

... from *Macaroni and Cheese Manifesto* (Third Edition)
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A Single Word Emerges

“I’m not afraid to beat you up in front of your mother!”

With those words we were forever snipped from our mother’s apron strings.

It was the first hour of our first day at the large orphanage that we learned, eventually, to call “Hum”—“the Hum,” to be precise, as in not quite “a home,” but a life-preserving refuge from our mother’s dirty and degraded den.

It was orientation day for newbies and we were careening under the giant round table, swatting at the hems of the dozen or so flimsy skirts voluntarily surrendering their charges.

I’m not afraid to beat you up in front of your mother? The powerful, gravelly voice had stopped us cold. We crawled out hesitantly, flinching, to face it—Mr. Wileman was a giant bolt of dark suit, all thick twitching shoulders and “go on and dare me” black eyes.

Thus my younger brother and I were rescued from the chaos of our fatherless world and welcomed into the squirearchy.

I was just 10 and entering the 5th grade. Think: up till now, you’ve never brushed your teeth, eaten even one square meal or arrived anywhere on time . . . and today you’re in the Marine Corps.

I have registered many of the Hum’s usual first-year memories:

The seemingly endless recitation and singing of unfamiliar and discomfiting prayers, bible verses, graces and hymns . . . and the enforced silences of meals, work squads, study halls and bedtime;

The sting and confusion of a sly rap—the hollering human ring and frantic effort to stem welling eyes and strike back . . . and the shock and excitement of witnessing a wrestling meet for the first time;

The overwhelming size and openness of the physical plant—open-stall lavatories and shower chambers, 30-bed dorm rooms, four-acre playgrounds and museum-size buildings . . . and the totally inscrutable eyes and expressions of hundreds upon hundreds of boys.

* * *

Yet one memory stands out as a key to our collective life and future:

Every day at 3:15 Mrs. Knapp would signal to clear our desks. For the next 40 minutes she read to us, first from Saint George and the Dragon, then, later in the year, from the Legends of King Arthur.

Her soothing voice swept over the classroom like a sustained gentle rain on a desert. I, for one, had never been read to, and it seemed almost too good to be true that she read to us daily, and about the perilous times of bold knights errant and dangerous and deadly dragons.

Thirty years passed before I fully grasped—in one crushing, humbling moment—the genius and the generosity of Mrs. Knapp’s reading of those particular stories to a group of wounded boys.

Yet, as I search my memory for a line from those many absorbing hours, only a single word emerges.

You see, at year’s end our class performed a play for the elementary school, based on our readings, which followed King Arthur’s trajectory from his days as a sweaty-but-hopeful squire to the point at which he addresses, for the first time, the fully assembled Knights of the Round Table.

As fortune would have it, the part of Arthur—and the lion’s share of lines—had fallen to me.

And while I recollect Merlin gravely pronouncing, and the fun of on-stage swordplay, and the incomprehensibility of one classmate playing Guinevere and another the worm-like Lancelot, I can remember only this one word:

I remember it because it was a showcase for my “soon-to-be-teased-away” New York accent;

I remember it because it was a tough word for a 10-year-old to recite without eliciting snickers;

I remember it because it seemed to sum up the play;

And I remember it—still hear it these many years later—because it has carried and delivered the magical ring of meaning, and the feeling, the finality of a full stop.

“Brotherhood.”

for Mr. Joseph Wileman and Mrs. Charlotte Knapp, with gratitude

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