

“Tenuously.”

This was how Lemuel described to Margery the nature of their relatedness when pressed, one morning around the time when other children (normal children) would be heading off to school.

“But who said you were normal?” asked Lemuel. “I never said that. Did one of the aunts say that?” These were Lemuel’s aunts, so however they were related to Margery, it was as tenuous as Margery’s relationship to Lemuel, maybe even more so; Margery called them Miss M and Mrs Eldritch. The one time she’d called one of them *auntie*

(Margery couldn’t remember which one, which was odd because Miss Me and Mrs Eldritch, although both unpleasant, weren’t interchangeable in the way Margery found so many outside adults to be. Miss M was portly in a boxy way and Mrs Eldritch was rounded in a fleshy way. Mrs Eldritch had grey hair and Mrs M had white. Mrs Eldritch pronounced every *h* assiduously, while Miss Me chose to view not only *h*’s but most consonants, especially word-ending ones, as optional at best. So, like cheese and something the complete opposite of cheese, like a guitar pick, or an Australian, Margery had no reason *not* to remember which aunt had given her a clobber, catching a raised garnet from one of their rings in Margery’s hair and pulling it and scalp out along with it once they’d finally gotten untangled

(the part of her head, near the top, but at the edge where her skull began to curve down towards her ear still stung in the rain, or if she had to wear hats

(which she didn’t because Margery never had to do anything and the days it was cold, Lemuel who never

(at least until the his education bent kicked in)

believed in any benefits of fresh air, let Margery hid away indoors like thoughts inside a parenthesis

(which Margery loved, because deep down, tucked away in a flutter beneath her heart’s heartbeat, there was Margery

(curled up tightly

(in a little
(parenthetical
(ball))))))

had resulted in unpleasantness Margery did not want repeated, but still Lemuel called them Margery’s aunts and somehow that name (at least to him) had stuck.

“I would like it to be more than tenuous,” Margery said, eyes barely straying from the stove

(she was learning to poach eggs, not because she or Lemuel or the aunts had been yearning for an increase in poached egg consumption in their lives, but because all adults

(according to Miss M)

should be able to poach

(actually scramble, except scrambled eggs gave Lemuel

(or so said Mrs Eldritch)

the runs)

an egg. It didn’t seem that hard a skill

(1. Crack egg into bowl; 2. Bring water in pot to simmer; 3. Slip egg into simmering pot water; 4. Keep there until egg is cooked; 5. Remove egg.)

but learning meant

(according to the aunts and Lemuel)

perfecting a skill with seventy-six repeats and today

(it was a Tuesday)

was only repetition two.)

“Mrs Eldritch’s,” Lemuel began, “ex-husband–”

“Mrs Eldritch was married?”

“Of course she was married,” Lemuel snapped. “Where do you think the *Mrs* would have come from? Mrs Eldritch’s ex-husband and I were also married, with Mrs Eldritch as well being an aunt of mine through marriage.

“And Miss M?”

“Also by marriage.”

“Also *what* by marriage.”

“Related.”

“To whom?”

“To you.”

“But I’m not married.”

“Your egg is burning,” Lemuel said. “And doesn’t your hand sting?”

It did because the oven mitt was thin and the pan was hot and was made of a single piece of metal (including the handle) and was on the stove, which was on, and Margery sometimes forgot things like this or that she was supposed to say *ouch* or where the band-aids (Miss M sometimes called them *plasters* even though she wasn’t from nor had ever been to a place where people routinely called band-aids *plasters*) were kept because sometimes Margery was so lost inside her parentheticals that what existed corporally didn’t affect her at all.

“How am I related to you precisely?” Margery asked Lemuel, letting go of the handle.

And to this Lemuel told this story that (he insisted) answered (nay, *allayed*) all of Margery’s questions and fears.

The Time Lemuel Went To Register Margery For School

(“But I don’t go to school,” Margery protested.

“Of course you don’t,” said Lemuel. “My goodness you are bothersome today.”

“So how can this be a story about me going to school?”

“Where did it say that this was a story about you going to school? I said that this is the story about *me* registering *you* for school.”)

When Lemuel was a boy

(“You were a boy?”)

At this point Lemuel huffed out of the kitchen *cum* breakfast nook, leaving Margery to determine the story for herself.)

When Lemuel wa a boy, school started at age six and such a starting point was called Grade One. Then, at some point, this changed and school started at age five but instead of calling this Grade Zero, it was called Kindergarten for some Teutonic reason. But then this Teutonic reasoning made sense because suddenly school started at age four and if they had called Kindergarten Grade Zero then this new *Junior* Kindergarten would be called Grade Minus One and that would just be terrible for all the parents who had dropped out of high school math and so in the end the Kindergarten nomenclature made sense even when starting school at age four did not.

Still, with such a sliding scale and such a passage of time since Lemuel’s educational beginnings (“A monstrous waste of time, if one already knew how to read, as I did, and already understood basic safety rules such as ‘Other people are not for eating.’”)

“Where did you go to school? The Donner Party Elementary School?”)

it may have been that formal, government funded education now began sometime in utero, but Margery ex utero, had to begin sometime, and since she could already scramble an egg by herself (“But I can’t scramble an egg.”)

“Well, you should be able to. All adults should be able to scramble an egg.”

“But Mrs Eldritch says that scrambled eggs give you –”

“Oh blast Mrs Eldritch!” Lemuel shrieked before locking himself in his room

(“Which is what,” Mrs Eldritch said, “I told you was going to happen.))

Lemuel took it upon himself (as the aunts couldn’t be bothered (Actually, Miss M was quite fascinated with tales of feral children and so believed that all forms of structured education were akin to prolonged torture in Soviet Moscow’s Lublyanka prison (another one of her fascinations was paperback Cold War thrillers),

while Mrs Eldritch quite enjoyed a blend of Montessori, Reggio, and Contemplative philoso-

phies as a manner of education, but balked at having to pay a fee to get on the waiting list of the town’s only private, democratic, child-led daycares, and she kept forgetting to ask the librarian to put the Montessori and Reggio books on inter-library loan for her to read, so that whole pedagogical avenue had tapered off from a highway to a dirt lane to just a bunch of trees with a wirey fence blocking the way.)) to register Margery for school. He took himself down to the nearest school in question, walked into the main office, and announced to a confused secretary and vice principal: “I would like to register a child for school.”

(“Why were they confused? Don’t people register their kids for school all the time?”

“Perhaps they register their *children*.”

“That’s what I said.”

“It isn’t.”

“Well then, why were they confused you wanted to register a *child*?”

“They were confused because they were bureaucrats and by not following the bureaucratic rule of order, I had beflummoxed them.”

“I like that word: beflummoxed.”

“Thank you. I invented it myself.”)

The secretary reached into a filing cabinet for a clipboard worth of sheets. “Child’s name,” she said testily.

Lemuel gave it.

“Your name.”

Lemuel gave that.

“Parent or guardian.”

“Dr Thomas –” Lemuel began.

“You said your name was Lemuel.”

“It is.”

“Parent or guardian,” the secretary again said.

“As I was trying to tell you, my parents were Dr Thomas –”

“Not *your* parents. Are you the parent or guardian of –” She ruffled the sheets having already forgotten who.

“Her name is Margery.”

“Yes, Margery,” the secretary said as if she were the one confirming this to him, instead of the reverse. “Parent or guardian.”

“Please inscribe *concerned friend of the family*.”

“I can’t.”

“It’s quite simple. *C* as in coconut, *O* as in ostentatious, *N* –”

“No, I can’t.” She spun the clipboard around so that Lemuel could see, but kept hold of the clip at the top to ensure that Lemuel couldn’t abscond with her administrivia. “See. Checkboxes. I have to check one or the other.”

“What a lack of imagination this form-maker must have had. Leave it blank.” Then, reading the next question for himself, Lemuel answered “My and Margery’s and my aunts’ address is –”

“I can’t leave it blank.”

“Do you now know how?” Lemuel asked concernedly.

“Of course I know how. But it’s a bubble sheet. It gets fed into a computer.” The secretary said this as if it explained everything. It did not explain anything.

(“I wonder what that would sound like,” Margery said with an eyebrow lift.)

“So?” asked Lemuel.

“The computer won’t compute if a bubble isn’t filled in on this line,” elaborated the secretary.

That some degree of elaborate computation was required to register a child for school startled Lemuel, but he forged ahead nevertheless, extending himself up to his full five feet seven and seven eighths of an inch to declare: “You may then denote me as her parent.”

“Are you her parent?” the secretary asked with the same eyebrow raise that Margery would later perfect.

“No.”

“Is one of the aunts you mentioned her parent or guardian?”

“No. They are my aunts.”

“And your relationship to the child –”

“Margery.”

“– is friend of the family?”

“*Concerned* friend of the family.”

The secretary pulled open the top drawer of the filing cabinet and dropped the clipboard inside. “You can’t register this child for school,” she said.

“Margery,” Lemuel reminded her. “Her name is Margery. As your job is lousy with children, I would think that you would be better at remembering their names.”

The secretary scowled. “You can’t register *Margery* for school because *you* are not her parent or guardian. A parent or guardian is the only person allowed to register a child for school.”

“Why?”

“I’m sorry?” To be fair to the secretary, it had been a few minutes since she’d told Lemuel and he had said goodbye, and left, and then come back again, while the secretary had moved onto another task and Lemuel had startled her into dropping a tea cup into her lap (iced, so while sticky, at least not scalding) with his unexpected return.

“Because,” Lemuel continued, “I don’t see why I shouldn’t, as a concerned family friend, be able to register a child for school. It seems to me you would want to include Margery.”

“There are security concerns.” The secretary dabbed at her lap with a Kleenex.

“What security concerns? I’m not attempting to lure (here Lemuel drew out the *ur* in *lure* to emphasize his point) into a panel van. I’m trying to do the exact opposite. I am trying to have more adults that are able to interact with her, in case an emergency arises.”

“Do you know her health card number?”

“Is that all this takes? Here.” Lemuel rattled it off.

“Hmmm.” That had not gone as the secretary had hoped. She’d figured the request for a health card number would stump the stranger, stopping his shenanigans, and certainly she would be able to get back to sipping what remained of her snack. Instead, now she was wondering whether the old toll-free number to call for health care fraud was still active, because who memorized their own health card numbers, let alone those of an unrelated minor, except for purposes nefarious.

At this point, the vice principal came out of her office, leaned against her walking stick as majestically as one was able to lean against a piece of functional orthopaedics to ask “And *who* are you?”

“Concerned friend of the family,” Lemuel said primly.

“There’s no box for that –”

“– on the form, yes,” Lemuel said. “That being said, Margery’s education needs to be dealt with, so here I am, dealing the cards, like poker, five card stud.” Lemuel was tiring of the rigmarole and rapidly losing interests. He should have told one of the aunts to do this, and, moreover, he was bored with how all this was going. “This is,” he told the two women, “too pedestrian for me to continue.

“But,” he said, reappearing a third time moments later and newly energized by his new idea, “I require and forms and-slash-or information that would allow (he was very cognizant not to use *me* or *I* or any other pronoun that meant that he, rather than a parent or guardian, would be undertaking and-slash-or overseeing the task of) home schooling Margery.”

“And that,” Lemuel concluded, “explains our relationship.”

“No,” said Margery. “It doesn’t.”

“It does,” Lemuel insisted. “Concerned friend of the family. And now, we shall, begin home schooling.”

“On a Tuesday?”

“Right. We will wait for next week. Enjoy your last day of summer vacation.”

“It’s autumn.”

“I must return to work.” Lemuel pointed a finger in the air triumphantly. Then, in a flurry of a whirlwind of a dust cloud, Lemuel took himself out to the garage, sliding (all the doors in the house slid rather than hinged, although maybe some stuck-and-accordioned more than slid to be honest) all the doors closed behind him.