well have been a dagger among the cloaks. By four o’clock that afternoon Charles Ellerby, a fellow antiquarian whose job I had once helped secure, had been named headmaster, and by the end of that month he had asked me to retire.