

**SEQUEL TO APPLE ISLAND, OR THE TRUTH
ABOUT TEACHERS**

BRADLEY'S ODYSSEY

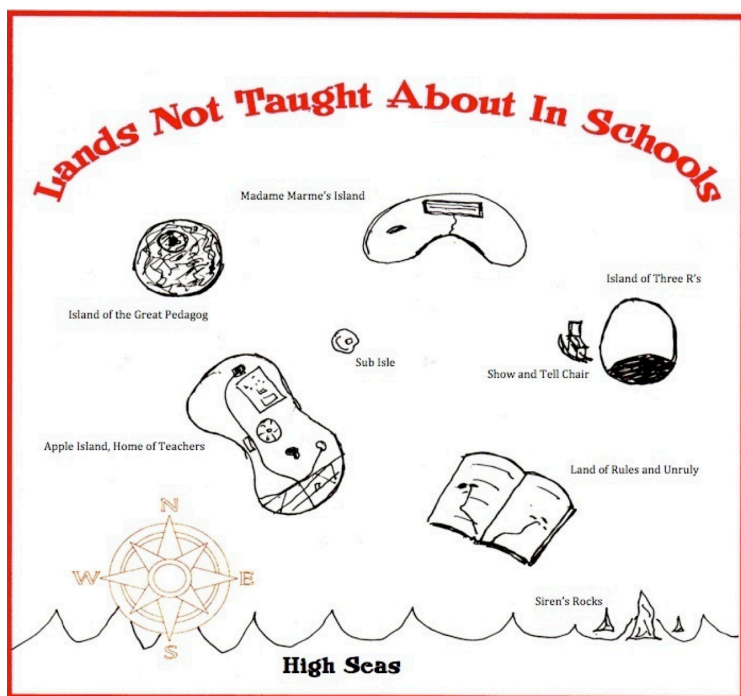


DOUGLAS EVANS

**AUTHOR OF MVP: MAGELLAN VOYAGE PROJECT,
ELEVATOR FAMILY, AND CLASSROOM AT THE END OF THE HALL**

BRADLEY'S ODYSSEY





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BRADLEY'S ODYSSEY



DOUGLAS EVANS



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FOR THE TEACHERS AND TRAVELERS



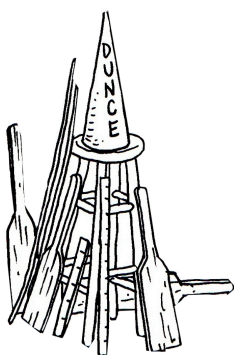
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"good stories; good tunes"

Too HOT To HOOT

The earthquake split Bradley's classroom in two. The wide crack in the classroom floor swallowed his class and teacher.

Moments before, Bradley Zimmerman had been sitting at his desk, taking a science quiz on the planets. His arms stuck to his desktop. His armpits were sopped, and his feet squished in his sneakers. A bead of sweat rolled off his chin and plopped onto his test paper.

"It's too hot to take a test," Bradley told himself. "It's too hot to think. It's too hot to hoot."

The next quiz question read:

5) What planet is closest to the sun?

Bradley checked the thermometer outside the window. "It's too hot to remember," he said. "The mercury is going to burst out of that thing."

He guessed at the answer and wrote it on the blank in his usual scribbly handwriting. Then he

reached into his desk and tore off the end of a Mars Bar. The next question read:

6) What planet is called the 'red planet'?

"How should I know?" he said, popping the candy into his mouth. "It's just too hot to take a test."

After taking another guess, Bradley looked out the window. On the playground, ripples of heat rose off the asphalt. The effect reminded him of a lake, which reminded him of water, which reminded him of the drinking fountain in the hallway, which reminded him of his terrific thirst.

He waved his test paper before his face. "Would the teacher let me get a drink in the middle of a test?" he wondered. "Not a chance. So I'll try something else."

Miss Smartt, his young, no-nonsense teacher, sat behind her desk, grading papers.

"Miss Smartt? The Boys' Room. I gotta go," Bradley called out. "It's an emergency. Urgent. I can't wait."

The teacher shook her head. Instead of answering Bradley, however, she addressed the entire class. "Class, what happened?" she said. "I've been checking your spelling tests, and you made *many* careless mistakes. Something's wrong. Some of you missed every word. So let's put on your Thinking Caps and try harder on this science quiz. OK?" Then she looked at Bradley and said, "Bradley, make is snappy."

Bradley hurried out the door. The drinking fountain stood halfway down the hall. As he hastened toward it, he heard the hum of its motor, keeping the water icy cold.

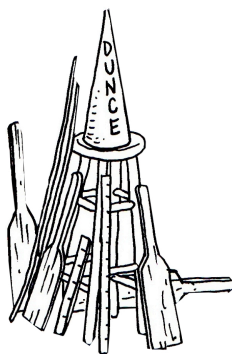
"It's too hot to listen to teachers," he said. "It's too hot to try. It's too hot to hoot."

Once at the fountain, he pressed his bare legs against the frosty, metal sides. He pushed the silver button on top. A worm of frigid water spouted out. Bradley leaned over. He puckered his parched lips as if to kiss the cascading stream.

"I'll drink the reservoir dry," he said. "I'll drink until my belly bursts."

Closer and closer he drew to the nozzle. The water wet the tip of his nose before touching his parched lips.

That's when the earthquake hit.



The earthquake

The floor shook; the ceiling shook; the walls shook. Bradley stumbled away from the trembling water fountain. A trashcan toppled over, and dust rained down from the swaying lights.

Burp! Burp! Burp! The earthquake alarm sounded to state the obvious. The school was in the midst of a major earthquake.

Having been through umpteen earthquake drills, Bradley knew what to do, either duck under a desk or stand in a doorway, whatever was closest. But how could he do either? With the world rocking around him, he could only stand in the hall, legs spread apart like a sailor on a tossing ship.

After fifteen seconds, the quaking stopped. Now Bradley had two choices, head for the playground or rejoin his class.

"I'd hate to miss all the action in the room," he said, and he started down the hall.

Lines of students streamed past Bradley as he worked his way to his classroom.

"Stay calm," teachers called out. "Remember where we lined up on the playground during drills."

Bradley reached his classroom door. He stood still and listened. Something was terribly wrong. Not a sound came from inside the room. No one was laughing or joking around. He put his ear to the door. Miss Smartt wasn't even barking out orders.

Cautiously, Bradley opened the door. He took two steps forward and froze. His toes hung over the edge of wide, deep crack that split the classroom floor in half.

Bradley stepped backward and dropped to his knees. He peered into the dark, jagged chasm. Black smoke blocked his view, but a low rumble came from far, far, below. He looked from one corner of the classroom to another.

"Miss Smartt and my class are gone," he said. "This fault must have swallowed them."

Again the walls rattled. The overhead lights swayed, and the water in the fish tank sloshed onto the shelf.

Bradley dove under one of the remaining desks.

While the room shook, puffs of smoke rose from the crack in the floor. The gray plumes exploded into mushrooms against the ceiling.

Now with the rumble and roar came a new sound.

Thumpety...Thumpety...Thumpety.

"Horses?" Bradley told himself.

Thumpety...Thumpety...Thumpety.

"Yes, and they're coming this way!"

More smoke belched from the fissure as the galloping grew louder and louder. All at once two charcoal-black horses sprang out of the crack. Their hooves pounded on the classroom floor. Steam shot from their flaring nostrils. Their long manes whipped the air as they raised their heads and let out piercing screams.

Four black, marble eyes fixed on Bradley. The pair of steeds pranced forward, drawing a shiny, black chariot into the classroom. In the two-wheeled carriage stood a figure dressed in black armor. A black helmet covered his head. A black chest plate bearing the letter F covered his front. The figure pulled the reins, and the horses stopped inches from where Bradley hunkered.

Bradley's sweat turned cold. He peered upward. "Um...ah," he began. "Visitors are supposed to sign in at the office."

The figure in black raised a fist. Laughter boomed from beneath his helmet. "Visitor?" he said. "No, *student*, I'm no visitor. I belong at this school, as I belong in every school. For I am Flunk, God of Failure and Forgetfulness; Lord of Losers, Last Place, and Laziness; and Ruler of the Underschool. Tell me your name, student."

The boy gulped. "Bradley," he said. "And I'm not lord of anything. I'm just a C student, an average, ordinary kid in this classroom."

At the mention of the name Bradley, the horses reared and scratched the air with their hooves. Their whinnies sent shivers up Bradley's spine.

"Bradley?" the dark figure exclaimed. Again peals of laughter came from the helmet. "*This* is Bradley? This scrawny, crawling student in short pants is the hero, Bradley, the Underachiever? This boy, who gets average grades, guesses on every test question, never tries in math, has horrible handwriting, does so-so in PE, and is mediocre in every other school subject, but who the gods of Mount Academy call the most clever and courageous fourth-grader on earth, is *Bradley*? Tell me you're kidding."

Bradley shrugged. "Perhaps you have the wrong Bradley."

"Bradley Zimmerman? Room Nine?" Flunk said. "You're the right Bradley, all right. Which means I created that excellent earthquake and

hauled this class to the Underschool all for nothing."

"*You* made the earthquake?"

"It's all my fault," said the god.

"But I'm not great or anything," said Bradley.

"And I don't care about school. I'm bored, bored, bored.

"Boy overboard!" said Flunk. "So my trip to the upper world has been a waste of time. I failed to capture the one student I was after...you."

Bradley drew in a long breath. "As you said, I'm average and ordinary. So why would you want to capture *me*?"

Again the dark god pounded the F on his chest. "Because according to the oracle, Internet, you are the great underachiever, the one student who is a threat to my plan. The Fates have let you escape this time, Bradley. But rest assured, we *will* meet again. And when that time comes I, Flunk, God of Failure, will not fail a second time to stop you."

Bradley shrugged. "But I was just getting a drink of water. I'm not a threat to anything."

The black figure yanked the horse reins. A plume of smoke rose to the ceiling as the horse team turned and leaped into the chasm, pulling the Lord of the Underschool behind them.

Bradley rubbed his eyes. "I 'm seeing things," he said. "Maybe I've been playing too many

video games. I bet my teacher and class are out on the playground with everyone else."

Bradley's chair stood nearby. Grabbing his backpack off the back, he rose to his feet and stumbled toward the classroom door. In the doorway, he turned to watch the crack in the floor begin to close. Narrower and narrower it became, until it was a slit, until it was gone completely.

PEN

The playground was pandemonium. Shouts, screams, and peels of laughter greeted Bradley as he exited the school. Teachers blew whistles, while their students ran around them.

The principal, Mr. Homer, stood outside the office. He called into a bullhorn, "Don't panic, children. The earthquake is over. But there could be aftershocks, so keep calm. Don't panic."

One quick look around the playground told Bradley that his teacher and classmates were absent. Dragging his backpack, he shuffled onto the baseball field. He sat on a bench by home plate.

"They'll figure out my class is missing soon enough," he said. "How could I explain that a god named Flunk took them to a place called the Underschool?"

Perhaps roused by the recent vibrations, the birds in the trees squawked loudly. As Bradley

listened to the tweets, he picked out one birdcall unlike any he had heard before.

"That's not a bird," he told himself. "Someone's playing a recorder."

He turned and glimpsed a figure dancing among the trees.

"Hello? Hello?" he called out. "Who's over there?"

Again he saw the thing. Was it a person? An animal? No, it was both, a creature with the furry legs of a goat and the top half of a man. His ears were pointed, and two short horns sprouted from his forehead. He kicked out his hoofed feet and did a somersault on the leafy ground without missing a note on his instrument.

The performance was so jolly and skillful Bradley couldn't help smiling. "I know who you are," he said. "You're Pan and you're a satyr. I've seen your picture in books."

The creature stopped dancing. Bradley saw that it hadn't been blowing into a recorder after all, but a long fountain pen with a broad gold-plated nib.

"Wrong, Brad," said the creature. "My name is Pen. Pan, the wild one, is my brother, as is Pin, the sharp one, and Pun, the funny one. I'm the writer in the family."

Here the satyr swirled the jumbo pen in the air as if writing cursive letters. In front of Bradley's eyes appeared the word PEN. The word floated

away, dissolving like smoke from a campfire.

"But what are you doing at my school?" Bradley asked.

Pen danced a jig around the bench. "I'm here to write a message for you, Brad, the hero."

Bradley groaned. "Not that hero stuff again," he said. "Listen, Pen, like I told Flunk in my classroom, I'm no hero. I mean, I'm chicken to go into the coat closet with the lights out. The girls call me Rosy because I blush so much. I still can't dribble a basketball with my left hand, and I cried when that fifth-grader, Virgil, pushed my head into the toilet. Would you call that hero material?"

Pen played another tune on his penpipe. "Never deny who you are, Brad. A true underachiever. The message I have for you comes straight from the gods themselves."

Before Bradley could ask another question, the satyr wrote more words in the air.

TO THE UNDERACHIEVER, BRADLEY,
YOUR ATTENDANCE IS REQUESTED
AMONG THE IMMORTALS OF EDUCATION
ON MOUNT ACADEMY.

ASAP

SIGNED, SUPER

Bradley reread the message before it dissolved. "Super? Who on earth is Super?"

Pen sat on the ground with his hairy legs

crossed. "Oh, Super isn't on Earth, Brad. And you'll meet him soon enough. Now we must hurry. There's little time to lose."

Again Pen blew on his penpipe. Soon afterward, Bradley heard the roar of an engine. Turning, he spotted a school bus painted shiny silver driving into the parking lot. Stenciled on its side was a picture of a white horse with wings. Above the bus windshield were the words:

MOUNT ACADEMY EXPRESS

The silver bus pulled up next to Bradley's bench. The door folded open, and a red carpet unrolled to his feet.

Pen sprang up. "You should know, Brad, it's a great honor to be invited to Mount Academy. Few students have ever been there. Won't you please step onto the bus, and don't forget your backpack. There are items in there that you will find useful on your long voyage."

Bradley lifted the backpack off the ground. "But there's nothing in here but a math book, paper, and stuff," he said. "And what long voyage? I can't go on any voyage. I have homework to do after school."

"You have far more important things to do than homework, Brad," said Pen. "Now off you go. Hurry. Hurry."

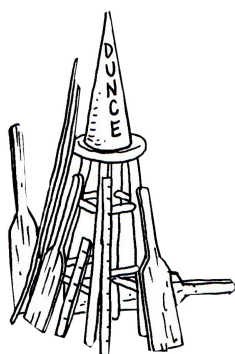
While Pen played more music, Bradley trudged up the red carpet. At the foot of the bus steps he stopped.

"Word of warning, Great Underachiever," the satyr called to him. "There is trouble brewing here on earth. Once again education is in grave danger, and your skills are needed. Your journey will be hard and perilous. While many of the gods will be there to protect you, you also have many foes.

"Danger? Perilous? Foes?" Bradley recited.

"As my brother Pin says, 'Keep a sharp lookout,'" Pen went on. "And as my brother Pun says, 'It's time to get the shoe on the road.' Take care, Brad, and whatever you do, don't lose that backpack."

Bradley shrugged and mounted the steps. Slowly the door folded behind him.



THE SILVER BUS

The bus was empty. Bradley swung off his backpack and sat in a seat halfway down the aisle.

"Hello?" he called out. "Is anyone on this bus? Who's driving this thing?"

Although no one sat in the driver's seat, the bus started to move. The steering wheel turned, and the gear stick shifted. No one on the playground seemed to notice the silver bus, with only Bradley aboard, leaving the parking lot.

Bradley looked out the window. The sidewalk flowed by at a startling rate. Houses flew passed in a blur.

"Where's this bus taking me?" Bradley called out. "What's Mount Academy?"

A tap on his shoulder startled him. He spun around, but the seat behind him was empty. He faced forward only to feel another tap. Infuriated, he turned again. Once more he found a vacant seat, and once more he faced forward. After a

third tap, he turned with a fist raised.

"Knock it off," he snarled.

Now in the seat sat a boy with silver skin. He wore a silver sweatshirt and a silver baseball cap with silver wings attached. His silver sneakers bore silver wings as well.

Bradley shook his fist at the boy. "Cut out the games," he said. "Stop playing around."

The wings on the boy's hat and shoes fluttered. "Stop playing around?" he said. "Who would ever want to stop playing around, Brave Bradley?"

The boy held a short silver rod with a chain and ball attached. When he swirled the rod, the ball wrapped and unwrapped around it as a tetherball did a pole.

Bradley made a face. "Who are you? And what are you doing on this bus?"

"My name is Recess," the boy said. "I am God of Play, God of Games, and Guardian of School Playgrounds. I'm here to see that you get safely to the great mountain upon which the Academy stands."

Bradley looked out the window again. "But I walk this way to school every day," he said. "I've never seen any mountain around here."

"It's easy to make a mountain from an ant hill, Brave Bradley," Recess said. "People do it all the time."

As the god spoke, Bradley slid back in his

seat. The landscape out the window suddenly changed. The bus was now rolling up a twisting gravel road. Green meadows and fields of sunflowers grew on the slopes by the roadsides.

Bradley peered out one side of the bus and then the other. "Look in that field," he said. "I see more satyrs like Pen. They're all playing games.

Recess swirled his rod some more. "The tall satyr's name is *It*," he said. "He's playing tag with his buddies *Eeny*, *Meeny*, *Miny*, and *Moe*. And see the two satyrs by the bushes? Those are *Hide* and *Seek*. The red and green couple just ahead is *Red Light* and *Green Light*. And notice the big, burly satyr, Brave Bradley. That's *Simon*, and everyone does what he says."

Bradley pointed to another field. "Look at the horses. No, they're men. No, their bottoms are like horses and their tops are like men. They're galloping around, kicking a soccer ball.

"Those are centaurs," Recess explained. "And they love playing soccer, a game I invented. Keep your eyes open. These slopes are often filled with wildlife playing more of my playground games."

Soon the bus entered a woods of trees bearing golden apples. Among the trees, Bradley spotted wood nymphs skipping rope, playing hopscotch, and twirling Hula-Hoops. Nearby, stags with silver antlers ran relay races, while four water

nymphs standing in a square, batted a red ball.

"They're playing four-square," said Bradley. "That's my favorite recess game."

Recess nodded. "I've watched you play many times," he said.

Bradley pointed again, "Hey, look over there," he said. "Why are all those nymphs chasing that centaur?"

"The centaur's name is *Extra Credit*," Recess explained. "And everyone likes going after *Extra Credit*."

At that moment the silver bus entered thick fog. The scene turned gray and misty.

"I believe you have sunglasses in your backpack, Brave Bradley," the silver god said. "It would be wise to wear them. We'll be at the gates of the Academy shortly."

Bradley found the dark glasses in his bag and put them on. The bus stopped in front of a tall chain link gate. Before the gate stood three maidens in white gowns.

"Those are the three Seasons...*Fall*, *Winter*, and *Spring*," Recess explained. "They are the gatekeepers of the Academy."

"What happened to *Summer*?" Bradley asked.

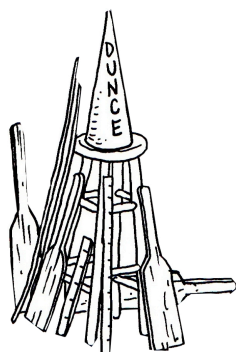
"She's always on vacation," said the god of Play. "That's why little work gets done around here at that time of year."

Recess nodded to the Seasons, and they pulled the gate open. At once, beams of sunlight

struck the silver bus. In the distance, Bradley saw their destination, an enormous, red, wooden structure. Apart from its size, the building resembled a one-room schoolhouse of a long ago time, complete with a bell tower on top. As the bus approached, a brass bell in the tower began to sway until *ding-dong ding-dong* resounded across the mountaintop as though a new school day were about to begin.

The silver bus stopped at the foot of a staircase leading to the building's wide front door. Recess stood and said, "We must hurry, Brave Bradley. The Gods of Education are gathering in the Board Room. Your meeting will soon begin."

Bradley slung his backpack over his shoulder. "I'm going to a meeting?" he said. "Uh-oh. Every meeting I've been to--meetings with my teacher, meetings with the principal, meetings with my teacher, principal, *and* parents--has meant one thing, *big trouble*."



THE BOARD ROOM

Bradley climbed down from the bus. At the foot of the stairway stood four women dressed in long white gowns. The quartet stepped forward, bowing their heads.

"Welcome to the Hall of Education, Underachiever," they said as one. "We are the Muses."

"I am Art," said the first woman, who held a paintbrush.

"I am Music," said the next woman, who strummed an autoharp.

"I am Drama," said the third woman, who held two masks, one grinning and one grimacing.

"And I am Poetry," said the last woman, who waved a quill pen.

Recess leaned toward *Bradley's* ear. "The Muses are some of the lesser gods here," he said. "When we run out of room in the Hall of Education, they're the first ones to get tossed out."

"Please follow us, Underachiever," the Muses chorused.

The women escorted Bradley up the flight of stairs. As he climbed, he read the bronze plaque attached to each step.

Grad School

College

High School

Middle School

Intermediate grades

Primary grades

Pre-school

"We're ascending the Seven Steps of Education," Recess told him.

Bradley stood on the top step and looked downward. "It seems like I've be going to school forever," he said. "But I'm not even halfway through with it yet."

The Muses brought Bradley through a large wooden doors and into a long hallway. Bulletin boards filled with notices lined the walls. Florescent lights overhead lit the way.

At the end of the hall, two tall knights dressed in a red armor stood at before a pair of wide glass doors.

"Pass, please," one of them said.

"Greetings, Hall Monitors," the Muses said together. "The Underachiever Bradley has come to see Super."

The knights bowed and opened the glass

doors. Bradley read a sign above the doors: BOARD ROOM, before stepping into a dimly-lit chamber. He paused to allow his eyes to adjust to the dim light.

On the floor in front of him lay a long, gray board full of knots, cracks, and splinters that could have been a piece of driftwood. The Muses bowed as they passed it.

"What's that piece of wood there for?" Bradley asked Recess.

"Behold, the Board of Education, Brave Bradley," the silver god replied. "Many gods believe this ancient plank holds extraordinary powers. But it's been here so long, we've forgotten what good it does."

Countless glowing video screens covered the walls of the room. Women and men sat in swivel chairs before the monitors.

"Who are these people?" he asked Recess. "Why are they watching TV?"

The God of Play waved his rod around the Board Room. "These are Gods of Education, otherwise known as the Immortal Faculty," he said. "Each screen shows a different classroom in the world."

Bradley stepped behind a goddess dressed in a brown robe. In the crook of her arm, she held a leather-bound book. The screen she viewed showed rows of students writing stories.

The goddess slapped her forehead. "Amanda

Blueberry did it again," she said. "Amanda misspelled *friend!* Why can't she remember / *before E, except after C?*"

Recess leaned toward Bradley. "That's Alphabetty, Goddess of Words," he whispered. "She and her twenty-six assistants have not been having a troubling day."

The god sitting next to Alphabetty wore a yellow robe. Above his yellow hair swirled a sideways figure eight that Bradley recognized as the symbol for infinity. This god's monitor showed a class in the middle of math period. The teacher held up the flash card 7×7 .

"Fourteen? Sixty-three? Forty-two?" the class called out.

The god in yellow groaned.

"That's Digit, God of Mathematics," Recess explained. "As you can see, the sum total of his day is also not good."

Bradley followed Recess to another wall where two more immortals sat. The first wore green and a crown of leaves. The second wore blue and carried a small globe.

"Meet the twin gods," Recess said. "Atom, God of Science and Geo, Goddess of Social Studies."

Atom watched a class studying pill bugs in a science lab. Never had a group looked so lazy and bored. Geo's screen showed a class drawing maps of the continents and oceans. One boy

labeled Europe as Africa. A girl colored Asia blue and called it the Pacific Ocean.

"What's going on, Recess?" Bradley asked. "The students on the screens are doing the dumbest things. No one is thinking."

"The crisis will be explained to you shortly," the silver god replied.

At that moment a bell rang. The gods and goddess left their posts and moved toward a round table in the center of the room. Ten director's chairs, each a different color, surrounded it. The immortals sat in the chairs matching the colors of their robes. When assembled, they resembled the color wheel Bradley had made in art class. Several gods he didn't know.

"The god in red is Discipline, God of Classroom Rules and Order," Recess told him. "You might be familiar with his helpers Detention and Time Out." Bradley noted the long paddle this stern-looking god slapped in his palm.

"The goddess in purple, is Counselor, Super's wife," Recess went on. "She's the Goddess of Children's Health and Safety."

"That explain why she's wearing a bike helmet," said Bradley.

Four chairs remained empty. Bradley figured the silver one belonged to Recess and the black one was Flunk's. The orange and white chairs puzzled him.

"The orange chair is reserved for Coach, God of Physical Education," Recess told him. "He seldom leaves his Gymnasium beneath the ocean. The white chair is where the head god sits. That chair belongs to Superintendent, who we call Super. Super is the god we're waiting for now."

SUPER

While the Gods and Goddesses of Education waited, a man dressed in a white hoodie and sweat pants entered the Board Room. He set a tray of coffee mugs and doughnuts on the table.

"That's Aid, cup bearer of the gods," Recess explained to Bradley. "He's brought us coffee, the *elixir* of the gods."

At that moment a window swung open. A light breeze swept into the room along with a paper airplane. The plane floated downward, circling the Board of Education twice. It did a loop-the-loop, before landing on the round table in front of the white director's chair.

Bradley stepped forward. On top of the airplane, he spotted two things, a pile of paper clips, and a three-inch tall man wearing a white business suit. The tiny man had a shock of white hair on the top of his head and a beard hanging to his waist. He climbed off the plane and strode over to a microphone. His voice came over a

speaker mounted on the wall.

"Sorry I'm late, staff. As you know, there's much work needed in the classrooms below."

Counselor leaned forward in her purple chair. "You haven't been tossing paper clips at students again, have you, Super?" she asked.

"Only at those not paying attention to their teacher, dear," Super replied. "I'm afraid, however, that there were many daydreamers today."

"One of these times you're going to poke an eye out with those things," scolded the Goddess of Health and Safety.

At this point Recess raised his rod to gain attention. "Superintendent," he said. "We have a special guest with us. By my side stands the Great Underachiever, Bradley."

The immortals at the table went silent. They set down their coffee mugs and turned toward the boy. Bradley rocked on his heels and waved from his hip.

"Bradley, my boy," Super called out. "Thanks for coming. The Gods of Education here have told me that you've been doing your usual average work in school, complete with procrastination and a ho-him attitude. "

Bradley shrugged.

"Well, it's time to put all that behind you, my boy," said Super. "It's time to live up to your true potential. Aid, bring our underachiever a chair."

The cupbearer placed a golden director's chair next to Super. Bradley sat down, smiling nervously around the table. This was beginning to sound like an ordinary parent-teacher conference.

"Bradley, these are troubled times," Super said into his mike. "Yesterday, something occurred that disrupted the entire world of education."

"A new video game? Another TV station?" Bradley guessed.

Super paced back and forth, pulling his beard. "Bradley, an important piece of apparel has disappeared from Mount Academy," he said gravely. "You see, my boy, the *Thinking Cap* has gone missing."

Bradley screwed up his face. "The Thinking Cap? Like the thing teachers tell students to put on after they ask them a tricky question?"

"The very one," said the tiny god.

"You mean there really is such a hat?" asked Bradley.

The gods and goddesses around the table nodded.

Alphabetty dropped the fat book she carried onto the table. "The Thinking Cap is the ultimate source of knowledge, Bradley," she said.

Digit's infinity symbol spun faster. "It's the fountain of creativity and inspiration for every student in every school," he added.

Geo twirled her globe on the end of a finger

and remarked, "Whoever wears the Thinking Cap, knows everything about everything, Bradley."

"And even more important, whoever wears the hat can control the thoughts and minds of anyone else," said Atom. His leaf crown had slipped over his forehead.

Discipline in the red chair slapped his paddle in his palm. "Think of what that means, Bradley," he said. "Anyone who wears the Thinking Cap can drain the brain of every boy and girl."

"Is that what happened in my classroom today?" asked Bradley. "Is that why I couldn't think of the answers on my science quiz?"

The immortals nodded again.

"But to fully explain this problem, my boy, it's best to start at the beginning," said Super. "Alphabetty, let me see your book."

Alphabetty slid the book across the table. The gold letters on the spine read: TEACHER MYTHS AND LEGENDS. A puff of dust rose into the air when Super pushed opened the cover. He climbed onto page one and began to read.

THE CREATION OF TEACHERS

1. Sir and Miss

Long ago when the earth was nothing but water, chalk dust, and modeling clay, Super sat on Mount Academy feeling bored.

“Counselor, there’s nothing on Earth to watch tonight,” he complained to his wife. “Just the same dull stuff—water, dust, and clay.”

“Then make something to amuse yourself, Super,” Counselor replied. “Create something that will make the world a better place. Create something that will work hard, but won’t demand much pay.”

So Super flew down to earth and grabbed a lump of clay. He mixed it with chalk dust, pencil shavings, and eraser crumbs. He stirred in a pint of patience, a cup of caring, a dollop of dedication, and a handful of humor. Then he shaped the lump into two figures and called his creations *teachers*. One teacher he named Sir and the other Miss.

2. Gifts To the Teachers

When the gods in the Hall of Education learned about the teachers, each gave them a gift. Counselor knew Sir and Miss would need food, so she gave them a healthy, red fruit.

“This is an apple,” she said. “An apple is as versatile as a teacher must be to do a good job. You can bake it to make pies, squash it to make sauce, squeeze it to make juice, or bob for it to have fun on Halloween.” From that day on Counselor’s gift became the symbol for all teachers.

The next gift came from Recess. “Here is a silver whistle,” he said “Blow it, and anyone who hears you will suddenly stop doing whatever they were doing.”

Therapist forged the next gift under his volcano. “This is a bell,” he said. “Ring it, and anyone who hears you will come running your way.”

Alphabetty gave the teachers letters, and Digit gave them numbers. It was Super, however, who gave the greatest gift...the Thinking Cap.

3. The Thinking Cap

Although the Thinking Cap looked like a plain, gray baseball cap, it had amazing powers. The instant the teachers put it on, they spoke wise words. They wrote books about what they said and wrote book reports about what they read in their books.

Wearing the Thinking Cap, Sir and Miss wandered the world. Whenever Atom made new

plants and animals or Geo created new rivers and mountains, the teachers stuck a label on them, giving each item a name. They wrote the names on lists. Each Friday they tested each other on how to spell every word.

4. The Crab Apple

For years, life on earth was peaceful and interesting. All went well until Flunk, Lord of the Underschool, decided to stir up trouble. One day, when Counselor wasn't looking, the God of Failure placed a new apple in Sir's lunchbox, a hard, yellow crab apple.

The next lunch period Sir bit into the apple and made a sour face. From that time on, whenever he wore the Thinking Cap, his thoughts were crabby and cruel. He thought up names to call Miss, and ways to trick her. He began writing boring books and giving dull speeches. Even worse, he grew tired of learning.

5. Apple Island

Sir and Miss arrived on a peanut-shaped island. Sir planted three crab apple seeds in the southern half of the island. Miss planted three red apple seeds in the North.

The crab apple seeds grew into a dense, dark forest that Sir liked very much. "This is where I will stay and live," he said.

At the same time, Miss's trees grew into lovely woods. The land became green and grassy. "This is

the place for me," she said. "I'll make my home here."

In the center of the island stood a White Mountain that the teachers named Chalk Mountain. Near its base, Custodian, God of Classroom Tidiness, placed a hat rack. That is where Sir and Miss hung the Thinking Cap. Then, before they parted, the teachers chose a name for their new home. They called it Apple Island.



Super stopped reading. He jumped down from TEACHER MYTHS AND LEGENDS.

"So that was the beginning, Bradley, my boy," he said. "In the following years I molded more teachers who lived on Apple Island."

Counselor pulled the strap on her purple bike helmet. "The teachers built Teacher City, The Great Hallway, The Grand Playground, The Great Book Building, and Office Palace where they kept the Thinking Cap," she added.

"Eventually the kind teachers left Apple Island," said Geo. "They sailed to America and built the Small Citizens Houses of Official Learning. Otherwise known as S.C.H.O.O.L.s."

"And when they left Apple Island they took the Thinking Cap with them," said Discipline. "They placed it in a certain coat closet, in a certain classroom, in a certain school, until yesterday when a certain teacher named Mrs. Stickyfingers stole it."

"And she hid it somewhere not even Monitor, Lookout of the Gods can find it," said Geo.

"But what do you want from me?" asked Bradley. "What can I do about the missing hat?"

Super kicked the spine of Alphabetty's brown book. "Bradley, my boy," he said. "There's another myth in this book. It foretells of a time when education on earth will be in great jeopardy as it is today. The myth says that knowledge and learning will crumble until a hero, a common underachiever with average grades, will come out of a classroom to save it."

"This boy, the myth hints, will be eleven-years old," said Digit.

"And his name will begin with B," said Alphabetty.

Bradley gulped. "Bob? Brian? Beethoven?"

The gods and goddesses stared at the boy. "Bradley," they chanted.

"Yes, Bradley, my boy, we believe you're the underachiever who can find and return the Thinking Cap," said Super. "We believe you are the chosen one."

Bradley slid low in his chair. "Me? Chosen? But I'm never chosen for anything. Teachers never choose me to be a class helper. Kids never choose me for a partner in class projects. And if we ever choose teams in PE game I'm always the last one picked."

"Bradley, the world needs you," said Geo.

"And if you run into any trouble, the gods will be watching you from the Board Room," said Atom.

"I only wish you had warmer clothes," said Counselor. "You'll catch your death of cold dressed like that."

Bradley raised his shoulders to his ears. "But even if I wanted to look for the Thinking Cap, I don't know where to start."

Recess spun his rod. "A good place to start is at the Starting Line, Brave Bradley," he said. "The silver bus is waiting to take you there now. Just follow the Muses."

With a nod from Super, the four Muses approached the table.

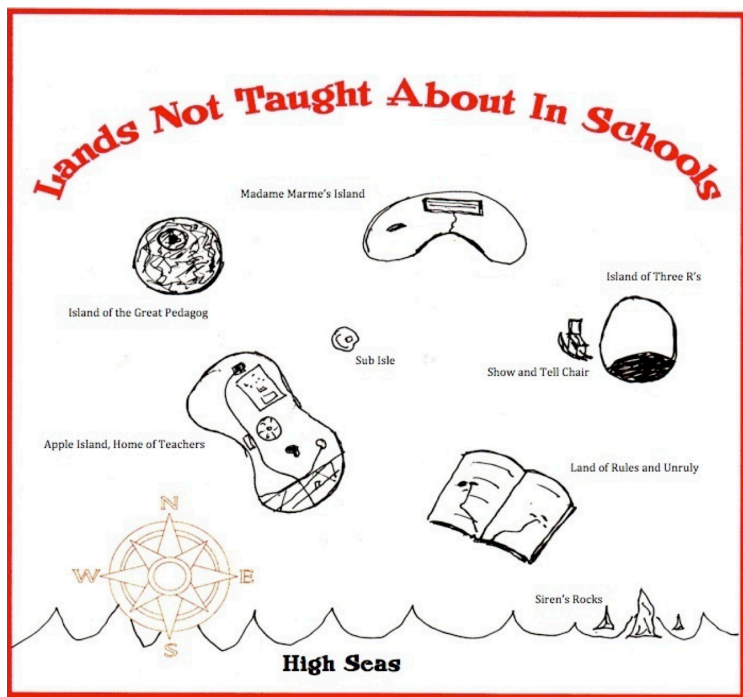
Bradley stood. Shouldering his backpack, he followed Art, Music, Drama, and Poetry out the door. His head buzzed with a million questions. He looked back at the table and started to say, "But I..."

The Gods of Education, however, had already resumed their Staff Meeting.

"OK, next matter of business," Super's voice came over the speaker. "Summer vacation is drawing near. Which of you gods will volunteer to host the End-of-Year Staff Party?"

DOUGLAS EVANS

PART 2
THE JOURNEY



THE ODYSSEY BEGINS

The silver bus drove to the ocean. It parked beside a sandy beach in a small cove. The door folded open, and Bradley climbed down the steps. A light, fishy breeze blew, and small waves lapped near his feet. His toes rested on a white, chalk line that stretched from one end of the beach to the other.

"Hello? Hello?" Bradley called out.

In the water about fifty yards off shore, a group of orange dolphins leaped and splashed. Among the dolphins, Bradley spotted a trail of bubbles, moving toward him. Soon the bald head of a diver surfaced. An orange scuba tank appeared, followed by a muscular body encased in an orange wet suit. The diver stood up in waste-deep water and lifted his facemask, revealing a round face with red cheeks and a

handlebar mustache. He held a harpoon with three sharp points.

"All right, laddie, let's get started," the diver called out. "On your mark! Get set!..."

"Wait!" cried Bradley. "I don't even know what I am starting."

"Well now, laddie, you're standing on the Starting Line, so you can start anything you want," said the diver. "A swimming race? A running relay? Push-ups? Sit-ups? Looks like you could use a bit of exercise. Care to start a car? Why not start a fire or a fight?"

Bradley shook his head. "I'm starting to get confused."

"I can start that too," said the diver. "On your mark! Get set!..."

"Wait!" Bradley repeated. "Who are you?"

"The name is Coach, God of Physical Education, laddie," the diver said. "It's also my job to help children get started on things such as math assignments, book reports, and science projects. So whatever you need to start, let's get started."

"I'm supposed to start looking for the Thinking Cap," said Bradley.

The god stroked his smooth chin. "The Thinking Cap? The Thinking Cap, did you say, laddie? Aye, now, that means you're starting on a great adventure, a long odyssey. That means you'll need an especially good start. You'll need

a head start, a flying start, or a jump-start. From what I hear, the Thinking Cap is hidden far across the ocean. It lies in Lands Never Taught About in School; Never Shown on Maps or GPS Devices."

"I think I'm going to start crying," said Bradley.

"On your mark! Get set!..." Coach began again.

"Listen, Coach," said Bradley. "Is there any way of getting out of going on this odyssey?"

The God of PE pulled out one side of his mustache and let it spring back "Not unless you have a note from your parents, laddie," he said.

"But how am I ever going to get across the ocean?" asked Bradley.

"Well now, I can start you off on the right foot," said Coach.

Here the god raised his three-pronged harpoon. Almost at once, a long, wooden ship rounded the end of the cove. Although the deck was empty, a dozen oars, six per side, swung back and forth in a steady rhythm. The ship's tall curved bow turned toward the shore, revealing a carved, wooden head on its front tip. The purple figurehead resembled the goddess Counselor.

The ship struck the beach and slid to a stop a foot from the Starting Line. A rope ladder dropped over its side.

"Here's your ship, ship-shaped and ready to ship out, laddie," the orange god announced.

"But the boat has no crew," said Bradley. "How do I get it started?"

"Just give a command, and it will take you where you want," said Coach. "Now, laddie, if you're finally ready to start, I'll give the start signal. On your mark! Get set! Get going!"

Bradley sighed. Holding his backpack by the strap, he climbed the rope ladder. He stood alone on the ship's wooden deck.

"But, Coach, I don't know which way to start sailing," he called out.

"Well, laddie, this being the Atlantic Ocean you can't sail farther West, so I suggest you head east."

Bradley turned a full circle. "OK, ship," he said. "It's weird talking to wood, but would you mind rowing out to sea?"

Nothing happened.

"You're now the ship's captain, laddie," said Coach. "Bark out those commands as though you mean it."

"OK, ship!" Bradley shouted. "Head east!"

In unison, the twelve oars rose. They dipped into the water and swung backward. The ship's high bow turned toward the eastern horizon.

"Forward, ship!" Bradley commanded. And, with swift strong strokes, the oars pulled the boat swiftly through the gentle waves.

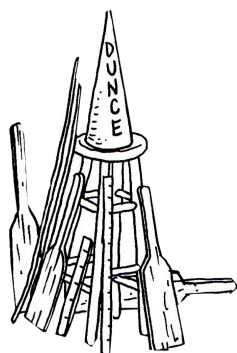
Ahead, a large orange sea horse rose to the surface. It skidded across the water on its curled

tail. Riding the sea horse was a naked boy, holding a conch shell.

"That boy is one of my assistance," Coach called from shore. "His name is Once-Upon-a-Time, and he's helpful if you want to start a story. Bon voyage, laddie. You're off to an excellent start."

At that moment, the boy on the sea horse raised the conch shell to his lips. A trumpet blast resounded across the sea.

Bradley stood in the ship's bow. He called out, "Once-Upon-a-Time there was a boy named Bradley, and he had no idea what he just started."



FOUND AND LOST

Bradley's ship sailed over the grape-dark sea. In no time, land was out of sight. Rise, dip, swing; rise, dip, swing, the oars rowed by the phantom crew kept a constant tempo.

Bradley sat on his backpack. "So where should we go now, ship?" he called out. "There's nothing in sight but sky and water."

As he spoke, someone tapped his shoulder. Turning, he saw nothing. "Recess?" he called out. "Is this one of your games?"

"Up here, Brave Bradley," said a voice over his head.

Bradley looked up to see the silver god, hovering ten feet above him. The wings on his cap and sneakers flapped double-time.

"You must sail northward to the High Seas," said the God of Play. "There you will find the island of Show and Tell. They can show or tell you where to find the Thinking Cap. But be warned, Brave Bradley. To reach Show and

Tell's island you must first pass the rocks of Found and Lost."

"Found and Lost?" said Bradley. "Don't you mean Lost and Found?"

Recess swirled his silver rod. "The women who dwell on the rocks are named Found and Lost," he said. "Any sailor who hears the songs they sing longs to get closer to them. Instead, they end up on the jagged crags. The rocks are strewn with the bones of men and women who found Found and Lost, but were soon lost at sea."

Without another word, Recess shot upward like a bottle rocket. Before the silver missile disappeared into the clouds, Bradley again heard the god's warning, "Beware, Brave Bradley. Beware of the Songs of Found and Lost."

Bradley stood. Once more he addressed the empty ship deck. "Turn left at the next wave, ship. Sail northward. A few rocks should be easy to avoid. It's time for Show and Tell!"

At once the ship turned. Soon afterward, the northern horizon changed. The wavy line where the ocean met the sky appeared as a high arc, and the water ahead sloped upward.

"Recess told me to sail to the High Seas," said Bradley. "We must be almost there."

As the unseen oarsmen sculled up the tilting ocean, Bradley and his backpack slid to the stern. He stayed pinned to the back of the boat until the deck leveled off. A stiff breeze blew. Waves as

tall as jungle gyms pushed the ship along at a terrific speed.

Bradley ran to the bow. He turned an ear into the wind and heard faint music.

"Someone is singing, ship," he said. "I also hear a guitar and drums. Wow! What a beat. It's coming from those rocks over there. Steer for those rocks, ship. I gotta hear more of that band!"

The ship changed course, and the rocks drew nearer. The music grew louder, and the words came clearer:

Bradley! Bradley! Hear Found and Lost sing.

Swim to us, and you'll have everything.

No matter what you have, you need more.

Our rocks are better than any store.

"Did you hear that, ship?" said Bradley.

"They're singing to me! They know my name!"

The ship coasted closer to the sharp-toothed rocks. Sun-bleached bones, even complete skeletons, were scattered about them.

On a ledge at the water's edge, a pair of tall women was singing. Each had long black hair. Each wore black leather jackets and pants. One played an electric guitar, and the other drums. On the front of the base drum were the words:

FOUND AND LOST

Bradley leaned over the railing to hear the next verse:

Bradley! Bradley! Come to us and choose.

From video games and running shoes.

Gadgets, gizmos, doodads, and stuff,

The things you have are not enough.

"Row nearer, ship?" Bradley called out. "This all sounds awesome!"

Found and Lost continued to sing:

Bradley! Bradley! Listen to our band.

Get the latest styles in the hottest brand.

Like fads you see in a TV ad.

Stuff you don't need, but wish you had.

"This is torture!" Bradley ranted. "I want! I want! I want!"

He stomped around the deck. He waved his fists. He kicked the walls like a spoiled kindergartner who didn't have the right color of crayon.

Bradley! Bradley! Don't be a fool.

Without our things you can't be cool.

Swim to us, Bradley, you won't regret.

Swim to us, Bradley and get, get, get!

Bradley pulled his hair. Sweat dripped down his forehead. "I'm hooked! I gotta have those things! I can't resist any longer! Give me! Give me! Give me!"

He swung a leg over the side of the ship. He heaved himself onto the railing and sat there, entranced by the music. He was about to leap, when a silver sparkle on a wave caught his eye.

"But wait!" he said, freezing half way

overboard. "Recess's warning! He told me I'd be sunk if I listened to Found and Lost's music."

At that moment, a wave rolled under the ship. The stern rose, and Bradley's backpack slid toward him. Still half out of the ship, he reached down and grabbed a Kleenex from the bag. With all his strength, all his will power, he tore the tissue in two and stuck a wad into each ear.

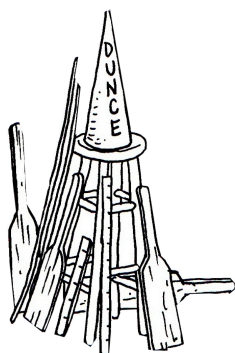
Instantly, the world went silent. Bradley fell back into the boat and lay on the deck, breathing hard.

"Ship, steer away from those rocks," he commanded.

The boat turned, and Bradley sat up. He looked back at Found and Lost on their rocks. The beautiful musicians were blowing kisses and beckoning to him to come back.

"That was close, ship," he said. "I'd have been lost on those rocks and never found."

He watched Found and Lost until they were dots in the distance. Finally, he pulled out his earplugs. "But that music sure was catchy," he said. "And I wonder what those running shoes and video games were like. I bet they were really, really cool."



LAND OF RULES AND UNRULY

*B*radley's stomach rumbled. He had not eaten a crumb since lunchtime. His last drink of water had been before the earthquake.

"Ship, I'm starved and thirsty," he called out. "Take me to the nearest place where I can gorge myself."

The rowerless oars steered the ship northwest. Moments later, a low stretch of land came into sight. Closer in, Bradley spotted a pebbled beach divided by a yellow line.

The ship slid onto the pebbles. Bradley leaped onto the beach and ran up to the signs posted on each side of the line. The one to the left read:

**WELCOME TO THE LAND OF RULES
RULE ONE: READ RULE BOOK BEFORE
ENTERING.**

A book, as thick as a lunchbox, hung there on a rope.

The sign on the right read:

**WELCOME TO THE LAND OF UNRULY
ONLY RULE: NO RULES ALLOWED**

"Eeny-meeny-miny-moe," Bradley went, and he stepped into the Land of Rules.

Beyond the beach, he found a ruler-straight path leading inland. Following it, he walked through a forest in which the trees grew in ruler-straight rows. He passed a field where corn stalks stood in equally straight columns, and a farmyard where even the cows and chickens walked in straight lines.

Farther on, Bradley came to a statue of Discipline, the God of Rules. The red marble figure stood among rows of red, domed houses. Each dome had a round front door, and before each door stood a person with one hand raised.

Bradley walked up to a woman outside the first house. "Greetings, ma'am," he said. "I'm new to this island. Would you know where I could find something to eat?"

The woman's eyes narrowed. Her lips tightened. Without saying a word, she remained standing there with her left hand held up.

Next Bradley approached a man outside the second house. He had his right hand raised.

"Excuse me, sir," said Bradley. "Is there a drinking fountain nearby?"

The man stiffened. His eyes widened, and he also said nothing.

"What's with everyone around this place?" Bradley muttered, continuing down the lane.

Soon he came to a sign. It read:

READING SIGNS NOT ALLOWED

While reading the sign, Bradley heard a shout. "Rule number seventy-four! Seventy-four!"

Across the lane stood a woman, waving a ruler. "Can't you read what the sign says," she said. "You're breaking rule seventy-four."

Bradley reread the sign. "Yea, but..." he began.

The woman waved her ruler again as if swatting flies. "Rule twenty-three! Twenty-three!" she shouted. "Raise your hand before talking!"

Bradley raised his hand. "Yea, but..." he began again.

"Rule sixteen! Sixteen!" the woman said. "Do not speak until you are called upon."

So Bradley's hand went up again.

"Yes, what is it?" the woman said.

"Who are you? And why are you waving that ruler at me?"

"I'm Miss Rule, Ruler of the Land of Rules," said the woman. "I rule over the Rulies who live here and wave my Ruling Ruler at anyone who breaks a rule."

Bradley raised his hand once more and waited

to be called upon. "Let me get this straight" he said. "If one rule says you can't talk without raising your hand, and another says you can't talk until someone calls on you, people can never talk to each other."

Miss Rule nodded. "That keeps the Land of Rules quiet and peaceful," she said.

Up went Bradley's hand again. "But why is everyone standing still?"

"Rule four-hundred states that Rulies can only walk in straight lines in alphabetical order," the woman replied. "Since everyone has the same last name, Doe, no one knows who should walk first."

This time, Bradley raised his hands along with his shoulders. "So is there a place to eat around here?" he asked.

"What's your last name?"

"Zimmerman."

"Then you may follow me to the lunchroom," said Miss Rule. "Here are the lunchroom rules. No elbows on the table. Sit only in assigned seats. No talking with your mouth full. No eating with your mouth empty..." And the Ruler of the Land of Rules went on reciting rules, as Bradley followed her down the lane.

The pair stopped outside the fifth red igloo. Upon entering, Bradley found a wide table with platters of jelly sandwiches, bowls of fruit, and cartons of milk in the middle. A dozen Rulies sat

around the table, staring at the food.

Bradley sat down. He reached for a banana and began to peel it.

"Rule number sixty!" Miss Rule shouted. "No bending elbows at the table!"

Stiff-armed, Bradley lay the banana on his neighbor's plate. He asked this Rulie, "Would you mind holding this banana near my mouth so I can eat it? Then I'll do the same for you."

"Rule number three!" Miss Rule snapped. "No sharing food in the lunchroom!"

Bradley found himself staring at the food like the others. "These rules are ridiculous," he finally said. "There should be a rule about having too many rules." He stood and bolted for the door.

Miss Rule waved her ruler in a frenzy. "Rule forty-eight! No standing without raising your hand! Rule nineteen! No raising your hand while sitting! Rule six-thousand eighty-four no questioning the rules in the Land of Rules!"

Bradley left the lunchroom. He ran down the lane and veered off through the cornfield.

"If I can't get some food in the Land of Rules, I'll try the Land of Unruly," he told himself. "It must be easier there."

Soon he came to the yellow line that divided the island. A sign read:

**NO LEAVING LAND OF RULES
WITHOUT A PASS.
NO PASSES ISSUED ON DAYS
ENDING WITH Y.**

"Figures," he said, and he leaped over the line.

The terrain now was grassless and muddy. Boulders and tree stumps stuck up here and there. Rusty cans, old tires, and glass bottles littered the place.

Bradley followed another path, this one as crooked as a Z. It led to a cluster of green domed houses. Graffiti covered every round wall. Piles of garbage blocked each round doorway.

Among the green domes, people walked in all directions. They bumped and tripped each other. They shoved and wrestled.

"This is worse than our school hallway after recess," Bradley told himself.

A man with ragged hair and smelly clothes stepped up behind Bradley. "Hello! Hello!" he shouted.

Bradley wrinkled his nose. "Well, you don't have to yell."

"Right you are!" said the man. "We Unrulies don't have to do anything!"

Bradley continued along the crooked path. While passing the fifth, green house, he heard the clash of dishes and the jangle of silverware. He entered. As he stepped through the doorway, a

jelly sandwich splattered his shirt.

Around the room, a dozen Unrulies stood on chairs. "Food fight!" one of them shouted.

Suddenly the air filled with flying meatballs, chicken drumsticks, dinner rolls, hot dogs, and milk cartons. Slices of pizza slithered down the wall. Spaghetti swung from the lights.

Meanwhile, Bradley eyed some cupcakes on a table. "Oh, if I could reach one of those," he said, stepping forward. But before he got a few feet, a slice of bologna slapped his face.

On another table stood a pitcher of lemonade.

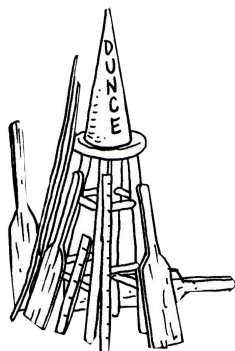
"What I would give for just one sip," he said. He moved forward again, only to have a tomato slam his shoulder.

"This is worse than the Land of Rules," he said. "Let me out of here."

Slipping on chocolate pudding, Bradley ran from the lunchroom. Back on the crooked path, he stumbled over a pile of rubbish and dodged a flying rock. With two Unrulies shouting names at him, he cut cross-country until he reached the yellow line.

"The only safe place on this island seems to be right here in the middle," he told himself.

Then, like a man on a tightrope, he followed the line back to the beach. He scrambled up the rope ladder onto the ship. Soon he was safely out to sea again.



The Tempest

Bradley's ship continued northward on the High Seas. The sky was cloudless, and the sun cooked the wooden deck.

By now Bradley felt faint from lack of food and water. "What I would give for a grilled hamburger with cheese and onions," he said. "You know, ship, maybe this whole Thinking Cap Hunt wasn't such a good idea. I'm no hero. I'm an underachiever and maybe I should be content with that. Maybe we should head back to the Starting Line. I could still get home by dinnertime."

As he spoke, a cool breeze tickled his neck. He turned to see a sight that made his stomach gurgle. In the stern of the ship stood a picnic table, loaded with a first-rate feast.

Bradley leaped toward the back of the boat. Where should he begin? A chocolate cupcake? French fries? A can of icy root beer? Plump strawberries? Butter pecan ice cream? A turkey

drumstick? A slice of pizza? Or a hamburger with cheese and onions grilled just the way he likes it.

As he reached for the burger, he read a purple card:

**BON APPÉTIT, BRADLEY
FROM COUNSELOR
KEEP GOING**

Bradley looked toward the purple goddess's figurehead on the tip of the bow. "Thank you. Thank you," he called out.

The hamburger disappeared in five bites. Down went the root beer and two doughnuts. He was about to grab a handful of potato chips when the sky suddenly darkened. Thunder boomed. Zigzags of lightning struck the ocean. Within seconds, a stiff wind blew, and bullets of rain stung Bradley's face.

"I've heard of changes in the weather, ship," he said. "But nothing like this."

Sudsy waves rolled past the boat. The deck raised, lowered, and rocked side to side. The oars, working back and forth, only fanned air.

Bradley grabbed the picnic table to keep from being tossed overboard. He looked astern, and his jaw dropped. Chasing the ship was a monstrous wave, a towering wall of water that curled at the top into gnarly, white fingers. He had just enough time to sling an arm through his backpack strap before the wave plunged upon

him.

Everything became foam, bubbles, and splintering wood. Bradley clung to the tabletop with all his strength. His ears ached. He thought his lungs would burst. The table dove straight downward, but after a short distance shot back to the surface.

The sky was blue and cloudless again. The ship, however, was now thousands of sticks bobbing on the water. The wooden head of Counselor floated nearby.

Still gasping for breath, Bradley lay on the tabletop. From some far off place came the thunder of galloping hooves and the scream of horses.

"Flunk made that storm, Counselor," Bradley called to the figurehead. "The God of Failure has also been watching me."

According to the setting sun the tabletop raft drifted westward. Bradley was staring into the reddening sky when a seagull flew by. The bird circled the tabletop twice, and landed by his head. It perched there squawking until Bradley realized what this omen meant.

He sat up quickly. "Bird, if you're here, land can't be far away," he said.

Sure enough, on the eastern horizon a pink smudge could be seen. Another small island. Bradley pulled a broken oar out of the water and began paddling toward it.

It took him the rest of the evening and into the night to reach land. In inky darkness, he crawled onto a sandy beach and collapsed on his back. His head rested on something soft and rubbery.

Above him, stars twinkled like so much glitter spilled on a classroom floor. Hopping among the constellations was a figure dressed in a yellow robe.

"Hello, Digit," Bradley said weakly. "Today didn't add up to much for me. What can I count on tomorrow?"

Above the horizon hung a white comma of the moon. On the bottom of the crescent sat a woman in a brown robe.

"Alphabetty, I'm lost, lonely, and soaked to the bone," said Bradley. "Do you have any kind words for me?"

As he watched, the Goddess of Words waved an arm. The moon comma grew wider, while the planet Venus shone brilliantly beneath it. This made the gibbous moon appeared as an exclamation mark. The moon widened still, and a swirl of clouds formed above it, creating a question mark. The swirl vanished, and the full moon became a period.

"Moon punctuation," Bradley said. "And, Alphabetty, you just put a period on the end of my long, long day."

The Goddess of Words blew Bradley a kiss. Instantly, the boy was sound asleep.

THE THREE R'S

Squawking seagulls woke Bradley the next morning. For the first time, he was able to inspect the rectangular, pink log that his head had rested upon all night. Similar logs lay on the sand around him.

"They look like pencil erasers," he said. "They feel and smell like pencil erasers. But who would ever need an eraser this big?"

Beyond the beach stretched a wide, flat plain. Here and there, trees with square trunks rose straight upward. Bradley stepped across stiff, brown grass and stopped below the first trunk. High above him, the treetops appeared as a dark rectangle against the sky.

"Strangest trees I've ever seen," he said. "And this grass reminds me of the carpet in first-grade that gave me rug burns during story time."

Farther on, Bradley walked over a white area crossed with blue lines. Along the sidelines were three holes. "A football field?" he guessed. "But

what could those holes be for?"

After passing more square-trunked trees, a tall, rock wall blocked his way. He sat down on a yellow log. Sticking out of the wall, high over his head, was a long, narrow ledge.

"From up there I could see over the trees," he said. "Then I could see what's on the rest of the island."

He began to climb. His sneakers found shallow footholds in the rough surface. After nearly an hour, he rolled onto the ledge. White dust covered him. The wall continued far above him, black and criss-crossed with white lines.

Dusting off his arms and legs, Bradley stood. He looked out over the flat, rectangular treetops. "Something is strangely familiar about this place," he said. "Even the smell reminds me of something."

As he spoke a distant bell rang. "Time for work," boomed a voice, and suddenly something immense blocked Bradley's view.

Bradley backed up against the black wall. "Ei-ei-ei!" he stammered.

He was staring into an enormous blue eye with long eyelashes. The eye was set smack in middle of a giant forehead of a giant face of a giant woman with long, blond hair.

"A Cyclops!" Bradley said under his breath.

The woman blinked her single eye. The eyeball moved back and forth, back and forth.

"Awwww," she said. "A little-bitty boy is standing on our chalk tray. And he's wearing little-bitty pants and a little-bitty shirt. And look at that little-bitty backpack. Isn't he cute?"

Before Bradley could find his voice, two more Cyclopes appeared. A red-haired woman stood on the right and a black-haired one on the left.

The three Cyclopes exchanged one-eyed glances.

"Writing, that's not a boy. It's a dung beetle," said the redhead. "An icky, creepy dung beetle."

The black-haired Cyclops raised an eyebrow. "No, Writing is right," she said. "Put on your glasses, Reading. That *is* a boy. So let's squash him, and get back to work. It's my turn to use the blackwall."

The blond Cyclops, who the others called Writing, shook her head. "Arithmetic, you're not going to touch that little-bitty boy. I want to take him to Show and Tell."

Redheaded Reading put on eyeglasses with a single lens. "Too bad he *is* a boy," she said. "Show and Tell would find him more interesting if he were a dung beetle."

"Let's stick a pin through him and mount him on cardboard anyway," said Arithmetic.

"No, I'm going to keep the boy on my desk," said Writing. "I want to watch him run and jump and do other little-bitty boy things."

With an enormous thumb and forefinger, the

blond Cyclops plucked Bradley off the ledge. Kicking and twisting, he sailed through the air. From this viewpoint he saw that what he had called trees were actually three giant desks, and the wall was a blackboard complete with a dusty chalk tray.

Writing dropped Bradley into a glass jar on the middle desk and sat down. Reading sat on the right and Arithmetic on the left. All three Cyclops leaned forward to inspect Bradley. They tapped on the jar and made goofy faces.

Bradley looked through the glass and shivered. "This is like sitting in the front row at the world's scariest movie," he told himself. "For years I studied the three R's at school. Now the three R's are studying me."

He stood and ran his fingers through his hair. After drawing a deep breath, he said, "Greetings, Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic. My name is Bradley and it's a privilege to meet you. You are very popular in my classroom."

The three eyes brightened.

"Are we?" said Reading.

"We are?" said Writing.

"Are you sure about that?" said Arithmetic.

"Yes, my class studies each of you an hour every day," said Bradley. "No one ever complains."

The three Cyclopes smiled, showing well-polished teeth.

Reading adjusted her one-lens glasses. "Bradley, did you know I'm the R who designed every one of the twenty-six letters you study in school. Lately, I've spent time at the blackwall designing new ones. Wouldn't one hundred letters be wonderful? With new letters, there can be more words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, and books for children to read."

Bradley screwed up his face. "But that's silly," he said. "New letters wouldn't make books any better. Books need to be scary, funny or exciting for kids to like them."

Reading's three-foot eyebrow crept up her forehead. At her side, Arithmetic and Writing sniggered.

Arithmetic's lips, smeared with glossy red lipstick, spread wide. "Well, Bradley, I'm the R who designed the numerals 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9 and 0?" she said. "As I'm sure you know, you can switch my numerals around and make any number possible. Now I'm redesigning all ten of them. My trendy new number line will come out this fall. Won't it be fun to do pages of math problems with more stylish numbers?"

Bradley thought a moment before saying, "I don't know about that. Numbers, no matter how they look, are boring if you just add, subtract, multiply, or divide rows and rows of them."

Arithmetic frowned. Her massive forehead wrinkled.

Writing winked at Bradley. "Right you are, little-bitty boy," she said. "Reading and arithmetic can be dull. But writing is always exciting, especially if you sprinkle in lots of the punctuation marks I designed. I get my ideas from watching the moon. The more dots, curls, and squiggles a writer sticks in a story, the prettier it looks."

Bradley wanted to comment on how silly needless punctuation was, but he saw three globe-size eyeballs glaring at him. He had to find a way out of that jar before the giants got any angrier. An idea came to him when Writing bent over, revealing the label on her shirt. It read: SIZE XXXXXL.

"You know, Writing," Bradley said. "I learned a brand new punctuation mark. It's one Alphabetty can't even make with the moon. My mother writes rows of them on the bottom of letters she sends to me at camp. Go to the blackwall, and I'll tell you how to write it."

Writing batted her eyelid. "Excellent," she said. She rose and stepped to the black wall. From the chalk tray, she picked up a piece of chalk the size of a fire extinguisher.

"First draw a line from the upper right hand corner to the lower left hand corner," Bradley instructed. "The next line goes from the upper left hand corner to the lower right one."

After the Cyclops drew the two lines, a giant X

crossed the blackwall.

"Extraordinary," said Writing. "What does it stand for?"

"A kiss," said Bradley. "If a student writes it at the end of a sentence, it could mean the story characters are kissing."

Writing bounced back to her desk. "Exactly," she said. "I'll put that punctuation mark in the next grammar book I write."

Arithmetic's eye narrowed. "Wait one second, Blondie," she said. "I have dibs on that symbol. In math it means multiplication."

"I'm sorry, but X is one of my twenty-six letters" Reading interrupted. "It's the rarest letter of all, and I won't let anyone else use it."

"Forget it, Two-Eyes," Arithmetic replied. "I've been using that sign since Roman times. It's the Roman numeral ten."

Reading's face was red. "That symbol also means poison when put on bottles," she hissed. "On maps it shows where treasures are buried and when it comes before *mas*, it becomes a favorite holiday. No, X belongs to me."

Writing, batting her eye, spoke to the jar. "You know, Bradley," she said. "During boring reading and arithmetic times students can write my new symbol to play Tic-Tac-Toe."

Reading made a fist the size of teacher's desk. "Do you want to fight about that?" she said.

"I'll take you both on with my eye closed,"

said Arithmetic.

Writing wrote an X on the ground with her toe. "OK, right here," she said. "X marks the spot."

The three Cyclopes stood and faced each other. Suddenly there was a flurry of hair pulling, pushing, slugging, and scratching.

Bradley wasted no time. He reached up and pulled himself over the lip of the jar. He sprinted across the desktop and slid down the square desk leg. Dodging stomping high-heel shoes, kicking loafers, and scuffing sandals, he tore across the carpet grass. He didn't know where he was going, but he ran and ran and ran.

SHOW AND TELL

Bradley leaped over a ten-foot long, blue crayon. He ran past a tall, paper sculpture (perhaps a wad of Writing's paper) and caught his breath behind a desk leg. At that moment, another bell rang.

"Time for Show and Tell," Reading called out.

"Awww! But the little-bitty boy got out of the jar," said Writing. "Now we have nothing to bring."

"So I'll do times problems on the blackwall," said Arithmetic.

"And I'll read my book *Fun With X-Rays*," said Reading.

"And I'll write rows of cursive X's," said Writing.

From where he stood, Bradley could see the beach and the ocean beyond. The tide ebbed swiftly, exposing a large rock close to shore. As more and more of the dark slab came into view, Bradley made out a familiar shape.

"A rocking chair," he said. "It's a rock rocking chair."

Seaweed dangled from the chair's arms and rockers. Barnacles and starfish adorned the back and legs. But Bradley's attention was drawn to the seat, where two hideous creatures sat.

Both had large flabby bodies, like sumo wrestlers, draped in white robes. Both had bare bellies that hung over their folded legs and round bald heads that gleamed in the morning sun. One had large eyes, round and shiny like DVD's, but no ears. The other had ears the size of dinner plates, but no eyes.

The creature with eyes spoke first. "Welcome to Show and Tell Time. I'm Show and by my side is Tell. Will all presenters present for today's program please step forward. When making your presentation stand up straight and do not sway. Present your presentation in a loud, clear voice. Avoid saying *um*, *ah*, and *you know*."

At this point, the creature reached to his mouth and pulled out a slender, slimy tongue. He handed the slug-like thing to Tell, who inserted it between his lips like a cherry Popsicle.

"Oh, ick," said Bradley, realizing what he had just witnessed.

"You will have two minutes to show or tell us something," Tell said. "If we find it interesting, we will show or tell you anything you request. But if you bore us, you will be severely punished."

Now who wants to go first?"

Bradley stepped onto the beach. Surely he wanted to find the Thinking Cap, but what interesting thing did he have to show or tell? He searched his backpack and pulled out a picture he had drawn recently.

"Um, hello, my name is Bradley Zimmerman, and ah, I brought something to show," he said. "You see, yesterday I spotted a turtle by the lake. This morning during math, I drew this picture of it."

Show clicked his fingers, and Tell handed him back the tongue. The moment he rammed it into his mouth, out came one word like a foghorn. "Bo-o-o-o-oring!"

Bradley turned hot and red.

"You call that interesting, Bradley Zimmerman," Show said. "That's a scribble compared to the masterpieces others have shown me. Why, a few centuries ago a man named Leonardo Da Vinci showed a picture of a smiling lady named Mona something or other. Now *that* was interesting. As a punishment for boring us, you will remain in the Coat Closet of Doom for one millennium."

Bradley thought quickly. "But I also have something to tell," he said. "Last week during recess, I found a trail of ants on the playground. I followed it from the swing set to the slide. Every ant was carrying a leaf at least five times its size."

The tongue returned to Tell. "Bo-o-o-o-oring!" he bellowed. "Who cares, Bradley Zimmerman? Others have told me about walking on the moon, writing great books, and climbing high mountains. As a punishment for boring us again, you will sit in the Time Out Chair of Terror for two millennia."

Bradley looked at his feet. Nothing I've ever done will interest these creatures, he thought. But as he peered downward, an idea flashed in his brain. Quickly, he stooped and scooped something off the ground.

He stood, holding the prize out, squeezed tightly in his fist. "Here is one of the most interesting items on earth," he announced.

Tell turned an ear toward Bradley. Show's eyes grew wider.

"With these tiny objects in my hand, humans have made some of their most useful things--glass for windows and processing chips for computers."

The rock rocking chair rocked swiftly back and forth.

"Tell us what it is, Bradley Zimmerman," said Tell. "I've never heard of anything so interesting."

"Humans use this for making concrete to build roads and cement to erect buildings," Bradley went on. "They even pour it into boxes for children to play in."

The tongue returned to Show. "Show me, Bradley Zimmerman," he said. "I can't see it from here."

"I'll bring it closer," said Bradley. "But first let me whisper its name into Tell's ear."

Bradley stepped up to the rock rocking chair. He leaned toward Tell's big right ear and whispered, "*Sand*."

A frown crossed Tell's tongueless mouth. He clicked his fingers. The instant Show passed him the tongue, Bradley snatched it from his hand and backed away.

The thing wriggled in Bradley's grip like a fish. "Oh, ick," he repeated. "My teacher tells me to hold my tongue, but I never thought I'd be holding someone else's."

Show and Tell rocked in a fury. They shook their fists in the air.

Bradley held up the tongue. "What's the matter, Show and Tell?" he said. "A boring cat got your tongue?"

The creatures, unable to speak, motioned with their hands, begging for the tongue's return.

"Now *this* is interesting," said Bradley. "What good are Show and Tell without a tongue? So here's the bargain. Tell me where to find the Thinking Cap, and I'll return this to you. If not, I'll drop it into the sea. A slip of the tongue, you could call it."

The creatures nodded in unison.

Bradley handed the tongue to Tell, who quickly inserted it into his mouth.

"That was what I call an interesting trick, Bradley Zimmerman," he said. "Now I will tell you all that I know. The Thinking Cap is hidden on an island, two days journey northeast of here."

Show retrieved the tongue. "But be warned, Bradley Zimmerman," he said. "The Thinking Cap is guarded by the crankiest monster that has ever dwelled on Earth. This beast is nastier than the nine-headed Hydra slain by Hercules, meaner than snake-haired Medusa killed by Perseus. Bradley Zimmerman, the Thinking Cap is guarded by a giant, slimy worm called the Great Pedagog."

"A giant worm?" said Bradley. "But I hate worms. How can I get the Thinking Cap with a monstrous worm in the way?"

In the meantime, the tide had risen as rapidly as it fell. The rocking chair legs were already underwater. Now the seat disappeared as well.

"Show, show me! Tell, tell me!" Bradley called. "How can I get past the Great Pedagog?"

"That's all for now," Show said, as his body submerged.

The tongue went to Tell. "Next Show and Tell Time, next week, same time, same place," he said, before his head went underwater.

Soon the entire the rock rocking chair had vanished beneath the ocean.

THE SUB

By now the Three-R's had stomped off to lunch. This gave Bradley time to sit on a giant rubber eraser and think.

"I know where to find the Thinking Cap," he told himself. "But how am I going to get off this island?"

The answer he realized was at the seat of his pants.

"The erasers!" he said. "When I dropped one into the fish tank at school, it floated. There are enough rubber erasers on this beach to build a boat."

He went to work. First, he pushed five erasers side by side. Then he retrieved the yellow log he had sat upon earlier, now realizing it was a giant pencil.

"The perfect mast for my boat," he said. "Next I need a sail."

After a moment of thought, he remembered the striped, white area he had crossed before

reaching the blackwall. "That wasn't a football field," he said. "That was a piece of Writing's notebook paper."

Ripping out a triangular sail from the paper was easy, but fastening it to the pencil mast proved a problem. Again Bradley searched the carpet and found what he needed. Wrapped around a desk leg was a strip of masking tape. Not only was the tape useful in attaching the sail, but also in holding the erasers together.

After much lifting and pushing, Bradley stood the pencil mast upright. He rammed the point into the middle eraser. Finally, he stuck a king-size paper clip into the stern to serve as a rudder, and the boat was complete.

Bradley stood back to admire his craft. "Erasers, a pencil, paper, and a paper clip," he said. "I'll call my new boat the USS Odyssey. USS stands for *used school supplies*."

He pushed the boat into the water. It floated, high and steady. As he climbed aboard, a gust of wind filled the paper sail and whisked the boat out to sea.

"Farewell, Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic," Bradley called out. "So long, Show and Tell. The Thinking Cap Hunt can now continue."

The afternoon was ideal for sailing, the sea calm, and the breeze stiff and warm. Several hours after leaving the Island of Three R's, Bradley spied an object sticking out of the water.

An L-shaped pipe with a lens on the end shot past his bow. It turned right, left, then cut straight toward the boat, growing taller as it came.

The next thing Bradley knew a small, iron submarine surfaced nearby. A hatch on top opened, and up popped a man wearing a brown suit, white shirt, and red bow tie. He had short-cropped hair and a thin mustache.

Standing in the hatchway, the man snapped to attention. "Right-o," he said. "Thought I spotted a vessel through my periscope. Good day, old chap. Are you ill?"

"Um, no," Bradley answered.

"Perhaps you're heading to a teachers' workshop or you need a "mental" days off?" the man asked.

"Uh, no and no," said Bradley.

"Then you have no need of a sub," said the man crisply.

"You mean a submarine?" asked Bradley.

"No, the U.S. Odyssey is all I need."

"I mean a substitute, old chap," said the man, giving a swift salute. "For that's what I am, a sublime substitute at your service."

"A sub in a sub?" said Bradley.

"Right-o, and I'm sailing home to Sub Isle after a grueling day in a classroom," said the man. "My, how those fifth-graders tested me. Noisy, fidgety, and constantly out of their seats I'm afraid. But we substitutes have a motto: *Rub a*

dub-dub, you can't sink a sub, and by lunchtime I do believe I had control of the class."

Bradley nodded, remembering some rough days his class had given substitutes. "So substitutes come from an island as teachers do?" he asked.

"That's where I was this morning waiting for the Call," said the sub. "When a substitute gets the Call, he must be ready for duty."

Bradley leaned against the pencil mast of the U.S.S. *Odyssey*. "So what did you do when the Call came?" he asked.

"I subsided into my submarine and submerged," said the substitute. "I sailed to the nearest substation, and rode the subway out to the suburbs prepared to teach all subjects from subtraction to subatomic particles."

Bradley shook his head. "Well that could become a problem from now on," he said. "If I don't find the Thinking Cap, substitutes won't have any classrooms to be called to."

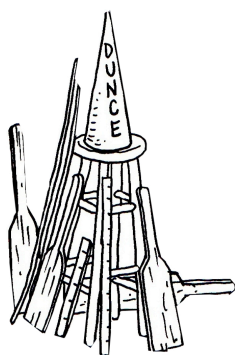
The substitute's mustache twitched. "What? The Thinking Cap is missing?" he exclaimed. "Bit of bad luck that, old chap. No wonder classes have been restless lately. No wonder it's been impossible to teach children anything."

Bradley nodded. "Yes, my mind sure was wandering a lot," he said.

"With the theft of the Thinking Cap, I should get back to Sub Isle straight away, old chap," said

the sub. "Tomorrow, if I get The Call, I want to be ready for the worst. Cheerio."

With that, the man disappeared down the hatch. The door closed, and the sub slowly submerged. Soon Bradley was alone again on the grape-dark sea.



EZ SCHOOL

All afternoon sub periscopes streamed past Bradley's bow. As the sun began to drop, a new island came into sight.

"That's not Sub Isle, because the submarines aren't headed that way," Bradley told himself. "And it can't be the Island of the Great Pedagog, since I haven't sailed two days from Show and Tell. Whatever island it is, I just hope there's food and a place to sleep."

Bradley shifted the paper clip rudder, and the USS Odyssey headed toward the rocky coastline. Nearer to shore, he could see a large round hill covered with green grass. On the hilltop stood a redbrick building with a wide front door and tall glass windows.

Bradley landed at a wooden dock. Grabbing his backpack, he hopped ashore. In the fading light, he followed a red-bricked path up the hill. He passed a playground and baseball field where a dozen young goats were grazing. As he walked

by, the goats trotted up to him.

"Hello, little kids," he said. "Sorry I can't stay long. I want to get to that building before dark."

"Blah! Blah! Blahhhh!" went the goats, and they followed Bradley up the brick path.

Outside the building, he stopped to read a sign:

**EZ BOARDING SCHOOL
FREE MEALS FREE BED
NO BAD GRADES. NO HOMEWORK. NO
TESTS. NO SWEAT**

He pulled the door open. "This sounds like the place for me," he said, and stepped inside.

Halfway down a hallway, stood a golden drinking fountain. Bradley rushed to it and turned the golden handle. Out gushed an arc of cool water. He slurped and slurped until his belly hurt. He burped and slurped some more.

As he drank, a voice behind him called out, "Welcome to EZ Boarding School."

Startled, Bradley straightened and spun around.

There stood a beautiful woman with long, black hair. She wore a black business suit, black lipstick, and black fingernail polish.

"My name is Madame Marm," she said. "I'm the headmistress here. Come with me, dear. I'll help you enroll."

"All I need is something to eat," said Bradley. "And maybe a place to sleep."

Madame Marm smiled. "Right this way," she said.

The woman led Bradley down the hall. She spoke as she walked. "Each student at EZ Boarding School gets his or her private classroom. He or she is taught by his or her own personal teacher. The teacher lets him or her decide his or her own lessons and when he or she wants to go to his or her next grade. Now here's the Dining Room, dear. Inside each student finds his or her favorite food and can eat as much as he or she wants."

Bradley entered a large room. Although many tables were set for dinner, no other diners were present. Vending machines displaying every imaginable food lined the walls. Bradley pulled a knob on one, and down dropped a grilled hamburger on a silver platter.

He sat down and devoured the hamburger in seconds. He raced to another machine that dispensed French fries and to another that poured root beer.

After he gorged himself, Madame Marm reappeared in the doorway. "Now, dear, I'll show you to your bed," she said.

Bradley followed the woman up a staircase. She stopped in front of the first doorway, and Bradley entered the largest bedroom he had ever seen. He plunged onto a bed the size of a foursquare court.

"Good night, dear," Madame Marm called, flipping off the light. "Your lessons begin in the morning."

Without bothering to take off his clothes, Bradley closed his eyes. "I could get used to a school like this," he mumbled, and instantly fell asleep.

But bad dreams haunted Bradley that night. In one nightmare he sat alone in a classroom. The blackboard was covered with assignments. Before the blackboard stood a black-haired teacher, screaming at him.

Suddenly Counselor, Goddess of Health and Safety entered the dream. She rode into the classroom on a mountain bike. "Beware, Bradley," the purple goddess called out. "Beware of the Sorceress Teacher. Beware of anything that comes too easily."

Bradley woke with a start. Madame Marm stood by his bed, holding a silver tray.

"Breakfast time," she said. "At EZ School breakfast is always served in bed."

After the hearty meal, Bradley followed the headmistress to an enormous classroom. Inside, he found a single, oak desk. A brass plate on the desktop read:

BRADLEY

V.I.P. (VERY IMPORTANT PUPIL)

Bradley sat in a cushy, leather chair. A stereo, a big-screen TV, and a half-dozen video games

surrounded him. On the wall a bulletin board read: STUDENT OF THE DAY and showed a large picture of Bradley.

Bradley leaned back in his chair. "Now *this* is what I call a classroom," he said.

Up front, a small, gray-haired lady sat in a rocking chair, knitting. She looked up from her yarn and said, "Good morning, Bradley. I'm your teacher, Miss Hap. First subject, doodling. You may doodle for ten minutes."

"Excellent," said Bradley. "I can make some great doodles."

He found a sheet of paper in his desk and filled it with stars, springs, mazes, and worms.

"A-plus," said Miss Hap. "Now it's time for ISCBR. Independent Silent Comic Book Reading."

Bradley took a comic book from his desk. While flipping through it, he yawned and scratched his chin. Something felt odd. Leaning forward, he saw his face in the brass VIP plate.

"Whiskers?" he said. "How could I have whiskers? I'm too young to shave!"

Ten minutes later the teacher announced, "Free choice time, Bradley. And after that will be nap time, followed by snack time, and an hour recess."

Bradley stood and wandered around the room. His arms and legs ached. He scratched two lumps on his forehead. He picked up a piece of paper and chewed it.

"I don't feel very well," he said, holding his stomach. "But EZ School is great. Maybe I'll stay here a few days and get some rest."

After a short nap, Bradley walked out to the playground. As he stepped onto a foursquare court, the goats gamboled up to him.

"Good to see you again, little kids," said Bradley. "But I wish there were human kids at this school, so I could play four-square."

He picked up a red ball and batted it hard. To his amazement, a brown goat butted it straight back to him. Bradley smacked the ball again, and the goat returned a line drive through his legs.

"Man, good shot," said Bradley. "How did a goat learn to play four-square like that?"

"Blah! Blah! Blahhhh!" went the goat.

Bradley ran toward the school to retrieve the ball. As he passed a window, he caught his reflection in the glass. He froze and stared. The glass revealed a face more goat than boy--a scraggly beard, pointed ears, and horns curling from his forehead.

Bradley touched his beard, ears, and horn. He reached around and felt a short tail. "What's happening to me?" he said. "I'm changing from a kid into a kid goat."

He turned toward the goats on the playground. Some were playing hopscotch. Some slid down the slide. Others were lined up

to play more foursquare.

"This all has something to do with my dream last night," Bradley told himself. "Counselor warned me about a Sorceress Teacher." He scratched his horned head. "And that teacher can only be one person--Madame Marm. She's cast a spell on this place. I should have known EZ School was too good to be real. But I think I know a way to reverse the sorceress's curse."

Without a moment's delay, Bradley herded the flock of goats into the school. He led them down the hall and into his classroom. Miss Hap still sat behind her desk, knitting.

"Sorry, I'll do the teaching from now on," Bradley said to her. And instantly the woman vanished.

Now Bradley opened his backpack and took out an English worksheet. "Listen up, goats," he called out. "I believe you were all once a kid like me. But EZ School made your brains lazy and let Madame Marm's magic work on you. So we're going to start doing some real schoolwork. Yes, I will now teach you about the Eight Parts of Speech!"

"Blah! Blah! Blahhhh!" went the goat.

Bradley drew in a long breath and began. "The first part of speech is the noun," he recited. "Nouns are people, places, and things. Verbs are the words that show action."

The result was almost instant. The goats grew

silent. Their horns shriveled. Beards became chins, and hooves turned to hands and feet.

"Adjectives describe nouns," Bradley continued. "And adverbs show how, what or when a verb takes place."

By the time he was teaching pronouns, six boys and six girls sat on the classroom floor.

At this point, Madame Marm burst into the room. She shook her fists in rage. "What's going on here?" she shouted. "What have you done?"

Bradley rubbed his chin. "Sorry to get your goat," he said. "But we've been doing something not allowed at EZ School. I've been thinking."

The sorceress snarled and stomped her feet. "Oooo, how I hate know-it-all brats like you, Bradley," she said. "No one has ever questioned my school before. Now get out of here before you do more harm. You are expelled."

"Not so fast, Madame Marm," said Bradley. "I won't leave until you use your powers to return these kids to their homes. If not we'll start reciting multiplication tables."

"Very well," said the woman. "Once children start thinking, they're no good for me any more."

Bradley grabbed his backpack and walked to the door. "So now I'll go, Madame Marm," he said. "I still have some important work to finish."

With that, Bradley ran from the classroom. He charged down the hallway and out the front door of EZ School.

THE UNDERSCHOOL

On the way to the boat dock, Bradley came upon two stooped women, walking up the redbrick path. One was thin and the other plump. Both held woolen scarves over their heads that hid their faces. Both wore long tattered dresses that swept the ground as they walked.

"Young boy! Young boy!" they called to Bradley. "Yoo-hoo, stop, young boy. We want to talk with you."

Thinking these were beggars, Bradley searched his pockets for change to give them.

The large crone held out a basket of yellow apples. "Take an apple, boy," she said. "They are good for you. Hee! Hee! Go ahead. Have a couple."

"No thank you," said Bradley.

"Perhaps you can help us, young boy," said the thin woman. "We're looking for someone. His name is Bradley. We have neooooows for

him."

"Yes. Hee! Hee!" went the other. "We have a message to give Bradley from the head god, Super."

"But *I'm* Bradley," said Bradley. "Super sent a message for *me*?"

The large woman sniggered behind her hand. "Yes, yes, Super just flew through your school, Bradley. Hee! Hee! He told us many mommies and daddies are sad, because their daughters and sons have disappeared."

Bradley stared at the ground. "Yes, Flunk took my class and teacher to the Underschool."

"And that's what Super's message is about," said the thin woman. "He wants you to go down to the Underschool and rescuoooo them."

"Me? Go to the Underschool?" said Bradley. "But I can't. I'm hunting for the Thinking Cap."

The hags exchanged glances.

"No, no, that's not necessary any more," said the large woman.

"The Thinking Cap is in gooood hands, Bradley," said the thin one. "You need to rescuoooo your class."

Bradley shrugged. "Well, if Super says so," he said. "But how do I get down to the Underschool?"

"No problem. Hee! Hee!" said the large woman. "There's a cave nearby that leads right to it."

"Come! Come! We'll take you there, Bradley," said the other. "There's no time to looose."

Bradley followed the two women across a meadow. They shortly came to a cave in a rocky outcrop.

"So off you go, Bradley," said the big crone. "Bye, bye. Bon voyage. Have a good trip."

"You'll have your class home in no time," said the thin one. "My, aren't you a brave boy, Bradley. Tooodle-oooo."

Bradley stepped into the cave and disappeared in the darkness. At once, the women, standing in the cave entrance, threw off their scarves.

"Excellent, job, Mrs. Stickyfingers," said the thin woman. "I believe we're rid of Bradley for goood. Not even *he* can find a way out of the Underschool. That boy has been a pest to us crabby teachers for toooo long."

"Lucky we got to that trouble-maker when we did, Head Teacher," Mrs. Stickyfingers said. "Hee! Hee! He was getting close to where we hid the Thinking Cap."

Meanwhile, inside the cave, Bradley walked along a slick, sloping floor. Steeper and steeper it became until he needed to drop onto his bottom and slide. Soon he was zipping downward at an incredible speed.

At last he shot out into a large dim cavern. A

short distance away flowed a black river. Against the bank floated a raft on which stood a withered, old man. He held a long pole with a stop sign on one end.

Bradley rose to his feet and approached the man.

"Your pass please," the man called out.

"Pass?" said Bradley. "Do I need a pass to get into the Underschool?"

The man frowned. "My name is Crossing Guard, boy. My instructions are to ferry no one across the River Tardy without a pass."

Bradley removed his backpack and drew out a sheet of notebook paper. "But here's something more useful than a pass."

Crossing Guard sneered. "What would I do with a worthless piece of paper, boy?"

"Let me show you."

First, he folded the sheet into an airplane and tossed it. "Great for sending messages across a room," he said.

Next, he folded the paper into a cup and dipped it into the river. "See it really holds water."

After that, he folded the paper into a hat, a ring, and finally a fan.

Crossing Guard took the fan and waved it before his face. "It does get hot down here," he said. "Climb aboard, boy. I'll take you across the river without a pass, if you don't tell a soul."

And there are plenty of souls down here to tell."

Bradley stepped onto the raft, and the ferryman poled him across the black river.

On the far shore Crossing Guard said, "You've crossed the River Tardy, boy. But you still must get by Copycat, who guards the Underschool Gate."

A few yards up a cinder path, Bradley came to a tall chain-linked fence. Before a closed gate crouched a giant three-headed cat. The cat scratched the air with scissor-sharp claws. It hissed. As Bradley approached, he noticed whatever the cat's middle head did, raise, shake, or lower the other two copied.

"Greetings, Copycat," Bradley said calmly. He reached into his backpack and took out his math workbook. He opened it to a page of story problems and began to read. "If John had six red balloons and seven blue balloons, how many balloons did he have?"

The guardcat sat back on its haunches. A blank look crossed its three faces.

Bradley continued to read, "If Sally had eleven soccer balls and she gave five to Amy, how many soccer balls did she have left?"

Copycat lowered its heads. Its six eyes drooped.

The plan's working, Bradley thought. Math story problems always put me to sleep. They're having the same effect on this big pussycat.

After two more problems, Copycat lay down. It curled into a ball and closed its eyes. Bradley quickly opened the gate and slipped into the Underschool.

Following the cinder path, he made his way through a misty, gray landscape. He passed roaring furnaces and large hissing water boilers. Dusty ducts and rusty pipes ran along the ceiling. Switches, wires, and fuse boxes covered the walls.

Among the furnaces, dark shadows wandered, moaning and whining. Bells rang, and whistles shrieked.

"This place reminds me of the time I sneaked down to my school's basement," said Bradley.

Farther on, he came to a tall, square castle. The walls were constructed entirely of cardboard cartons. Labels on the cartons read: PAPER TOWELS, SPONGES, CHALK ERASERS, and FINGER PAINT. Bradley stepped through a doorway and entered a room lit by candles. The place smelled of ammonia and floor wax.

At the far end of the room, was Flunk, sitting on a metal stool. His black armor and helmet gleamed in the candlelight. By his side sat Miss Smartt, Bradley's teacher. Her head was lowered. Tears dropped onto her lap.

The God of the Underschool folded his arms across his chest. His laughter boomed through the cardboard room. "So we meet again,

Braddyboy," he called out. "Welcome to my Carton Castle."

Bradley stepped forward. He looked toward his teacher and then at the black god. "I've come to take my class and teacher back to school," he said.

Miss Smartt looked at her student through watery eyes. "Oh, Bradley, you shouldn't have come here. You've been tricked. No boy or girl who enters the Underschool can ever leave."

Again Flunk's laughter shook the walls. "So, Braddyboy, it looks like your Thinking Cap Hunt is a failure. Welcome to the Land of Failures. Welcome to the land where the souls of dropouts and delinquents dwell. You and your class are stuck down here forever. And, look, I got myself a teacher to be my queen."

Bradley's teacher glared at the god. "I'll never be your queen, you creep," she said. "You're a loser."

Flunk pounded the F on his chest. "That's right, my darling," he said. "I'm the God of Losers."

"But what have you done with my class?" asked Bradley.

Again Flunk laughed. "They are close by," he said. "Miss Smartt, darling, why don't you show your underachiever, Braddyboy, where your pupils are now."

BRADLEY'S ODYSSEY

Miss Smartt looked at Bradley again. Then she buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

BULLY

Miss Smartt rose from her chair. She took Bradley by the hand and led him out of the Carton Castle.

By the doorway stood a hideous creature with a tiny head, webbed feet, and felt markers for finger. Using its black index finger, it was scribbling words and figures on a castle wall.

Miss Smartt shook her head. "That's Graffiti, one of Flunk's helpers," she explained. "Each night he and his companion, Vandal, climb to earth. They leave their marks on many school doors and walls."

"I think I've seen their work in our Boy's bathroom," said Bradley. "Does Flunk have other helpers?"

"Smart Aleck, Tattle Tale, Lazy Bones, Cut Up, and Monkey Shine are a few more," said his teacher. "But, of course, Bully is the meanest of all. And we're headed towards him right now."

"Bully? Like Virgil, the bully in fifth grade," asked Bradley.

Miss Smartt shook her head as more tears flowed from her eyes. "Oh, much worse," she said. "Bully is a beast with the head of a bull and the body of a brawny teenager. Bully is so mean Flunk keeps him inside a giant labyrinth, so he can never find his way out."

The pair walked through a tunnel and into a large cavern with a low ceiling. Bradley's classmates were huddled against a stone wall. Above a narrow opening in the wall were the words:

**ENTRANCE TO MAZE
FREE ADMISSION
NO HEIGHT REQUIREMENT**

The students stood and crowded around their teacher when they saw her coming.

"Children, look who showed up to rescue us," Miss Smartt said.

Bradley waved, and the entire class groaned.

"It's only Bradley," someone called out.

"Big deal," said a girl. "What can Rosy do?"

"Bradley's no good at anything," said someone else.

A girl named Celeste-Marie Aardvark was crying. Tears splattered on the stone floor.

"What's the matter, Celeste-Marie?" Bradley asked.

The girl heaved in sobs. "I'm...I'm first," she

said.

Miss Smartt placed a hand on Celeste-Marie's shoulder. "Oh, Bradley, I'd willingly become Flunk's queen if that would help Celeste-Marie and the rest of the class," she said. "Each hour one student must enter the maze. Somewhere inside Bully is waiting. Who knows what that beast will do to anyone he meets."

"And... and we must enter in alphabetical order," Celeste-Marie sniveled. "So I'm...I'm first."

Bradley had never liked Celeste-Marie. With the last name Aardvark, she always stood first in line. She always got the first reading workbook passed out, the first seat at assemblies, and the first turn at just about anything the class did. But now he looked at the girl, and his heart sank.

He drew in a long breath, before he said, "You know, everyone, this class has been down here a long time. So I bet no one knows today at school is Backwards Day. The teachers and kids are doing stuff backwards. That includes going in reverse alphabetical order."

Celeste-Marie's eyes lit up. "It's Backwards Day?" she said. "So...so that means..."

"That's right," said Bradley. "I, Bradley Zimmerman, must enter the labyrinth first."

"Oh, what a shame, Bradley," a classmate called out.

"Too bad," said another. "Tough break."

"Better luck next time, Bradley," said someone else. "If there is a next time."

Bradley shouldered his backpack. Waving farewell to his classmates, he stepped through the opening in the wall. Once inside the maze, he found passageways leading to the right, left, and straight ahead. He paused to listen. From far off came the deep, raspy sound of snoring.

"Bully is asleep," he told himself. "If I sneak up on him, I can take him by surprise. But first I must find a way through this maze without getting lost."

After a moment of thought, he took a crayon from his backpack. On the wall he drew a five-pointed star. He started down the right hand passage and drew another. He turned left and drew a third, then right and drew one more. In this manner, drawing star after star, he wound his way through the maze. At each fork in the path, he stopped to listen for the snores that told him which way to go.

At last, after taking one sharp corner, Bradley tripped over a form lying on the ground. "Uh-oh," he said, and backed away. He was staring at Bully.

The figure wore blue jeans and a black T-shirt. Glassy, black eyes opened on his furry, bull head. Two sharp horns jutted from his forehead, and a gold ring ran through the end of his snout. The half-bull, half-teenager leaped to his feet.

"Hello, victim!" he roared. "Finally Flunk has sent me someone to pick on."

Bradley said nothing. He remained standing there, inspecting his fingernails.

Bully cracked his knuckles one by one. "Let's see, victim, what shall I do to you first?" he said. "Twist your arm? Rub my knuckles in your hair? Or should I pinch your ear until you say, 'Uncle?'"

Still Bradley kept silent. He stuck his hands in his pockets. He stared at the ceiling.

"How about if I give you a head lock, victim?" Bully went on. "A wedgy would be fun. Or maybe I'll just slug you in the shoulder until you start crying."

Bradley yawned. He rocked back on his heels and whistled.

Bully placed his hands on his hips. "So why aren't you running away, victim?" he said. "Why aren't you begging for mercy?"

Bradley shrugged. "Why should I?" he said. "Flunk said I had nothing to fear if I entered the labyrinth. He said Bully was just a big sissy. He called you a windbag, weakling, weirdo, whiner, and wimp."

"Flunk said that about me?" said Bully.

"He said you were a braggart," Bradley went on. "A bunch of bull who only *thinks* he's a bully."

Bully's growled. Steam shot from his flaring

nostrils. "I don't believe you, victim. What proof do you have?"

Bradley raised his backpack. His name appeared on the back in black marker. He was embarrassed when his mother wrote this, but now he couldn't be more thankful.

"See, my name's Bradley Zimmerman," he said. "So if your *victims* were supposed to enter the maze in alphabetical order, why would I volunteer to go first? In fact, my whole class is waiting outside, eager to meet the silly bully."

Bully shook his horned head. Bradley enjoyed the worried look on the beast's face. "This is embarrassing, victim," he said. "What good is being a bully if no one is scared of me?"

"You have a point or two," said Bradley. "Maybe you should ask Flunk about that yourself. Why don't you show him just how tough you are?"

More steam shot from Bully's snout. "I'll do that," he said. "But how can I get to that good-for-nothing god? This maze has me baffled."

"No problem, Bully," said Bradley. "Follow me."

In no time, Bradley retraced his steps out of the labyrinth. Bully ran at his heels, snorting, and blowing steam. His class cowered around their teacher when they saw the beast.

Bully, however, charged straight past them, waving his arms. "Let me at that lying, double-

crossing Lord of the Underschool," he ranted. "I'll get him in a head lock. I'll rub my knuckles in his hair. I'll pinch his ears until he cries 'Uncle'."

Bradley blew out his cheeks. He faced his teacher and classmates. "I believe Bully and Flunk will be busy for a while," he said. "Now we must find a way out of this dreary place."

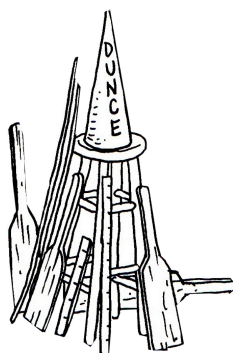
Miss Smartt pointed to a tunnel off to the left. "Flunk brought us down that passage," she said. "It leads right to our classroom."

She started up the tunnel, and her class followed.

Bradley's head filled with thoughts of hugs from his parents, a warm meal, and his cozy bedroom, but he remained motionless.

Miss Smartt turned. "Come on, Bradley. We'll be back at school in a short time."

"I can't go with you," he called out. "School won't be school if I don't find the Thinking Cap. So long, Miss Smartt. So long everybody. I have a job to do, and I won't fail."



THE GREAT PEDAGOG LEGEND

*B*radley's boat bounced across an invisible ocean. Black, black, black surrounded him. The sun had set long ago, but no stars or moon had taken its place.

His exit from the Underschool had been swift. Upon reaching the gates, he found Copycat still asleep. At the River Tardy, Crossing Guard was so eager to show Bradley an origami bird he had folded from his paper, he ferried him across with out a hassle.

After a long climb up the slide, Bradley found the crabby teachers' discarded clothing at the mouth of the cave. Moments later, he reached the USS Odyssey still tied to the dock.

The night continued dark and chilly. Huddled by the pencil mast, Bradley never felt so lonely and homesick. Once or twice he nodded off to

sleep, only to be awakened by the bump of another wave.

At last a gray streak in the eastern horizon signaled morning. But the dawn brought a pillow of fog with it. The thick mist engulfed the boat, dampening Bradley's spirits further.

With visibility only a few feet, the raft struck a rocky beach before Bradley saw it. Weary and hungry, he trudged ashore. A few yards inland grew a thick jungle. Signs nailed to the trees read.

**BEWARE OF WORM!
NO TRESPASSING!
GET OUTTA HERE!
DANGER! KEEP OUT!
HAZARDOUS MONSTER!
NO VISITORS!
GO AWAY! SCRAM! SHOO!
IF I WERE YOU I'D LEAVE**

Bradley pulled off his backpack and sat on a rock. "The worm is here, so the Thinking Cap must be here," he said in his head. "Now *I'm* here, and I don't know what to do next?"

In that instant, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Looking up, he saw Recess hovering in the mist above him. "You will soon face your greatest challenge, Brave Bradley," the god said. "This is indeed the Island of the Great Pedagog. But before you search for the worm, I will tell you a story. Knowing about a foe can help you find its weakness."

The silver god landed before the boy. Twirling his small tetherball pole, he told Bradley *The Great Pedagog Legend*.

Long ago the Great Pedagog was a teacher--one of the two-thousand teachers who lived on Apple Island. Her name was Miss Smiley Face, and she was kind, intelligent, and beautiful.

The four Muses on Mount Academy favored Miss Smiley Face. They gave her skills in art, music, drama, and poetry. In turn, Miss Smiley Face taught the other teachers how to finger-paint, play the recorder, put on puppet shows, and write funny poems. Miss Smiley Face was so loved by the other teachers that to this day many of them draw her face on their students' papers.

But as often happens, when someone becomes popular, others grow jealous. One crabby teacher on Apple Island envied Miss Smiley Face so much her purple ankles turned green. Her name was Mrs. Gold Star.

One night when the other teachers were on the Grand Playground playing freeze tag, Mrs. Gold Star crept into Office Palace. She unlocked the Thinking Cap Closet and snatched the sacred hat.

"I'll think of a way of ruioooooooning Miss Smiley Face's popoooooooool arity," she said. Then she placed the Thinking Cap on her head.

Although Discipline, God of Rules and Order, tried to stop him, Flunk appeared in Mrs. Gold Star's mind's eye. He told her where to find an apple tree that bore the reddest, shiniest apples. Hiding inside each apple, however, was a worm from the Underschool.

The next morning, Mrs. Gold Star placed one of these apples on Miss Smiley Face's desk. The instant the teacher bit into it, she began to squirm. Her skin grew soft, pink, and slimy. Her middle became round and stretched out one hundred feet. Within minutes, the teacher had turned into an enormous earthworm, wriggling on the floor.

Mrs. Gold Star named the worm the Great Pedagog and kept it in a swamp. She fed it crab apples, until it became the crabbiest creature in all creation.

The worm dug huge holes in the Grand Playground, so the teachers couldn't play. It ate books in the Big Book Building, so they couldn't read. And after it rained, it lay in puddles on the Great Hallway, so the teachers couldn't walk by.

Even Prince Apple, Ruler of Apple Island, feared the Great Pedagog. Whenever he left Office Palace, the worm wrapped around him, covering him with slime. Thoroughly grossed out, the prince spent hours in the bathtub afterward. Eventually, he agreed to hand his Golden Ruler over to Mrs. Gold Star, if she would remove the worm from the island. From that time on, Mrs. Gold Star ruled Apple Island as Head Teacher. The Great Pedagog ended up on this remote island, the farthest corner from any other corner of the world.



When the story was over, Recess rose into the air.

"There's two more things you should know about The Great Pedagog, Brave Bradley," he said. "First, like any earthworm, if you cut it in two you will have two worms meaner than the first. Second, beware of the Great Pedagog's stare. Anyone who looks into the worm's eyes turns into plastic."

"Plastic?" said Bradley. "Like a Barbie doll?"

"Many great warriors have come here to defeat the Great Pedagog, but ended up as plastic statues," said the god. "To see the worm, look only at its reflection."

Bradley kicked his backpack. "Even if I could

see the worm, how can I fight it when all those others failed."

"Everything you'll need is inside your bag, Brave Bradley, and inside your head," said the god. "Just avoid the Great Pedagog's stare."

Bradley gulped. "I'll remember."

"Now I must leave you," Recess said. "Since Mrs. Stickyfingers took the Thinking Cap, every school playground has become a disaster area."

The silver god shot straight upward into the gray sky. "Remember, Brave Bradley, you are the chosen one," his voice came out of the fog. "You are a hero. You are the only hope for all schools and education everywhere."

MEETING THE WORM

Slinging his backpack over a shoulder, Bradley stood. Ahead lay a tangle of crab apple trees, thorny vines, poison ivy, and poison oak. As he pushed his way through the bramble, sharp thorns scratched criss-crosses on his bare arms and legs. Gnarly tree twigs clawed at his T-shirt and backpack. The poison ivy and oak itches would come later.

After an hour, he entered a clearing. In the center stood an enormous granite rock in the shaped of an apple. A single round hole appeared halfway up.

"The Great Pedagog's lair," Bradley said under his breath. "The Thinking Cap must be in there."

Around the stone apple stood dozens of life-size, plastic soldiers. Bradley shivered. No doubt, these were the men who had come to conquer the Great Pedagog, but had met it eye to eye instead. To his left stood a Roman foot soldier with a sword drawn. On his right was a

knight in armor and a samurai warrior. Nearby knelt a US marine with a bazooka forever on his shoulder.

Bradley bumped into a bearded Viking, holding an ax over his head.

"Pardon me, sir," he said, as the figure toppled over.

He opened his backpack. In the bottom corner, he found a stick of Juicy Fruit gum. The gum went into his mouth, but the foil wrapper was what he needed. Turning, he held the foil before his eyes. He saw the reflection of the stone apple, blurry, but clear enough.

Beside the hole was a red box like the fire alarms in his school hallway. A sign below the handle read: PULL TO SUMMON WORM.

Stepping backward, Bradley reached for the handle. "I always wanted to pull one of these things," he said, and he did.

Burp! Burp! Burp! went the alarm.

Bradley bolted forward, knocking over a plastic Zulu warrior. He held up his foil mirror and waited.

From deep within the hole came snapping, sticky sounds. Moments later the Great Pedagog appeared. Two eyes, like revolving ping-pong balls, bulged from its blunt head. Its slimy, pink body slithered slowly from the hole like toothpaste from a tube. Its head swayed side to side as if it were sniffing the air.

"Oh, ick," said Bradley. "Worms are disgusting." And he lowered the mirror.

In the next instant, a voice behind him called out, "Bradley, my buddy. My how you've grown. How are you doing, buddy? Turn around, and let me see you."

Where had Bradley heard that voice before? Yes, it belonged to his kindergarten teacher, Mr. Dembrow. Could good-old Mr. Dembrow be on this island? He started to turn, but checked himself. Holding up the foil, he saw only the earthworm squirming farther from the cavity.

"Nice try, Fish Bait," Bradley called out. "But it'll take more than a worm brain to trick me."

Again he lowered the foil and again he heard a voice. "Brad Zimmerman, look what I have for you. A chocolate cupcake. I know chocolate cupcakes are your favorite snack."

Miss Purdy? Was Miss Purdy, his second-grade, all-time favorite teacher, standing behind him?

Bradley rechecked the reflection and again saw the Great Pedagog, now halfway out of its hole.

"Sorry, Food For Early Birds," he said. "Miss Purdy was a health nut. She would never offer me a cupcake before lunch."

Bradley chewed his gum hard. "The worm is tricky," he said. "If only I could find a weak spot somewhere."

As he spoke, his gum snapped. In the foil he saw the worm wince. The gum snapped again, and the same pained expression crossed the worm's face.

Curious. That's how my teachers look when I make noises in class, Bradley thought. According to Recess's story, The Great Pedagog was once a teacher. Since it still sounds like a teacher. Since it acts like a teacher. Could it be possible? Maybe...just maybe it reacts like one, too.

Bradley stooped. He pulled the Velcro on his sneakers, making a loud ripping sound. The Great Pedagog let out a moan. It shook its head and recoiled into its hole.

"Ah-ha, so the worm turns," said Bradley. "I've got you now Great Pedagog."

He went to work. He unzipped his backpack as loudly as possible. *Zzzzip!* He opened and shut the rings on his notebook. *Snap! Snap! Snap!* He pressed the button on a ballpoint pen. *Click! Click! Click!* He tore paper into long strips. *Rrrrip! Rrrrip! Rrrrip!*

The worm writhed wildly. It whimpered. It squeezed its deadly eyes shut.

"I'm an expert at getting under a teacher's skin, Great Pedagog," Bradley called out. "And since your skin is soft and thin, I'm getting even better results."

Zip! Snap! Rip! Click! Grind! Tap-tap!

Bradley cracked his knuckles. He blew his

nose like a bike horn. He whistled through his fingers and slapped his cheeks.

Behind him, the worm let out a scream.

Next, with a pencil, Bradley tapped his front teeth. Last year this noise drove his teacher up a wall. To his delight, he saw the Great Pedagog climbing the side of the stone apple.

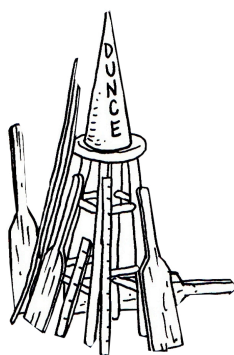
"Now for the grand finale," he said. "Here goes something that never fails to make a teacher blow her top." And he stuck his hand in his armpit and pumped his arm. The trumpeting was tremendous.

The worm continued to shriek. It rolled and twisted into O's, C's, and G's. It's head swayed back and forth, until, with a dull pop, the entire end of the beast exploded. Worm guts sprayed in all directions. The body plopped to the ground and lay there like a fat noodle.

Bradley wiped slime off his arms and legs. "Man, that's what I call blowing your top," he said.

Cautiously, he stepped toward the creature. He kicked its spongy sides.

"The Great Pedagog is dead!" he announced. "I did it! I, Bradley Zimmerman, the Great Underachiever, have killed the Great Pedagog!"



THE THINKING CAP

With no one to share his moment of triumph, Bradley felt lonelier than ever. He kicked the worm carcass again. Already it had shriveled like a deflated balloon.

He looked toward the giant, stone apple. "I guess the Thinking Cap is in the worm hole," he said. "I guess I should go get it. Then I guess I should find a way home."

Bradley heaved himself onto the hole opening. The tunnel was long and dark. The smell reminded him of a classroom after someone had thrown up.

"Hello!" he called out. His voice echoed, once, twice, three times.

On hands and knees, he moved forward. Almost at once he slipped on the slimy floor. As he rose off his belly, gook as thick as nose drippings plopped from the ceiling onto the back of his neck. He wiped off his hand and began crawling again. Each time he lowered a hand or

knee it made a squelching sound in the goo. He crawled some more and slipped some more, until--*bang!*--his head bumped something tall and skinny.

Bradley sat down. He recalled the myth Super had read him on Mount Academy. "The Thinking Cap is a plain baseball cap," he told himself. "Sir and Miss hung it on a hat rack before they parted. Could this be that hat rack?"

He reached up and grabbed something soft and flat off a hook. He felt a brim in front and a plastic adjustment band in back.

"I guess this is it," he said.

He was too drowsy and grossed out by the smell and slime to feel much thrill in his find. He had come all this way and now he held the prize --the Thinking Cap.

Without thinking, he put the hat on his head. He turned and began crawling from the hole. How bright and shiny the walls suddenly appeared. The smells were stronger and the sounds clearer.

When he reached the end of the tunnel, Bradley sat on the ledge, dangling his feet over the side. He rubbed his temples. What was happening inside his head? Lights flashed; colors splashed; and sounds bounced ear to ear. Pictures blinked in his brain. Words whirled by in a blur. Numbers ticked out by the trillions.

"Yes! Ya! Si! Da! Oui!" Bradley shouted.

"Cool! Bien! Olé! Bravo!" He could speak in any language he chose.

As if a movie was ending, the pictures, sounds, and numbers faded. Again Bradley looked across the clearing filled with plastic soldiers.

"The Roman Empire ended in 476 AD," he stated. "World War Two began in 1939, and the Minnesota Vikings lost the Super Bowl in 1970, '74, '75, and '77." Amazed by his own knowledge, he continued. "Thirty-seven times nineteen equals seven-hundred and three. Mount Everest is 29,028 feet tall. The Atlantic Ocean is 33,420,000 square miles big."

Yes, he knew everything--the name of every plant and animal, the answer to every math problem, and data about every person, place, or thing. He could hum every song, spell every word, and recite every poem.

"But the gods also told me that whoever wears the Thinking Cap can also control the thoughts of others," Bradley said. "Let's give it a try."

He pictured his classroom in his head. His classmates looked pale and frightened. Miss Smartt looked as glum as she had by Flunk's side.

"They're still in shock after the trip to the Underschool," Bradley told himself. "So I'll erase that memory from their heads."

Almost at once Miss Smartt began writing on the blackboard. The class began chitchatting and

squirming in their seats. No doubt, the kidnapping, the Underschool, and Flunk were forgotten.

Next Bradley thought about Virgil, the school bully. "Virgil, every time you see Bradley Zimmerman," he said, "you will bow and call him 'sir'."

Bradley smiled for the first time all morning. "It's not every day a kid gets to put on the real Thinking Cap," he said. "So why shouldn't I find the answers to some of life's big questions. Maybe I'll learn the size of the universe. Or if there's life on other planets. Better yet, I'll think about how I can become the most powerful and richest kid in the world?"

He closed his eyes. He pulled down the brim of the Thinking Cap. His mind began to whirl again. Somewhere deep in his brain a small dot appeared. There it was, the answer to power and money. The dot grew, but still Bradley couldn't tell what it was. He thought harder and the dot grew larger. What was that thing? What were the answers?

All at once the Thinking Cap flew off Bradley's head. His eyes popped open in time to see the hat along with a paper clip fall by his side. At that moment, a paper airplane glided past his face and landed on the stone ledge.

"Super!" Bradley called out.

The tiny Head God of Education, dressed in

his white robe, waved. "Greetings, Bradley, my boy," he said. "Sorry to have interrupted your Thinking Cap thinking. But there are answers a boy your age is not ready to know. Best to stay in school and learn them one step at a time."

Bradley picked up the Thinking Cap. "So what should I do with this old hat?"

"I'll return it to the kind teachers," said Super. "They'll hide it in a certain coat closet, in a certain classroom, in a certain school. And as for you, Bradley, my boy, your odyssey is over. Now you can go home."

"Home. But how?" asked Bradley. "Even wearing the Thinking Cap I couldn't think of a way."

All at once a gust of wind swept through the clearing. Out of the sky sailed a paper airplane bigger than a school bus. It circled the clearing and landed among the plastic figures.

"You shall ride home as the gods do," said Super. "Now climb aboard, my boy, and off you go. Farewell. Have a good flight."

Bradley jumped down from the stone apple. He walked over to his airplane and sat on the back. More wind blasted through the clearing, raising him and the plane into the air.

Bradley grabbed the edge of the plane as it banked to the south. Soon he was sailing over the ocean. Higher and higher the plane flew until the sky darkened. Earth appeared as a

green, blue, and white ball below. This was the edge of outer space.

Above, thousands of stars winked at him. These weren't the usual pinpricks of light that filled the night sky, but large, five-pointed gold stars like the ones a teacher might stick on a perfect spelling test. Leaping from star to star was Digit.

"Greetings, Bradley," the god called out. "The world will forever be grateful to you for what you've done. You saved your class, defeated the Great Pedagog, and retrieved the Thinking Cap. These gold stars are for you. Excellent job. Good work. Well done."

A crescent moon also hung in the sky. Alphabetty sat on its bottom lip. "The immortals have another gift for you, Bradley," she called out. "Each night the sky displays constellations of heroes such as Hercules, Perseus, and Orion. From this night on, an additional constellation will be up here. Astronomers will call it the Bradley constellation to honor another hero. Behold."

Bradley looked upward and saw it. Between the constellations Pegasus and Andromeda was a new group of stars in the shape of a B.

"Thanks. What an honor," said Bradley. "But do I really deserve all those gold stars? During my odyssey, whenever I ran into trouble, I only did things I normally do at school."

"As the gods told you from the beginning, Bradley," said Alphabetty. "You had what it took to achieve greatness."

Digit and Alphabetty waved as the giant paper plane began to descend. The sky returned to blue and the land flattened. Bradley soon made out his town, the street where he lived, and finally his house.

"Home at last," he said. "Home is where journeys end." He held up his backpack and remembered the English worksheet and math pages he still had to do for school tomorrow. "And home is where homework waits to get done."