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A Lesson Dashed

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Gary J. Whitehead

A Lesson Dashed

“You’ve got a hyphen here. It should be a dash,” I say.

The kid looks hard at his essay, as though his words might unlock the deep mystery of my statement. His eyes are small air bubbles rising in a murky pond. “What’s the difference?” he says.

“Yeah, what’s the difference?” says the girl slumped in the chair next to him.

I tell them that one day I’ll write an essay on the difference between the hyphen and the dash, and then the whole class is egging me on. “Do it; do it,” they shout. They think it strange that anyone would write anything, ever, that wasn’t assigned.

But I’m a high school English teacher. Who’s got time to write?

So I say:

“The hyphen—silly, little brother of the dash—is a jealous piece of punctuation. It wants to be bigger, wants toglom onto words and live vicariously between them. Like a thin moustache on a fifteen-year-old boy watching his oldest brother groom himself in the mirror before a hot date, it sprouts sparingly out of a sentence’s flesh above the white space of a forced smile. In the family of black horizontal lines, the hyphen pines to be something it isn’t. Couched between letters, it does what it can to make some meaning out of its meaningless existence, but it’ll never be more than a half-pint, watching its big brothers—so much cooler, so much suaver—set off some appositive like the grips on the handlebar of a motorcycle squealing off to places unknown.”

In the third column of chairs, Diego caresses his upper lip and winks at Francia. She laughs.

I walk down his column, kicking book bags as I go. “The hyphen is a sissy. Even the word sounds girly, like Hymie, the kind of kid who got beat up in school so often that he came to feel half-worthy. Or like hymen—the fold of mucus membrane separating *virgin* from *ho*.”

Croaking everywhere. Now I’ve got their attention, and they’re looking at me like I’ve gone bonkers.

“Hymen, the thin skin named for Hymenaeus, the Greek god of marriage who, ironically, was bisexual; take away the ‘m,’ add ‘ph,’ and you’ve got a piece of punctuation outclassed by words, misused since kindergarten, ignored in high school. The poor hyphen—he could never measure up to the lettermen, but he was useful at times, a kind of Cupid, hooking up others in the clumsy hallways of dim-lit essays while the intransitives looked on jealously and the infinitives talked endlessly about the things they’d do.”

Now I’ve lost them. I try a different tack.

“In my own family, I was the hyphen, the youngest and so the smallest, and I remember what it felt like to be the flat-line of a word dead at the margin of so much white space. With me so far?” I say, and the small pond of faces gurgles a little. Rodrigo looks at the clock. Katie yawns, sees me watching her, smiles for forgiveness. I forgive her. I remember what it was like to be seventeen.

“Did you really just give a lecture about the hymen?” says Morgan. In his short-sleeved linen shirt, shell necklace, cargo shorts and Birkenstocks, he looks as though he’s heading to the Hamptons.

“The *hy-phen*,” I say. “Weren’t you listening?”

“Kinda.”

Steven, the biggest boy, a Korean whose right knee rises and falls as timed and incessant as an oil derrick, says, “It was all a metaphor.” And he gives me a see-I’m-the-smartest-kid-in-the-class look.

“I’m glad someone was paying attention,” I say, and return my own knowing grin to confirm his wish.

“Was that Greek god really bi?” asks Ethan in the back.

“Well, it depends on whom you ask,” I say.

“I’m lost,” says Francia.

“The word *hyphen* comes from the Greek *hyph’ ben*, meaning ‘under one,’ which is odd because, if anything, this piece of punctuation is ‘between two.’ It links up compound words or

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names, or breaks up syllables of words when they come at the end of a line in a book and so require being broken. Little fracture lines that help our brains at lightning speed to process as ‘require’ and not ‘re quire.’ (See above).

But in my family, where I was the hyphen, the Greek translation was about right. I had two brothers, call them Em and En, and the oldest and biggest, Em, got his own bed. I slept in a bunk bed with En, and, you guessed it, I was in the bottom bunk. I was ‘under one.’ Yet, my own wished-for translation probably works better. Here’s a scene:

Brown Chevy station wagon laboring along the Blue Ridge Parkway of Virginia. Tall pines, mountain vistas, dad with his elbow out the driver’s window, his aviator sunglasses smudged with fingerprints. In the rearview mirror three boys hot and tired and needing to pee.

‘Ma, he’s diggin his elbow inna me!’ I whine.

‘No I ain’t,’ says En.

‘Y’are too!’

‘Y’am not.’

Our mother holds up the bag of Pepto-Bismol-pink mint candies. ‘Knock it off, or no more for the lot of you!’

‘I wasn’t doin nothin,’ says Em.

‘He was too. He was diggin inna me, too!’

‘Shut up. I was not.’

‘Were too!’

‘Was not.’

‘Dick, tell them to knock it off!’ my mother screams.

The springs creak and dad’s hairy nostrils appear briefly in the divider between seats. ‘One more peep, and we’ll turn this vehicle around and go home.’

Squished as I am, all I can do is peep, but I keep a lid on it. For now. It’s rough being ‘between two.’ But this is the camping trip we’ve been looking forward to all year. And dad is the boss. For now, I’m content to be ‘under one.’

Now it’s Katie looking at the clock and Rodrigo yawning. Steven’s leg’s looking for oil under Room 220. Morgan’s turned around in his chair and talking to Casey, whose brother I had in class a few years back. Sam, who speaks fluent Russian, says, “Are there really pink mints that look like Pepto Bismol?”

“Hard to believe, but true,” I say. I can see he’s got a *New York Times* crossword in front of him. It’s a Monday, and he’s about a third done with it. The ladies in the library photocopy the puzzle and leave a stack on the counter, and all the kids do them in class. I’m a crossword fanatic, so while I pretend to scold them and tell them to put the puzzles away, I invariably give them an answer or two or show them my completed puzzle, which I keep in my grade book. I’m always promising that one day we’ll devote the whole class to strategies of crossword solving. I can explain the puns, the abbreviations, why the words EDEN and ELAL and ELIA come up so often. “Sam, let’s put the crossword away,” I say.

He winks.

“Can I go to the bathroom?” asks Collin in the first row. He’s a virtuoso guitarist with green Irish eyes and fingers that can dance along a fret board like a Riverdance jig. He brings his guitar in sometimes and plays for the class.

I look at the clock. Ten minutes left. I think I saw his girlfriend pass by the door a few minutes ago. Do they have their rendezvous timed? “I don’t know, *can* you?”

“Uh, *may* I?”

“Go ahead.”

Tory’s got his Yankee’s hat cocked sideways. Too much rap music. Michael’s big, track-runner’s legs are lifting his desk off the floor. Sean is reading *Air & Space* magazine; he’s going to be an aerospace engineer—a good one, I think—and right now he’s more interested in ailerons than hyphens. This is probably a good thing. Next time I board a DC-10, I’ll remember it. Stella, who’s the spitting image of the actress Koyuki, star of *The Last Samurai*, and on whom I fear is lost my best rendition of Stanley Kowalski’s howled “Stell-aaaa!” is the last student still one-hundred percent attentive. For a second I remember my father telling me about his Navy bunkmate, a Native American, who slept with his eyes wide open. Could the same be true for Asian-Americans? But I can see she’s waiting. She wants to hear more about the hyphen.

“What are your brothers’ real names?” she says.

“Michael and Richard.”

“So why did you call them En and Em?”

“Oh, Stella!” I say.

“Okay, listen up. In Standard English there are three types of dashes. The first is the hyphen, which you all now know about. The other two are the em and en dashes. To confuse the hyphen and either of the other two dashes is to make a grave error.”

In the pond I see a few eyelids rise.

“The en dash, so called because in printing it is as wide as the letter N, is basically a symbol meaning ‘through.’ I go the board and scribble: *June 4th–6th*.”

“Hey, that’s prom weekend,” says Jon in the seat closest to me.

“Really?” I say. “Well, the weekend runs from June 4th *through* June 6th. With me?” A few ribbits. Time to get Socratic on their asses. “Who can tell me why the em dash is called the em dash?” I watch the second hand on the clock hum through ten seconds.

Steven says tentatively and without raising his hand, “Because it’s as wide as the letter M?”

“Oh, Steven!” I say. I give him a see-you’re-the-smartest-kid-in-the-class look.

Francia, her hair pulled back tight, looks at me with her big eyes. I know what she wants to say.

“What other word might the en dash replace?” I say. The second hand turns in the one direction it knows. I write on the board: *At prom hors d’oeuvres will be served from 5:00-6:00 PM.*

“What’s *whores-da-oovers*?” Ashelee says.

“Hors d’oeuvres!” everyone yells.

“I knew that,” Ash says. She grins, guzzles the Snapple I’ve asked her not to drink in class.

Justin pushes the hair from his eyes, raises his hand. “Uh, Mr. Whitehead, are they really serving hors d’oeuvres from five to six?”

“You just answered my question,” I say.

“What?”

Stella says, “I get it. The en dash also means ‘to.’”

“Oh, Stella!” I say, beaming.

George, beneath the perfect arc of his ball cap brim, looks angry. “What are you saying—that it’s wrong to use a hyphen in a case like that?”

“Technically. Yes.”

“So we use an en dash in place of ‘through’ or ‘to.’” Emphatic.irate.

“Right. The en dash conveys time, range, or distance.” I go to the board again and write: *The Chicago–Philadelphia route...pages 15–20...* “We

also use it in certain strings of compound adjectives when to use a hyphen would cause confusion.” I see we’re running out of time, so I scribble: *...a high-inflation–full-employment condition.*

“So, when do we use a hyphen or an em dash?” George demands. He thinks I hate him, but I really don’t. A few years ago, I wrote his sister’s college recommendation.

“Well,” I say, pointing to the board, “note that the hyphen is used to link up the compound adjectives ‘high-inflation’ and ‘full-employment.’ So, one use of the hyphen is to link compound adjectives.”

“You wrote that on my last essay,” says Diego. He’s one of the three Spanish-speaking kids in my class, and a few weeks ago when he read aloud a García Lorca poem in Spanish, my heart cracked.

“Now you know what I meant?”

He nods.

“Okay, we’re almost out of time. When do we use an em dash?” I say, rallying them. I can see that Deug Young has inched toward the door.

“He’s the big brother in the family of dashes,” Stella says.

I give her a glance that says, *Oh, Stella!*

“He’s the bully,” says Steven. “He muscles his way in a sentence.”

I give him a glance that says, *Oh, Steven!*

“Mr. Whitehead, did you get 12-across?” asks Sam.

“I did. Did you get 16-down?”

“Didn’t Emily Dickinson use dashes?” says Casey.

The big, square, gray clock says there are three minutes left, but I know it’s a minute fast. “Focus people, focus. The em dash creates a strong break in the structure of a sentence.” I go to the board and scribble as fast as I can: *Dashes can be used in pairs like parentheses—that is, to enclose a word, or a phrase, or a clause—or they can be used alone to detach one end of a sentence from the main body.*

“Like you just wrote,” says Dan, ever astute. “They can be like parentheses.”

I give him a nerdy thumbs-up. “Dashes are particularly useful in a sentence that is long and complex or in one that has a bunch of commas in it.”

I hear the door open, see Collin come back in. No new hickies, from what I can tell.

“Just in time,” I say to him. Then, of course, the bell rings and there’s a cacophony of

desks scraping, chair legs thumping, feet trampling. Only Ethan and Sam remain, crosswords in hand.

“Okay, what’s sixteen-down?” Sam says.

“What’s the clue?” I say, though I already know it.

Ethan, using the nub of a pencil as a guide, scrolls down the page. “Catalogue divider.”

“Is it INSERT?” Sam says.

“Too many letters,” says Ethan. “It’s gotta be five.”

“Don’t think mail order. Think list,” I say, “think *punctuation!*”

They look at me. Puzzled.

“I’ll give you a hint. This’ll be the lesson when I give back the next set of essays.”

“COMMA!”

Oh, Ethan! I say without saying it.

Gary J. Whitehead teaches English at Tenafly High School. His third book of poetry, *A Glossary of Chickens*, was recently published by Princeton University Press. New work is forthcoming in *The New Yorker*.

This poem is dedicated to all those who have suffered indignity and destruction at the hands of the unruly forces of nature.

Hurricane

Distant rumblings of fair warnings
 Official discoursed attempts
 Distilling nature’s fickle pattern
 Malevolent mayhem predicted and warned
 Harsh scoldings for malingerers and malcontents
 Prescient fear
 Agonized anticipation
 Entrance without invitation
 Ruinous rumbling
 Validated sequence
 Unforgiving anger
 Horrific howls
 Floods and tears
 Innocence scoffed
 Merciful pleas ignored
 Media signals incessantly beamed
 Illumination snuffed
 Hope shattered
 Devastation insidiously purveyed
 Redemption churlishly rebuked

- *Joe Pizzo*

A veteran teacher of 38 years at the Black River Middle School in Chester, **Joe Pizzo** serves as an adjunct professor at both Centenary College and Union County College. A staff announcer at WRNJ, Joe’s book *New Jersey ASK 7 Language Arts Literacy Test* recently went into its second printing with revisions. He was also named last month as a Teacher Who Makes Magic by WMGQ, and he initiated a visit at BRMS of 23 school principals from Shanghai.