

The Case of the Disappearing/Appearing Slow Learner: An Interpretive Mystery

Part One: A Strange and Earnest Client

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Abstract

Max Hunter, a West Coast private detective, receives a call from John Williamson, a special education teacher / coordinator requesting his help to find the educational category of slow learners. He journeys to Calgary and visits Williamson in his school. After some discussion Max agrees to take the case. Max meets an informant with a surprising connection to the case, and finds some key clues, as well as peril, during a visit to the public library.

Keywords

fiction, hermeneutics, mystery, slow learners, psychology, education

for Jacob

I

It was a messy case. They can all get messy, but this one got under my skin. I never should have agreed to it that day I got the call. Maybe I hadn't had enough java that day and my sense of danger was still in glorious repose. I was, to be sure, already tired as I squeaked open the door of my office; already tired as I slouched into my desk. I hadn't had any business in a week, but I was still luxuriating in the rewards from that last case: a bruised jaw, a torn rotator cuff, a fractured love life, and a slight dimming of my already flickering pilot light of hope. I'd been paid out alright in everything but fees, and even as I pondered the toll the last case had taken on me, I knew I would need a paying job soon. The rent for the office was due and the dust bunnies in my care needed to be provided for in the style they'd grown accustomed to. I was torn between brewing a pot of java or treating myself to a drink from the office bottle in the bottom drawer of my desk. I just sat there, staring at the wall, waiting to see which impulse prevailed.

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I was watching some ants skittering up the wall like they were racing toward some kind of bounty. It might have been a speck of sugar from that day the week before when I threw my mug of java against it. The one to bring it back to the queen would win a knighthood. Above them a spider cruised along her web. They were racing toward her too; they were just too busy to notice. I didn't have the heart to tell them. The unfolding drama was interrupted by the ringing of my phone.

I picked up and was about to announce myself when the voice on the other end beat me to it.

"Is this Mr. Max Hunter?"

I'd considered asking if he was a tax collector or jealous husband but he sounded worried and I didn't think a crack like that was necessarily appropriate. I answered to the affirmative.

"It's John Williamson. I am calling from Calgary, Alberta, Canada. I'm a teacher. I teach special education. Actually, I sort of coordinate special education at my school. Some of my students, the slow learners, they've all disappeared, and it's not just here, it's all across the province."

"So call the police. I've heard the Mounties always get their man."

"I can't, they don't handle cases where metaphysics are involved."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but he sounded firm on the point. I switched gears.

"Why me?"

"I was told you were hard-boiled."

He'd done some research. This impressed me, slightly. "Can you afford me?"

"Your usual rates are kind of steep for my department budget, but I need a professional on this case, and I have some money left. You'd have to save every receipt for expenses, and, I'm sorry to say this, pay for your own drinks."

"I'm willing to meet to hear more, but no promises." At least it would get me out of the office, and away from that bottom drawer.

"Thank you, Mr. Hunter. That's all I ask. I'll meet you at my school next Tuesday, during the first morning tutorial at 7:56 a.m., and make sure you park in visitor, not teacher parking, and make sure to sign the book with your license plate number, make and model of car, and the staff member you are visiting and time of arrival and be sure to collect a visitor badge."

"Can someone frisk me too?" I asked, mocking the formality of the proposed liaison, candidly relieved by the prospect of employment despite my insouciant reply.

So the Buick and I made our way to Calgary. As a West Coast hard-boiled detective, I hail from the state of frontier depravity and I can handle the elements.¹ Still, it was warmer where I came from, and maybe everywhere else too, than it was at this frozen city my potential client had summoned me to. In anticipation of this trip, I'd found the removable extra layer of insulation my trench coat came with and zipped it in, but it wasn't enough. From the first time I stepped out of the Buick, the cold assaulted me with the dull brutality of an overzealous cop beating a suspect with the Los Angeles yellow pages.

Dive hotels, on the other hand, are the same everywhere; they smell funny but the hosts don't ask a lot of questions. After checking in, I let myself into my room with some difficulty. I had been given one of those computerized card keys. I swiped it three times, failing every try. I was just about to kick down the door when I realized I had it upside down, corrected the problem and the door popped open. When I saw the room I wondered why they had bothered with the fancy lock. Everything in it, including its present occupant, was cheap, run down, and worthy of neither stealing nor protecting. I sat on the slab they'd made out to be a bed, poured myself a double from the bottle in my suitcase and thought about the case. He'd said they'd all disappeared. "Disappeared, like a fist when you open your hand," I thought.² I wondered where they'd gone. Was foul play involved?

After a restless night, the morning imposed itself on me cruelly. During the night I'd dreamt I was at the dinner table, a shrill voice was telling me, "Don't let your meat touch your potatoes; don't let your potatoes touch your peas ..." over and over again. I looked down, fork in hand, and tried to follow the instructions, and make sure my portions were orderly. My plate was filled with hundreds of tiny children dressed in white, brown, and green skittering across the plate with the unsettling speed of fleeing mice. Just as I was beginning to recover from this dream and slip into a more peaceful sleep, the four-dollar travel alarm I had brought along woke up and began pecking at my brain. Reluctantly rising, I used excessive force to disengage the alarm and I brewed the complimentary two-cup java bag I found in the heavily calcified machine on the other side of the bed. I choked down the rancid results, quickly showered and shaved, and headed off to my appointment.

II

It was an older school but reasonably well maintained. Graduation pictures hung on the hallway walls. Looking at forty years of cohorts, I noted that some hairstyles get reincarnated every twenty years while some run their course and are heard from no more. The hallways were wide. I later learned this was to enable the movement of large pieces of industrial equipment and such things and this feature was typical of all schools built at the time due to extra federal sugar for the Industrial Arts.³ Indeed, the school had several large Industrial Arts laboratories and I wondered if I might be able to get a cheap haircut and maybe an oil change for the Buick, which were two bits of professional maintenance I had been putting off before I left. It seemed weird to see so many students milling about chattering, eating, jostling, talking or texting on their smart

¹ Hamilton (1987, p. 5)

² See Hammet (1930, p. 61). The simile is borrowed from this source.

³ Norman (1984, p. 45)

phones, and to hear a band playing down the hall, while a basketball team practised in the gym at a time of day when I might be barely out of bed, wondering over java if I should bother to shave or not. Still, maybe this was typical.

Williamson met me at the office. I gave my prospective client the once over. He was of average height and build, dressed in beige corduroy pants slightly frayed at the bottom, and brown boat shoes and a blue sweater. If he was meeting the requirements of some kind of a dress code with that outfit it was one I couldn't comprehend. He smiled as he shook my hand in greeting; it was a sad smile. Clumsily, he only connected with a third of my hand so while his grip had adequate pressure it was more like a thumb shake. His eyes, like two dirty blue puddles on cracked white concrete, looked worn out. He awkwardly handed me a business card. He made a hell of a first impression; I thought he'd starve in a sales job. The job title on his card was stupid too – Diverse Learning Coordinating Teacher. As I was glancing at the card, Williamson observed some students playfully shoving each other in the hallway. He watched for a while, decided to ignore them, and took me downstairs to his room. As we walked, he told me a little about himself. He said he'd been teaching for seventeen years, fifteen of them at his current school. He'd done various things at his school including teaching some regular English Language Arts courses and acting, as far as I could tell, as a sort of a broker for students who worked with community employers as a part of their high school programs. Some of these students just worked at regular jobs, but some did this as a part of accreditation for regulated trades like mechanics or welding. Lately, he'd been in charge of coordinating services for students who were seen as having various exceptional or additional needs, and there were quite a few such students at his school. The one common thread in his career, he said, was that ever since he began at his current school he'd been working directly with slow learners as a part of his job assignment. I made a mental note of all of this but didn't know enough about the case yet to ask any questions.

We came to Williamson's room. A title above the door of the room read, rather presumptuously I thought, "The Learning Centre." It seemed a larger than average classroom and a lot was going on in there. Some students were sitting in desks completing assignments occasionally asking a staff member for help. There were twelve desktop computer stations along the wall. At the desktop stations, students were doing research, on-line courses, word processing, and a few appeared to be discreetly watching music videos or playing games. A rather fidgety student, wearing earphones, sat with her desk pulled up to the corner walls of the room, completing a worksheet by locating answers in a large textbook labeled, simply, Foods. A cluster of students sat at a table along the other wall, and were taking turns receiving tutorial help in math from a female staff member who, Williamson later told me, had a knack for helping students in this discipline. The room broke into five smaller rooms at the back, an office, and four quiet work spaces for students which Williamson told me had once been storage areas before being re-tasked for their present purpose. In the middle of these, another assistant was reading an English exam out loud to two students. Williamson sat me down on the other end of his desk near the back of the main room of the Learning Centre. He said he liked to work in the main room instead of the small office behind him so he could stay in touch with what was going on in the room. He shoved stacks of paperwork, large folders with students' names on them, booklets entitled 'Individual Program Plan', and other booklets entitled 'Referral for Support' to either side of the large desk, forming a valley through which we better could see at each other as we talked.

“So tell me about the slow learners,” I began. “Who exactly are you talking about? And, where do you think they went?”

“There really isn’t a clear answer to either question. Psychology tells us slow learners are . . .,” he replied, and then he resorted to making finger quotation marks in the air, “individuals whose I.Q.s, you know, their measured intelligence quotients, are one but not two standard deviations below the mean – in the low average range between 75 and 89.” He closed his finger quotations as he elaborated on the data. “Two deviations would mean they had intellectual disabilities. They don’t; they are only one deviation below. But they’re supposed to learn slower than ‘average’ students and need extra help.”⁴

“That sounds like it came out of a textbook,” I observed. “Who do you think slow learners are?”

“Well, I end up reading the files of the kids I work with, and a lot of the kids who struggle do seem to have I.Q. scores in that range. But I think it’s more complicated than that....”

Something was wrong with that. I thought for a second and then it came to me. “What do you mean you work with them? I thought they all disappeared?”

“I guess I have to tell you they haven’t exactly physically disappeared like I might have implied on the phone,” he admitted, “in fact, some of them are probably working in this room right now.”

Suddenly my mind was full of hornets. My hand itched to slap him. Clients hold out on me all the time, it’s a convention of the genre, but I’d never had one try to hire me to find something he knew was right in front of him before. Through clenched teeth I demanded why he had dragged me out to this frigid city just to waste my time on such a case. Before he could answer I thought better of the question, the mysteries of the human heart being what they are, and I muttered something about being on my way home and expecting to be paid well for, as I put it, dropping everything to come up to take on this case. Then I got up to begin the long journey back to the bleak predictabilities of my own dark city, the violent streets I travel on, alone and unafraid, the equally complex but more interesting femme fatales, my dingy apartment, my decaying office and, of course, my bottom drawer.

Williamson stood too. Looking stricken, he began to desperately plead for me to stay. “You don’t understand, the slow learners might not have physically disappeared, except for the ones who have dropped out of school, but they have largely disappeared from the talk, or discourse of special education, here and all over the province, and I think that’s pretty important. Look, I’m sorry I oversimplified things. Please, you’ve come all this way, just hear me out for a little while longer before you decide.”

I didn’t have much to lose in staying another minute, I concluded. When I later told the story of this wasted trip, this foolish client, I thought, the more details I could offer, the more I might be likely to hear one of my favorite phrases, ‘on the house,’ from sympathetic bartenders. Besides I was curious about something he said.

⁴ See King (2014)

“So what if nobody talks about them?” I argued. “The kids are here. You try to help them, and it looks like things are going OK in your resource room (I’d heard that term from a previous client and felt a tinge of pride in being able to talk to this specialist in his own lingo). So, what’s the problem?”

Williamson grimaced and beckoned me to go with him to the private office space behind him. Flustered, he tried several keys on his key ring until he found the one that opened the office door. He let us in and shut the door behind us. I considered remarking that it’s always the last key you try but then thought better of it.

“Careful what you say,” he cautioned earnestly, “these are high school kids; some of them have had bad experiences in resource rooms in junior high and elementary schooling. So, we call this room a learning centre not a resource room. And the kids aren’t forced to come. It’s up to them to come for help, and we don’t just help the so-called ‘special needs kids,’ we help anyone who drops in and....”

I cut him off before he could say anything more. He had misled me into making the trip down here and now he was getting pedantic. “Whatever, your learning centre. I get it. The kids come; you help them, whatever they’re labeled, no real mystery, end of story.”

“No, it isn’t the end of the story. The kids with other exceptionalities like Autism, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health issues, and Attention Deficit Disorder have special education codes. We have to write Individual Program Plans (IPPs) to describe the types of specialized support they will receive, and special funding is attached to them. Alberta Education releases resource manuals to describe how to best help these kids, school districts hire consultants to help us help them, they receive accommodations on tests, like readers or scribes, to help level the playing field.⁵ Even the most rigid teachers know that it’s expected that they do something more for kids with specific disabilities. Slow learners don’t have any of these guarantees.”

“Should they?”

“Well, maybe. The kids I work with, the ones who fit the profile, seem to have a pretty rough time with school. Extra resources to help a struggling kid are always nice.”

“You seem hesitant. What’s the downside?”

“Labeling practices haven’t necessarily been wholly beneficial in special education.⁶ I think it’s unlikely that adding one more ‘official’ label would solve very much. I’d like the additional resources, but do we have to call everything that might cause a student to struggle ‘a disability’

⁵ See Alberta Education (2006, pp. 1-3). In their general manual on accommodations Alberta Education has defined an accommodation as “a change or alteration in the regular way a student is expected to learn, complete assignments or participate in classroom activities.” Some assessment accommodations defined in this manual include allowing breaks during a test, reducing the number of questions, breaking a test into parts and administering them at separate times, and / or providing a reader or a scribe.

⁶ See Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls (1986) and Couture (2012, p. 54)

in order to get the resources? Also, how would I know if there aren't a bunch of other kids out there with the same I.Q. levels who are doing just fine in school? I might only end up working with the slow learners who are struggling. The population of students with this cognitive profile might be too diverse for the label to mean much of anything.⁷ Still I think we need something more than what we currently have for these kids.”

This was getting worse and worse. He'd misled me into coming, lectured me on terminology and now it seemed like he wasn't even completely sure he wanted me to solve the case. Seeking some kind of satisfactory answer I pressed on. “Well, do you want me to find where the idea of a slow learner went or not?”

“I do, but after you find it, I want you to help me decide how we should bring it back to the school. What aspects of ‘slow learner’ should be downplayed? What is of worth in the idea? What helps us teach kids?”

I brought up something else that was still troubling me. “I still don't get it. Why me? I'm just a wise-cracking shamus. Aren't you worried people won't think you take this thing seriously if you put me on the case?”

“Look, maybe I need you because you're a wise-cracking shamus. Seems like a lot of people who work in this field, myself included, can be pretty earnest about things. Maybe your approach is a good way of being heard, of pointing out some of the problems without being totally depressing. Maybe ‘care’ is a better concept than ‘take serious’. I care deeply about this issue. The opposite of care isn't humor, it's indifference, inaction....”

“I'm not your hired clown. If all you want is to change the tone, you can do that yourself.”

“It's more than that. I need you. I can't do this on my own. I need your distance from the case. I'm researching in my own backyard here, closer than even that in some ways.” I found this last statement cryptic but allowed my potential client to continue. “I need you to ask questions I wouldn't be comfortable asking, to go places I can't go. I'm stuck here all day, but I'm guessing you like to work by moving around a lot.⁸ You're going to have to look for this in some weird places, maybe some dark places.”

“That's the first thing you've said that makes any sense to me. But there's something more isn't there?”

Williamson looked down. He spoke in a small voice. “It hurts. There are some things about special education that hurt me to talk about. I need your help. I need your strength.”

I didn't know if I should pursue this line of questioning anymore. As a detective I felt I ought to. As a man I was beginning to feel that I'd prodded this guy enough for the day. A student knock-

⁷ Claypool, Murusiak, & Janzen (2008, p. 434)

⁸ Schmid (2008, p. 99)

ing on the door broke my reverie. He wanted Williamson to help him track down some answers in a welding textbook. They'd obviously done this sort of thing a lot before. Williamson excused himself, said we could talk more in a minute. As he walked back to his desk with the student, all the nervous tension he'd been showing in our conversation seemed to drain out of his body. It seemed that in the moments when was working directly with these kids he was freed, temporarily, from having to worry so much about them. He pulled up a chair and he started helping the student, not doing it for him but giving him some clues. He reminded him to look for key words from the question and gave him hints like telling him the page numbers or even paragraphs where the various answers were hiding, so the student didn't have to reread the whole chapter looking for every answer. Every now and then he would read a section out loud and the student would write down the parts that he thought were the answers. This method didn't exactly look like rocket science, but it seemed to work. They were both at ease, joking a little even as they worked together.

I figured I'd learned all I was going to by watching Williamson and the student work together, so as they continued, I grabbed a booklet with his school's logo off the bookshelf in the back office and skimmed through it. It turned out it was a registration booklet intended to guide students, and the parents and teachers who advised them, in selecting courses. I was surprised to discover that there so many tiers of academic courses offered at each grade level. If I counted Advanced Placement,⁹ which according to the booklet was supposed to be an enhanced but not entirely separate curriculum, there were four levels of English Language Arts available for grade ten students. I assumed the bottom level which was numbered "10-4" was for slow learners. Math, science and social studies all appeared to work on the same tiered principle, with a class coded as "10-4" representing the lowest-skilled tier in each discipline.¹⁰

Having completed his brief session of tutorial help, Williamson returned to the back office.

"Kind of funny he asks me for help on welding theory, Williamson noted as he returned to the office. "I'm all thumbs." I had figured that out from the thumb shake, "I don't have a clue about welding. But I find the text pretty straightforward."

"It must be sad when kids are that over their heads in a class." I speculated.

I thought I'd said something appropriately sympathetic but Williamson didn't like that very much. "He can handle the class. The welding teacher says he is one of the best welders in there, but he has a hell of a time with the bookwork. This is what he wants to do. We can help him here, but I hope he makes it through the college component of his welding ticket. It would help if he had a formal learning disability - they have good disability services in the trades schools. He could have things read out loud to him. But he doesn't, so I don't know if he'll be able to get this kind of help in his technical training. I've read his file, according to his I.Q., he's just a slow learner."

"Here we go." I thought. I felt an even worse hard luck tale coming on.

⁹ Calgary Board of Education (2004, p. 1)

¹⁰ Alberta Education (2014, pp. 1, 6)

“Another time I sat with a girl and her parents while the psychologist reviewed the results of psychometric testing,” Williamson began, confirming my suspicion. “We had sent in a referral for testing because she was struggling in all her classes. Her ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher said she was way behind her peers in learning English, especially when it came to reading and writing, and she was failing almost everything else except for cosmetology and math. Well, the psychologist put her I.Q. around seventy, but said her adaptive functioning was too high to put her in a special ed. class.¹¹ That made sense too. She was very competent at most of the other things we would expect kids her age to be able to do and she was quite gifted in some things. She had held down a part-time job for more than a year, and often took care of her younger sisters at home. She was doing great on the hands-on assignments in her cosmetology class. She probably spent an hour before school every day on her clothes, hair and make-up. She had a real knack for that sort of thing - she always looked so glamorous. Anyhow, the psychologist then told us this kid was reading at a grade one level. She said the only way we had any hope of getting her through even the lowest level of classes in the ‘regular education’ tier of instruction would be to do an extensive remedial reading intervention with her, at least an hour a day of one on one work for an entire semester. Even after that, she told us we would probably have to continue to have an assistant reading all her tests out loud with her for better understanding and we’d likely have to scribe major writing assignments with her. Do you know what our psychologist said the only problem would be with providing these interventions?”

I was pretty sure I could guess but the question sounded rhetorical.

“She said the district couldn’t officially provide any of these services. We couldn’t be funded for any teacher assistant time to get someone to work with her and no one from the special education team would even be available to come out to help us set up a reading program, because according to the testing she didn’t have a learning disability or an intellectual disability. She was just a slow learner who was very behind in reading.”

This was a good story. I was beginning to understand some of Williamson’s frustrations, but I still didn’t entirely trust him. Some things still didn’t make sense. “Wait a minute,” I asserted, “I thought you said nobody uses the term ‘slow learner’ any more. Sounds like your psychologist does.”

“I’m sorry. Sure the psychologist uses it but in terms of funded services offered, special education programs or Alberta Education’s published best practices for helping these kids, the phrase ‘slow learner’ vanishes into the air. It’s weird so much of the vocabulary of educational psychology is pretty common vocabulary with teachers in schools too, but other than that specialized use I talked about, this one just gets skipped”.¹²

¹¹ See Alberta Education (2012, p. 3). The special education class was for students with mild intellectual disabilities. The diagnosis of mild intellectual disability requires both an IQ in the 50 to 75 (plus or minus five) range and a demonstration of adaptive behavior, as measured by a standardized inventory, in the delayed range. Therefore, as in this case, a student whose IQ falls in the intellectual disability range, but who has high adaptive functioning also falls into the ‘slow learner grey zone’. Such a student would be predicted to struggle academically, but would be ineligible for many support services.

¹² Claypool, Murusiak, & Janzen (2008, pp. 434-435)

Williamson was then briefly distracted glancing through the large window of the office to the outer room. He wasn't needed, though. Numbers were thinning out. Several of the students were ambling out, and some actually appearing to thank the staff members who had been working with them. "Classes start in five minutes," Williamson informed me.

"Well, I'm sure cases like the one with that girl are pretty rare," I speculated, resuming the conversation.

"Actually, I've looked it up. According to some, it's pretty common for a psychologist to be caught in the position of recommending services for a slow learners even while knowing the children won't qualify because they don't 'technically' have disabilities."¹³

I was becoming more interested in spite of myself. I take a sick pleasure from twisted cases, the absurdity of human arrangements, like we're all very young children dressed up in grown up clothes, inventing a game with no object and then arguing about the rules. This case was starting to sound especially twisted. I still thought he was holding out on me, though.

"Supposing, just supposing, I do agree to take the case. Do you have any idea where I should start looking?"

"Actually, yes. I think you first need to go back and see if you can find 'slow learner' or something like it, some basis for what we now think of as 'slow learner' in the past."

"How far back do I need to go?"

"You'll have to rely on your instincts for that, I'm not really sure. I bet some aspects of this label go a long way back."

"Where else do I need to look?"

"Well, even though we don't hear the term in schools, 'slow learner' seems to pop up pretty often in the news stories, in popular fiction, and even in movies. I'd take a look there. See how popular culture constructs the idea."

I liked the sound of that. I had a lot of former clients in Hollywood. Williamson continued, "Then, there's a series of classes for struggling students. They're called Knowledge and Employability, or K & E, classes. Before that it was called The Integrated Occupational Program, or IOP. They don't use the words 'slow learner' anywhere in the curricula for these courses, but 'low average I.Q.' is mentioned as a criteria in admittance. The criteria also mentions that students who take K & E are all supposed to be well below grade level in their academic skills and at-risk of not completing a high school diploma."¹⁴

¹³ Ibid. (p. 44)

¹⁴ Alberta Education (2008, p. 41)

I shouldn't have been surprised by this gem, but I was. I'd almost agreed to the case and then he handed this to me. "Hang on," I interjected, "there's a program for these kids? A special education program? You keep telling me they've disappeared but these kids keep popping up all over the place! I have some advice for you; it's pretty technical but let's see if you can grasp it. You don't look for things that aren't lost! I've been trying to tell you this since I got here. Are you a slow learner too, Williamson?" All of a sudden I was fixing to leave again, feeling some pleasure about getting this parting shot in.

Williamson didn't care for this remark. Briefly the mild-mannered teacher's eyebrows bunched together forming the familiar vertical and horizontal creases between his eyes and his lips tightened. Then, after a minute, his mood shifted without improving as his eyes and mouth drooped downward and he sort of hugged himself involuntarily. "Look," he said sadly, "I appreciate that you've come a long way and this is an unusual case for you. Maybe I'm an annoying client too." I could have corrected him, he was only a potential client, but I said nothing. "You've earned the right to call me anything you want. Please, though, just think twice before you casually throw out a label that my kids didn't choose to have as your favorite insult, like it stands for everything that's disagreeable."

Despite Williamson's unassertive posture, I felt I was being corrected. Probably his standard reaction to anyone who indulged in politically incorrect special education talk in his room. I thought he was going a bit overboard. After all, he did seem pretty slow to understand my problems with this case. Sure, there might have been a trace of derision in my choice of words, but I thought I was mostly being literal.

Just then, Williamson recovered himself slightly as he smiled a strange smile. "Besides, you've proven my point," he remarked, "I'm guessing your business doesn't take you to schools very often but I bet it's not the first time that you've called someone that. However distorted, this phrase is clearly out there in the big bad world so why isn't it in here," he gestured around his room, "more?"

He'd hit on a sort of interesting point. I was proud of him. I decided to stay another minute.

"Anyhow, you don't understand, those classes aren't a program. They're just a series of classes. And schools don't have to offer them, they're optional. They're not in special education; they're in the vocational education area.¹⁵ They're supposed to be better paced for slow learning students and more connected to the practical use of what's being taught, more hands-on. There are some problems though, with these classes. One of the main ones is that the students who complete these classes don't get a full high school diploma, they get something called a Certificate of Achievement.¹⁶ I've never thought that was right. A lot of the kids and their parents aren't very fond of this distinction, they find it demeaning. I've always thought a lot more students could benefit from these classes than the few who end up enrolling in them and less kids are signing up for K & E classes at my school every year. From what I can tell, school districts around here aren't that crazy about K & E either. Several schools in this city that specialized in K & E have been shut down recently and a lot of composite schools are no longer even offering discrete K & E classes to slower learning students in their populations either. At best, they're borrowing from

¹⁵ Ibid. (p. 41)

¹⁶ Ibid. (p. 21)

the K & E curriculum to make the work easier for slower students in large, faster-paced high school diploma level classes, which I'm not sure are the safest places for slow learners. But it's hard to justify separate K & E classes of seven or eight students to administrators who are worried about regular education class sizes of forty students. They'd rather just use the K & E teachers as regular teachers to keep these numbers down. I'm constantly hearing we just need to offer the weaker students the K & E curriculum in the regular classes."

"Why do you think it's a bad idea to offer classes that combine the K & E kids with the regular students?" I asked.

"It's not always a bad idea, I mean the education system is always supposed to be getting more inclusive for everyone, and the K & E students are in a lot of the regular classes, like option classes and religion classes, if it's a Catholic school, with everyone else. But, and I know this doesn't make me sound very inclusive, there's some things about large core classes, you know English, Math, Science and Social Studies, how they're set up and how they're often taught, how they're assessed, that can make them unsafe places for slow learners. These were the sorts of classes K & E students have been meeting failure in for their whole careers, before coming into K & E."

Just then the laser printer a student was trying to print something out on made a grinding sound followed by a series of beeps. Williamson's colleague was still working with the math students, so he had to go over and fix the paper jam. He came back and starting talking immediately, now seeming to rush his words a bit. The pre-school tutorial period would be over any minute. "So you definitely need to look into K & E. And for that matter, maybe you need to look into some formal special education programs, or in some formal special education labels too."

"Why would I do that?" I asked. "You said slow learners can't be found there."

"I said slow learners can't officially be found there, but don't be so sure. Besides, if you are looking for a suspect on the lam, doesn't finding out where he didn't go, and why, sometimes lead you to where he is?"

Though oversimplified, this was sort of true, and I indicated my acceptance with a slight nod.

"Oh, and one more thing," my potential client cautioned, "There's something else, you can't go into this unarmed, it's too risky."

"Gotcha. I've got a sidearm in my luggage back at the hotel. I call her Candace.¹⁷ She gets cranky if I don't take her out once in a while."

"Please don't talk that way in my learning centre, it's violent and misogynistic." I chose not to comment on the kinds of video games I saw the kids playing, so furtively, on the computers when we came in. Williamson seemed to have a pretty selective understanding of what happened in his learning centre. He continued, "Besides, that's not what I meant. You are going to need to be armed with some sort of research philosophy, some kind of method."

¹⁷ See Jackson (2014, p. 359). In the television series based on Mickey Spillane's popular detective novels, the protagonist, Mike Hammer affectionately names his large sidearm 'Betsy'.

“What do you know about detective methods?” I demanded. “A client sees a couple of actors in the movies playing good cop / bad cop and he thinks he knows how detectives work. My methods are my business.”

“I don’t know about being a detective,” Williamson admitted, “but this is an educational research issue, and I know that can get messy and convoluted. A topic like this, I’d think begs for some strategy that helps you work with language and metaphysics, keeps you moving forward practically instead of getting lost in all of it. Something that enables you to avoid the false clues and see what’s hidden.”

“Don’t try to impress me with this talk of educational research,” I warned. “I know jargon when I hear it. It sounds more like you’ve been reading too much Sherlock Holmes. You think it’s some kind of method or set of principles that helps you sort out the real clues from the red herrings. I don’t adopt any one method because if I did I might miss things. That’s where most of the police I work with, even the sharp ones, go wrong. I keep my mind and my eyes open, I wear out my shoes, I ask a lot of questions, and I know when to grease palms and when to twist wrists. And I have experience. I rarely begin investigating any two cases the same way, but in the end I usually get my clients the truth, sometimes more than they can handle. So, I won’t be told by any client how to work. I’ve turned down better paying and better looking clients than you when they tried to make similar demands. You want me, this is what you get.” I hadn’t intended to reveal that much but conversing with this schoolteacher had somehow brought out the lecturer in me too.

“I don’t want to argue,” he said wearily. “But this is a special case. One that’s going to involve parsing a lot of knowledge claims you’ve never heard before. Please, just consider some interpretive method to arm yourself with, or to add to your toolbox or whatever.”¹⁸

I could tell by his metaphors he had gone from making a demand to offering a suggestion. I could ignore a suggestion, so I was content to leave it at that. Even though I had no intention of following up on whatever he was recommending, I kind of liked the toolbox idea. I didn’t want to hear Williamson talk about it anymore, but I filed it in my mental gallery of curiosities. I changed the subject by asking if there were any other leads I should check out.

“Well, you might want to talk to some other teachers to clarify if this disappearance is as serious a concern as I think it is. You might want to find out if they’ve heard ‘slow learner’ as a concept as rarely as I have, and find out how they manage with students with this profile, without having much by way of resources or guidelines to help them. Also, maybe some other researchers have done similar investigations or, at least, related work. I can’t be the only one who has ever noticed this disappearance. You need to check that out.”

“Anything else?”

¹⁸ “I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area...” Foucault (1974, pp. 523-524).

“That’s pretty much all I can think of. There’s probably all sorts of places you’ll end up going that I haven’t anticipated but that’s all I have for now.”

There was still one thing I didn’t understand. “I’m sure this has been bothering you for years; so, why do we need to investigate this now? Why not last year? Why not next year?”

“Like I said I’m getting worried for K & E. Right now we have separate K & E classes in every core area, but I don’t know how long we’ll be allowed to sustain this with the low enrolments we’ve been having. I’m afraid the slow learners will just get dumped in regular classes with no additional supports one year, and the numbers of students registered for K & E will be so low there won’t be anything I will be able to say to stop it. That and I’m finding it harder to work through the frequent lack of resources and understanding of what these kids need lately.”

“That’s rough, princess. I suggest a few doubles after work. You’ll sleep like a baby and be too numb to be so bothered the next day.”

He looked pained, again. This was sort of fun. I thought I might have to take the case just so I could offend his sensibilities for a few days. If he’d hired me for my misanthropic tendencies, I’d make sure he got his money’s worth. If I took the case that is. He recovered some of his dignity and, once again, clarified.

“Well, it’s not just that. I’m hearing of some new things going on in special education. Many of the researchers who look at special ed., not to mention the students, parents, and teachers who are stakeholders in special education, have been saying it’s too regimented, too much based on a deficit model, and more medical than educational. They’ve been saying this in the field for years.¹⁹ Alberta Education is starting to listen. They might finally be looking critically at some past or current practices and attempt to move away from the formality of codes and disabilities. I don’t know as much about all this, except that part of the aim is to make school more flexible for all learners. I hear they’re looking not only to reform special education, but the whole Alberta curriculum to promote this kind of flexibility.²⁰ I want to make sure the needs of slow learners don’t get forgotten in these changes.”

“I get it. When they start digging the past mischief up, you want to make sure they find all the bodies.”

I’d startled him again with my choice of words; it was too easy. With summoned patience he clarified, “Well, maybe that’s necessary as a beginning, but I’m more worried about making sure the needs of slow learners are addressed in whatever new system they come up with.”

So here it was; the crisis I’d been waiting to hear about. There was some urgency here. It was more than this strange man’s trepidations. There might really be something I could help solve here. I was curious, and something about those stories Williamson had been telling got to me. I weighed my options. What was the worst thing that could happen? Actually that wasn’t the right question. The worst thing that could happen was that I would freeze to death chasing down

¹⁹ Alberta Education (2009a, pp. 2-3)

²⁰ Alberta Education (2009b, pp. 5-8)

empty leads and not be discovered until the spring thaw. But the case seemed interesting enough, some wrongs to right and some rent money to earn along the way. It might have just been the bad coffee from the hotel, but I felt a twinge in my gut telling me that I ought to help this guy.

Just then, another crisis. The bell Williamson told me would ring soon – did. Williamson and I watched through the office window as a new set of kids began to filter into the room.

“My homeroom class,” Williamson told me. I could see he had to get back to work. Looked like our meeting was coming to an end. He needed an answer. I wanted to say something hopeful, but I still wanted to hear him beg one more time before I agreed.

“That’s not a bad start Williamson. The parts that make sense, I mean. A better collection of leads than I normally get.”

He actually blushed. “Thanks. Like the kids, I guess, I may need help but I’m not helpless.” Sounded like he’d said that before. “Will you please take the case?”

“One hundred and twenty-five dollars a day plus expenses.”

We shook hands to seal the deal. Williamson’s aim seemed to have improved since his last attempt at the social convention with me a few minutes ago in the main office. He managed to make contact with all of the appropriate digits this time.

III

Sitting in the Buick with windshield wipers fending off a slow but insistent snowfall, I realized I had no idea where to start. I had to do something though. A paying case is always good, but I didn’t want to be stuck in this city any longer than I had to and this unnaturally early meeting had left me with a lot of day to work with. More often than not, I like to work by stirring things up instead of piecing things together, looking hard at what comes to the surface, but I didn’t even really know where to stir. I knew I wouldn’t be going to the methods store or wherever Williamson thought I would go to find some kind of research method. I’d be just fine without any of this, I didn’t get hard-boiled overnight and besides, I always had Candace if I got myself into trouble.

Williamson had lent me his public library and university library cards so I could get up to speed on the case. I had a roughly similar general appearance, aside from being slimmer and better dressed, and I thought maybe a nice warm library might be a good place to check up on some of the facts of Williamson’s story. I still didn’t entirely trust this strange, earnest client. He seemed, at times a moralizing boy scout, at other times a delusional fool. What kind of man hires a detective to look for an educational category? Still, every now and then I thought I heard in things he said echoes of some of the same “fierce grief” I feel.²¹ Grief over not fitting in, or not buying in, being too troubled by all the little wayward things others take for granted, having a nose too sensitive to the rot. In the sick little world where I operate, the sheen of nobility this gives me is about as useful as a cereal box sheriff’s badge. I wondered what it did for William-son.

²¹ Hamilton (1987, p. 25)

I drove to the downtown public library, and then, annoyed, progressively further away from the library as all the nearby lots were full. I reluctantly parked in a lot that was neither close nor affordable and walked several chilly blocks. Reaching my destination, I passed through a metal detector overseen by an ancient sentry. I'd guessed there might be such security and begrudgingly left Candace locked and lonely in the trunk of the Buick. I found a computer station to work at in a row of cubicles near the back of the library.

I sat myself down in a little patch of heaven, a graffiti-strewn cubicle with chipped particle board and a hard plastic chair and a desktop computer with greasy keys and a smudged screen. I began to look up subjects on the library computer. I thought maybe I'd verify what Williamson had begun to tell me about slow learners in our first meeting. It was weird, as soon as I entered the phrase "slow learner" the library catalogue computer seemed to slow down. Despite this, I managed to locate a recent book on the topic in their holdings. It was called *Slow Learners: Their Psychology and Instruction*,²² and a copy was available at this branch. I left my trench coat on the chair to mark my place and walked up the stairs, retrieved the book from one of the shelves and returned to my station.

I noticed that while I was upstairs, I had acquired a neighbor in the cubicle beside me. He didn't seem particularly sociable or even conscious. A head of matted hair rested, facing away from me, on a huge fleshy forearm. A formless grey overcoat concealed the rest of my companion's appearance, but I could detect the sickly sweet smell of rot. Classy joint.

The cover of the book depicted a child of twelve or thirteen sitting backwards on a chair, maybe to emphasize his perceived backwardness as a slow learner. He was staring out at me with a look that was both forlorn and somewhat vacant. Reading the introduction, I noticed that the authors authoritatively stated the I.Q. levels Williamson had only mentioned approximately. Also, I observed they seemed to think they had pretty much everything else figured out about slow learners too.

The experience of educators confirms that there are many children who are so backward in basic subjects that they need special help. These pupils have limited scope for achievement. They have intelligence quotients between 76 and 89 and they constitute about 18 percent of the total school population. These students do not stand out as very different from their classmates except that they are always a little slow on the uptake and are often teased by the other students because of their slowness. They are quite well built physically but rather clumsy and uncoordinated in movement. They are no trouble in school. Although much of the work is difficult for them, they are patient and cooperative ... They need help in the form of special class [sic] in ordinary school. Most slow learners struggle along in ordinary classes failing to have the special attention which they need.²³

"Wow," I thought, "Could it be true that almost a fifth of the students in any given school are just like this?" That smelled funny so I checked out another source on the computer. This time an

²² See Reddy, Ramar, & Kusama (2006).

²³ *Ibid.* (p. 4)

article written by an American psychologist answering a series of FAQs or ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ about slow learners on the website “schoolpsychologistfiles.com”.²⁴

A “slow learner” is not a diagnostic category, it is a term people use to describe a student who has the ability to learn necessary academic skills, but at rate and depth below average same age peers. In order to grasp new concepts, a slow learner needs more time, more repetition, and often more resources from teachers to be successful. Reasoning skills are typically delayed, which makes new concepts difficult to learn.

At this point, the website quoted the same IQ numbers that Williamson and the previous book mentioned. But then the writer made this interesting clarification:

Those who fall two standard deviations below the mean are often identified as having an Intellectual Disability (IQ below 70). A slow learner does not meet criteria for an Intellectual Disability (also called mental retardation) [sic]. However, she learns slower than average students and will need additional help to succeed.²⁵

All this sorting into cozy little boxes was making me miss my little warm hotel room. I was tired. I noticed my companion in the next cubicle had disappeared; I chided myself for missing this when it happened. Still, he’d seemed harmless. I gave myself a couple of quick slaps to the face and concentrated on my search again.

I was looking for a different perspective on this classification process and found a study in an on-line journal that offered just that. This article was pretty technical. Still, I was able to piece together that these authors didn’t like how psychologists and educators, in their opinions, often overused the idea of “low average” in describing the traits and needs of students. Low average, I realized, described the very same IQ range as slow learners were said to have. They said low average carried the risk of being a self-fulfilling prophecy for children without the benefit of being a label that leads to additional services. In addition to this, the authors did an interesting experiment. They found one hundred and ninety-six archived I.Q. tests from a private clinic in an urban centre in Alberta and rescored these tests using a different scoring system that was also considered acceptable in the field. They found that a full eighteen percent of the classifications changed by one category, from low average to average for example. No wonder these slow learners were elusive. You could make them come and go by how you scored the test.

The authors who did the rescoring experiment, like Williamson, were pretty critical about the practice of denying struggling students’ special education services on the basis of their low average IQ tests. I wondered why this would even happen. I found an answer to this, though not a very satisfying one, in the psychologist’s website I was looking at earlier. It was in her answer to an F. A. Q. “If these students struggle so much, why do are they often not eligible for Special Education?”

Special Education services are provided for students who have a disability. Slow learners typically do not have a disability, even though they need extra support. Cognitive abilities are too high

²⁴ King (2014, para. 1)

²⁵ Ibid. (para. 2)

for these learners to be considered for an Intellectual Disability. However, the abilities are usually too low to be considered for a Learning Disability. Consider that a learning disability consists of discrepancies between average abilities and below average academics, coupled with a processing deficit. Schools often look for a discrepancy between a student's ability and where they are performing. Slow learners tend to perform at their ability level, which is below average. To the disappointment of many, slow learners often do not receive special education services.²⁶ I was still a little shaky about the claims these sources were making about this group of students, but now something new was bugging me too. If I had it right, it seemed strange to me that in many jurisdictions a special education system had evolved such that it routinely excluded from special services a whole group of learners that the intelligence tests it seemed to value so highly predicted would struggle at school. Where have the slow learners gone, indeed? Maybe my foolish client was on to something after all. A little thrill of danger ran down my spine.

I scrolled back through some psychology websites without, I didn't think, learning much of direct relevance. Then it occurred to me that I did know, from my conversation with Williamson, a place where some of the slow learners in Alberta had gone. It was an instructional tier offered to struggling high school students in some schools. Williamson seemed to have mixed feelings about it. Then again, I didn't know what that meant either. Williamson seemed to have mixed feelings about everything. I typed in Knowledge and Employability (K & E) Classes and then, remembering the name of the previous slow learner program my client had told me about, I added "Integrated Occupational Program (IOP)" to the search too. I got several hits. I clicked on the information manuals for both programs and briefly scrolled through them looking for descriptions of the sorts of students they were intended for.²⁷ Though I was only skimming to get to the part about enrolment criteria, I couldn't help but notice that the manual for the old program, IOP, was much thicker, containing a lot more advice about how to support these students. I wondered why, but I put that question on the back burner.

Both manuals were pretty consistent with what the psychology books had said about slow learners as well as what Williamson had told me. The recommended populations for both K & E, and IOP before it, were supposed to have low average IQs, show up as behind grade level in their skills and grades in their core subjects, be more adept at concrete learning, and be at risk of not being able to complete the regular high school diploma.

I selected the third item down called "Accountability Pillar Results for Annual Education Results Report" because I wanted to know who was accountable for these classes.²⁸ I always wanted to know who was accountable. I was rewarded with a complex document showing various statistics about student achievement, and about parent and student perceptions about the general quality of education in the province. "Dead end," I thought. It wasn't telling me anything about K & E or slow learners. I was about to close the site when I saw the phrase 'high school completion rate'. This seemed important, but why? I remembered Williamson griping that the students who took this level of classes left school with a credential called the K & E certificate, a credential widely seen as less valuable than the Alberta High School Diploma.²⁹ Surely if there were even half as

²⁶ Ibid. (para. 3)

²⁷ Alberta Education (1989, p. 3)

²⁸ See Alberta Education (2010)

²⁹ Alberta Education (2004, p. 10)

many slow learners around as the previous data claimed, and they really did have as tough of a time in school as the information about the categories suggested, these K & E classes would be an inevitable path for many of them. The completion results would surely show a significant minority of Alberta's students earning the K & E certificate instead of the High School diploma. I started to look at the stats on this. Now that I was in the right section they were easy to find, but not so easy to believe. In 2009, 30,689 students completed high school in three years having earned a high school diploma; 305 completed earning a K & E certificate of achievement. In 2008, 30,500 students completed high school with the diploma, 266 completed with the certificate in the same year. In 2007, 30,105 diplomas, 255 certificates.³⁰ I rubbed my eyes and looked again, I thought maybe I'd missed a zero. If up to eighteen percent of students were slow learners why were less than one percent of students completing high school with the credential intended for slow learners?

"Maybe the high school diploma route isn't so bad for them," I thought. "Maybe most of the slow learners manage to scrape through at the higher instructional level." But what if they didn't? I looked at the dropout rates for the same five years. For several years running, a quarter of the year's cohort of potential graduates had not completed high school within the three expected years; completion rates rose a little to eighty percent when another two years beyond the expected three were added.³¹ I wondered how many of the dropouts were slow learners?

"How do students get lost?" I pondered for a second. I realized one of the main ways was by not completing school. The mystery was coming into focus for me. I felt all tingly; the hairs on the back of my neck were standing at attention.

My tingly feeling was suddenly joined by a duller and more menacing sensation, a large arm encircling my throat. So eager had I been to begin my investigation, put this case to bed nice and early, I hadn't taken a wary enough look at my foul neighbor at the next computer station and now he was choking me from behind. The full force of the rotting stench hit me with the last breath I was able to take before he cinched my throat shut. As massive, fleshy arms tightened around me, I brought my feet up to my desk and pushed backwards with all my strength. The desk thudded against the wall, giving me what I thought was good leverage for dislodging my assailant, but he easily absorbed the force and the chokehold just got tighter. My peripheral vision beheld a close-up view of a pallid, shapeless face and a staring eye, black as an eight ball. I wrenched to one side, and the hold just got tighter. I looked to the entrance of the library; the ancient guard was asleep in his chair. Straining, I gripped my assailant's thumb and upper wrist with both hands and tried to wrench it backwards to break his grip. His skin felt cold, and a large pulpy wad of it tore off and skidded across the cubicle. It came to rest on the upper left corner of the computer keyboard, concealing the escape key. In the reflection on the monitor, I saw his wrist glowing faintly pink in the spot I attacked, I guessed maybe there might be a beating heart under all that, but he was otherwise unharmed and constricting my neck more tightly than ever. A brightly colored figure flickered in and out of my range of vision but I wasn't sure if it was real. Someone had a problem with me investigating this category – I wondered who? My indignation at the story arriving at this point was short-lived as everything went black.

³⁰ Alberta Education (2010)

³¹ Ibid. (p. 4)

I was in a lineup outside a factory, waiting to be measured. A machine was doing the measuring. Once I was measured it would put me in a box. Depending on which box I was in, the machine would pick me up and push me through one of five chutes and down one of five tracks for further assembly. It was a big factory and the chutes were too small to enable a long look down the lines. Beyond the first few stations, I couldn't see where any of the tracks were leading. I arrived at the machine. A pair of mechanized arms with a crudely marked stick measured my height and width. A box was selected from a shelf overhead and lowered to the ground. I lay down, curled in the box. My arm stuck out. Instead of lifting my box onto the shelf as it had with the others, the mechanized arm tried to push my arm back down into the box, but it still stuck out. A mechanized arm held my human arm. A mechanized arm drew a line across my human arm. A mechanized arm held a dull saw, I wriggled my human arm to escape.

“Mr. Hunter!” “Mr. Hunter!” Williamson was shaking my arm trying to rouse me awake. I was in a coffee room inside what was likely the private staff area of the library, laid out on a threadbare couch. Someone had loosened my tie and collar and someone had, apparently, poured a couple of teaspoons of drool into the lapel pocket of my blazer. Williamson told me that a little girl who had wandered away from her mom had reported to her mother that a man was being attacked by some kind of monster at the back of the library. She, I realized, was the brightly colored blur I'd seen; at least I'd kicked up enough of a fuss to attract her attention. Though not entirely comprehending her, her mom had roused the security guard from his slumber to check out whatever her daughter had thought she'd seen. Before the guard got to me, my assailant had apparently escaped undetected. I'd been found unconscious at the cubicle, but they assumed the little girl, whom I owed my life, had only imagined the monster. The staff, used to people falling asleep in the library, had assumed I had a temporary ailment brought on by recreational overindulgence or professional overwork, and that I needed no medical intervention except for rest. Perhaps due to my professional appearance, in lieu of calling the authorities, they had kindly moved me to this couch to sleep off whatever I had. Williamson's business card had fallen out of my pocket, so they called him to retrieve me. I was really out of it. The diabolically cold weather, the early morning, the educational research and the apparent zombie had all conspired to put me out for several hours. It was now four o'clock.

I had a glass of water and assured the staff I was ok. Williamson asked me what had happened, but instead of explaining it right there, I asked him to take me somewhere licensed and seedy, where our conversation would not be overheard by interested parties. It wasn't hard to find such a place. On the short but chilly walk there, my wet lapel pocket froze, and I felt a sliver of ice near my heart.

A few patrons glanced up at us with tired hostility, and glanced down again into their beer. We had to step lightly over several spots of uneven tile, found two stable barstools that were unoccupied and sat. An indifferent server wiped the scratched tabletop, leaving a sheen of grease from her cloth, and then she vanished into thin air, like the slow learners I was looking for. I counted nine dead flies in the lamp overhead. Williamson looked uncomfortable. This place was perfect. As we waited for the waitress to return, I told Williamson how I'd been attacked. His face assumed a distressed countenance and he asked for more details. I told him he'd need a drink to help him absorb the news and got up to order from the bar. He reluctantly agreed but asked me if

I thought it was wise to be drinking after losing consciousness like I had. I told him I get knocked out often and that this was my standard treatment.

I had a shot of something that burned pleasingly at the bar and returned to the table with a pint for each of us. I took a long swallow and told him what I'd learned about the case so far. I told him I thought I was off to a good start before being attacked. He fidgeted. Then I told him about how my assailant resembled nothing so much as a zombie. He stopped fidgeting and began shaking. I described my objections to my own perception of this, "It doesn't belong. Sure, I often experience this world as a place gone all wrong, but that's just being realistic. There's no room in my thinking for monster stories."

Williamson's face reddened and he glared at me. "I told you this was dangerous territory and to look into a research method. I said it was very important. You ignored me. Look where that left you, senseless in a library. That zombie-like thing did you a favor; you were in too deep too soon. Who knows, maybe it was even trying to warn you about something."

"I think I did well," I protested. "I confirmed how slow learner is defined, at least psychologically, and more about the problems with the category that you were trying to explain to me. I saw how few students complete the K & E Certificate provincially."

Remembering himself, Williamson took a deep breath and settled down. "I am surprised the completion rate is that low," he admitted. "But that just helps confirm my suspicions that a lot of slow learners are disappearing. It doesn't really explain why. And you tipped someone off about our investigation and let them get the drop on you. You've got to be more careful. A dead shamus isn't much use to me."

He took another copy of his business card out of his wallet. I wondered if he was secretly excited to finally have someone to hand them to. He wrote a name and address down on the back of it and handed me the card. He said he'd met a teacher at a session at a conference that might have some insider knowledge of where the slow learners had gone. Her name was Colleen Birdseye. He gave me an address to look her up. He said that talking to her would probably be a safer lead to follow up while I got my bearings on the case. He told me to call him when I'd learned 'something useful' and then got up to leave, leaving a half-empty pint behind him.

The waitress returned from oblivion and I asked her for a menu. My ordeal had left me hungry. I ordered a club sandwich that I hoped wouldn't be too vile and another beer to sit on its shoulders and hold it down just in case.³² Soon I'd have to trek back to the Buick. I might even get to try out my technique of scraping ice off the windshield with an almost maxed out credit card. I looked at the flies in the lamp again, sleeping the big sleep,³³ basking in the warm white light. Lucky devils.

IV

³² Chandler (1964, p. 9). The personification about the sandwich is borrowed from this source.

³³ Chandler (1992, p. 230)

I drove to the address on the card. It was six blocks off the main drag in a partially hidden little strip that also contained a pawn shop and a used books and trading cards store. I had to turn hard when I finally spotted the place out of the corner of my eye, and the Buick slid on the ice for a minute before it found its traction again and took me in. I parked and entered a gym. I'm six feet when not slouching, and solid enough too, but the muscle-bound gargoyle at the reception desk looked to have eighty pounds on me. Beside him, the computer, the phone, and the desk all looked like toy versions of themselves designed for toddlers already being trained for the high power business world. Still, he'd been domesticated for customer service, and when I asked if I could just observe the class for a while, being interested in maybe signing myself up as a student, he assented with a friendly smile. I thought if I asked if he could crush my head for me too he would have agreed with equal sociability.

The gym smelled of seven brands of fermenting sweat. On a mat to the right was a fit, diminutive girl with dark hair restrained by a functional ponytail. She was wearing Thai boxing shorts and a t-shirt that read, "If you had any questions in the academy you had to wrestle Plato." She was taking turns practising a sparring move with a much larger man. It involved a hip throw followed up with an arm wrenching submission hold. She executed her turns with the ease of putting on a coat, but her partner was less graceful. She had to coach him through every turn. I could see a hint of tightly controlled aggression in her throws, despite her patience with her partner. I was getting a little dizzy watching all the flipping when, mercifully, they took a break.

Her gym bag, which she now approached to get some water, was along the main wall near where I was watching from. I went over to her.

"Looks like your partner is a pretty slow learner," I remarked.

"We're all slow learners at something," she replied. "Besides he's new."

"Still, he's twice your size and you can't weigh much more than a buck-ten. And you're a girl. What a loser."

"This stuff isn't so easy to pick up on at first," she said.

"I bet I could do better," I challenged. By then her partner had moved on to the heavy bags, gloved up, and looked to be investing much thought in the simple combinations he was a-rhythmically throwing. She brought me out to the mat and challenged me to attempt the same throw on her. A good right hook and a few dirtier moves were more my style, but I'd grappled my share too, and expected little resistance as I attempted the toss. Suddenly, though, I was trying to hoist a five-foot two hunk of lead. Next, I was seeing an exit sign upside down, thudding onto my back, and feeling my arm straightened and bent slowly back the wrong way. Decorum demanded I should tap her to submit at this point, but I had one more shot left. "Did K & E make you this tough?" I gasped.

Confused, she released her grip. I sat up and rubbed my arm. I explained how Williamson, whose name seemed to register on her, had sent me to her to find out if she'd seen the slow learners. She agreed to meet me for coffee when the class was over. For the next twenty minutes, she

kicked some focus pads with a trainer, each strike bursting like a firecracker, and I stood along the wall and rubbed my arm some more.

I followed her to a chain coffee shop back along the main drag. We milled through the ordering line obtaining a milk and a coffee respectively. I offered to buy her beverage but before I could insist she flipped me a gold-colored coin with a bird on it. We found a table. Looking a little less Spartan with an oversize hooded sweatshirt and a friendly smile on, I realized she was rather pretty. I could also read from her eyes that she beheld me in only professional curiosity, which was fine with me. I didn't want any distractions on this case. I wanted out of this city.

"You look pretty strong," she remarked. "I didn't expect you to be that easy to throw."

"Well, you took me by surprise," I had to admit. "And besides, I'm always tougher in the last reel." Wearying already of this small talk, I asked what she knew about where the slow learners might be.

"Right here, maybe," she said with just a hint of irony. "They thought I was a slow learner when I was in school.³⁴ I was placed in the Integrated Occupation Program when I was in junior high school. This was years ago when it first came into the Alberta Education system."

If it weren't for the way she said it, I would have said Williamson had found me the perfect informant, a self-described slow learner. She'd been in the programs. Maybe she'd seen some other slow learners along the way. I tried to engage her in talk of her own experiences a little, to tease some more information out of her. "I don't get it. You don't seem that slow to me. How could that be? How did you end up there?"

"I ... uh ... couldn't read. I basically got through elementary school without being able to read. Just faking my way through it. Then I came to Calgary in grade seven and they tested me and found I had a grade one-ish reading level. I could pick things up if I had to, but my comprehension was really low. I had a huge gap in my learning. And they did tons of testing and then they threw me in IOP. They thought that was the best place for me. And then the IOP people said 'she's not IOP' so they threw me in gifted education. And then they finally gave up on me."

"You mean they finally just let you be? Do you mean things got better?"

"No. I mean I dropped out. I didn't finish high school. All my learning, I did as an adult. I think that's what happens with a lot of our kids." I didn't know who the 'our' were. I assumed it was all the teachers who worked with slow learners. She continued, "The shuffling around and the stigma that goes with K & E, I mean that was with IOP too. If you were in IOP you were one of

³⁴ Aside from some fictionalization to locate them as characters in the narrative, the opinions given and experiences described by teachers, students, administrators, and curriculum leaders are from my interviewees and any character located in a realistic role in education is based on an actual interviewee. I interviewed eight teachers, administrators or curriculum leaders, and four students. For the character named Colleen Birdseye, as well as the later interviews with the group of students, I took the quotations directly from transcripts of our audio-recorded conversations. For all other interviewees, the quotations were reassembled based on my notes of our conversations. In all cases the quotations were verified with these sources before being used in this work.

those kids. The stigma that goes with that program prevents kids that should be in there from going in there.”

“But you’re a teacher now, and that takes a degree, doesn’t it? How did you get back into the school system?” As well as thinking a story like this might help me track down slow learners or at least understand how students got called slow learners, I was genuinely curious.

“Well, I was working in a mechanics shop. That was what I was going to be. That was my plan, so I didn’t think dropping out of high school would have a huge impact on going to SAIT or my apprenticeship.³⁵ So that was what I was going to do but I had a really bad injury on the job – wheelchair and everything, so I couldn’t do the job anymore. I could now obviously, but I couldn’t physically pick anything up then. I was like, ok what am I going to do with my life? So, I went to Mount Royal College as a mature student and failed miserably a few times, but back then that college was really good with students with learning gaps and they worked with me, and I finally started to see success at school. That was, let’s see my daughter was two then, so I would have been twenty-two. And I went from there. I just got better as a student as the years went on.”

“Do you think your experiences are pretty typical? Are lots of bright kids with learning issues like you had misplaced in K & E?” I realized I was asking my questions two at a time now, but I was excited. I was in the middle of the tempest of category confusion that I’d been learning about. Williamson had found me a good informant.

Colleen Birdseye took a sip of her milk. “Well that’s always a big argument for not placing in K & E. A K & E student is not a learning disabled student. There’s this distinct higher / lower hierarchy between LD and K & E and I think it does a few injustices.”

I discerned that LD probably stood for “learning disabled” as Colleen Birdseye continued to explain the injustices of the hierarchy. “One, it assumes that a student who is at a K & E level can’t have a LD because they aren’t smart enough, which is completely false. Most of the kids I’ve taught in K & E have learning disabilities as well. And, it again perpetuates that idea that if they’re in K & E they can’t do anything else. Whereas if you’re just coded with a learning disability, you’re capable of doing everything as long as you have the right accommodations.”

Williamson had mentioned accommodations to me as well but I forgot what they were so I asked. Colleen Birdseye explained that they were things like providing students with extra time on tests, access to a staff member or technology to read tests out loud, and / or a scribe to record their writing for them. These things were supposed to make things fairer for students with disabilities, but not change the difficulty of the tests or assignments on a conceptual level. I thought for a second this was a pretty sweet deal for the disabled kids. But then I wondered why there was a whole institutional process just for qualifying for these things. I’d known some keen-eyed P.I.’s who avoided reading like it was consumption, and almost all my colleagues dictated their letters to a secretary; if they could afford one. Not me, I could barely keep myself on the payroll so I did my own clerical work. That, and I found the rhythm of pounding on the computer keys relaxing; like a little army of speed bags to bip - bip with my fingers. As a P.I. who didn’t use those so-called accommodations then, I was in the minority. As for time, we billed by the day, extra time

was always better, at least until the client ran out of money or patience. That was just how we did it. So this concept of accommodation was foreign to me. As I considered this, I felt a teacher's eyes on me and realized my mind was wandering. I apologized, and said it had been a long day and pleaded that my informant continue explaining her concerns. After a minute, she did.

"My issue is this hierarchy between seeing a better person and a not-as-good person. There's certainly issues with being learning disabled too, but with K & E it's often viewed as kids that aren't worth putting the effort into."

"Sounds like you think that it isn't strictly slow learners who end up being placed in K & E classes," I paraphrased, just to keep the conversation going. Then I came up with another question. "Does the concept of slow learner affect your work in any way?"

"The term itself? It doesn't impact me, I wouldn't say. It does impact people. When I have a K & E student, I have to be aware they're a K & E student, but at the same time I run a classroom that is diversified anyways, personalized anyways. Actually personalized, not just the word personalized because it's trendy. I mean I've taught classes – I had one class that was a 30-4, 30-2, and 30-1 class and, honestly, I loved it.³⁵ It didn't matter if it was kids in 30-4 or 30-1, they all needed personalization for their learning."

I had no idea what all the levels she was reeling off meant; it was like alphabet soup, but with numbers, to me. But I thought asking her to clarify might have been a further distraction. With all this confusion of definitions and talk of personalization, I was already worried she was being kind of cagey about whether or not she'd seen the slow learners recently. Maybe Williamson was wrong in his recommendation, and I had followed him by being wrong in my initial impression that this was a good informant. It sounded like she didn't even believe in the category. It was time for a blunt question to see. "Is there such a thing as slow learners?" I asked.

"I did presentations and stuff at teachers' convention on K & E learners. 'The K & E Learner' and that kind of thing. One of the big things that I always tried to focus on was what K & E is now; and, if people really want to teach it, this is what they need to keep in mind, it is complex learners you end up working with. You could have a gifted kid in a K & E class who has decided to swear at the teachers way too many times or hasn't handed stuff in, so they assume they don't understand. Being aware of that when you're teaching and giving the kids a chance is what matters."

That wasn't a straight answer either. This was all very interesting, but I wasn't sure it was much use in my search for the slow learners. It seemed every time I brought up some kind of problem related to teaching slow learners, something that might help me track them down, she acknowledged it, sure, but then got quickly back to talking about the teaching practices she thought were good for slow learners and maybe every student. Was she being cagey, or did she just think it had more to do with teaching? I tried to use this teaching idea to challenge her sense of pride to loosen things up. "Does it affect how you're perceived as a teacher, working with K & E students?"

³⁵ Alberta Education (2014, pp. 1, 6). The provincial English Language Arts curriculum is tiered into a more academic grade 12 English course, 30-1, a less academic course 30-2, and the K & E level 30-4.

“Yes, definitely. The most obvious was when my school district closed down two K & E schools, one of which I was teaching at. Coming out of the K & E schools that got closed down, you were ‘must place’ in new schools. Coming from K & E, you’re seen as ‘less than’ as a teacher. In general, you’re not seen as a capable teacher of so-called ‘regular kids’, so definitely it changes the perception.”

Something bothered me about her use of the phrase “K & E School.” I made a mental note to think more about it and follow it up if needed, but I wanted to maintain the momentum of the conversation, so I said something agreeable instead of questioning her on this. “Yeah, Williamson says even though he’s been to grad school, he thinks people still talk to him slower because he’s in special education.” This wasn’t strictly speaking true but it seemed like something Williamson might say.

She laughed. It was a nice laugh; all amusement, no malice. I tended to prefer a little malice. “Yes, exactly, they assume ‘you’re not as smart as us’. And even teaching style – I tend to teach in an inquiry style of learning, and very art-based, and a lot of art brought into the classroom. And that’s seen as fluff learning. ‘You’re a K & E teacher and you don’t understand how to teach.’ Well, yeah, I do actually.”

I thought I caught an edge to her voice – that I had her for a minute – but she’d stated this all so matter of factly, no derision. And there she was talking about teaching style again. Why did teaching style matter so much? What tack to try next? Maybe if I kept working the critical angle I could get her mad, and get her to point the finger at someone or some problem instead of all this talk of teaching styles. I remembered what I had read about the K & E completion rates. “If you go with a strict IQ level, maybe 10 to 15 percent of students would have the IQ levels of K & E students,” I began, “but only one percent or less of students graduate with the K & E certificate. Why?”

“I think it goes back to that stigma. Back when I worked in the one of the K & E schools before they shut them down, my daughter was at a junior high here in Calgary. She was in at the guidance office because she was in trouble for mouthing off or something. And she was told – and this counselor didn’t know where I taught – she was told if this behavior keeps up you will be in one of those schools taking K & E and you won’t graduate. From a guidance counselor. When it’s coming from that level, and it’s not only parents who see it as a bad thing to get a K & E certificate, but other staff members see it as well, and kids don’t want to do it. So you end up with kids who go into -2 levels and aren’t able to do it and end up dropping out, maybe they end up taking the -2 level three times and are seen as behavior problems for not handing in their work. But it’s never seen as ‘if they were in K & E they could experience some success.’”

Number soup again. I could only assume that this “-2” was the next level up from K & E. “Does there have to be a K & E certificate?” I asked. I was thinking maybe if there was no certificate, the system would have no choice but to make more room for slow learners in the diploma route. Were the slow learners hiding, or being hidden, in this obscure series of classes?

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “It’s a hard call,” she said after a pause. “I don’t even know if a high school diploma is even a necessary document. These kids, any kids, here’s what they’ve been able to do. A transcript will show these are the courses they’ve had successes in. At the end of the day, does it matter if they get a piece of paper signifying graduation too? I do think it’s important if they have a high school diploma that they continue to have a K & E certificate or some kind of completion certificate so these students that struggle in the so-called regular program are seeing an alternative with an end in sight. But I really don’t think either the certificate or diploma should be there. This is what they’re capable of doing, these are the courses they’ve shown success in. The transcripts themselves are enough information for colleges and universities and employers to decide if students qualify.”

This conversation was taking on the pattern of an epic film. It started with a battle, offered a bit of hope, and then a dash of disappointment, and now here I was getting excited again about what she was telling me. School closures, bad stigma, and the idea of no diploma, I was feeling that same thrill of danger I began to feel in the library. It was more than the stories giving me this sense, I realized. I felt as though I was being watched. I looked around. A shady figure in a trench coat was watching me through the window of the coffee shop. Noticing me noticing him, he began to retreat up the road. My conversation with Colleen Birdseye was important, but if I could catch this guy, I thought, it might break the case wide open. If I could find out who’d been out to get me ever since I typed ‘slow learner’ into the library catalogue, then maybe I could find out if someone was out to get slow learners – not only letting them fall through the cracks, but pushing them through. In twenty seconds I explained I had just realized I was late for another appointment, apologized for cutting this session short, and ran out of the coffee shop.

It was snowing lightly again when I got outside, like salt falling from a gummed-up shaker. Three streetlights up, half a block ahead, I saw that I hadn’t lost him. The trench-coated figure was pacing efficiently up the street. Looking down for a second at his footprints in the skiff of snow that covered the sidewalk, I noted with surprise that they looked perfectly linear and every step appeared to cover exactly the same amount of distance. For several blocks, up streets, around corners, I strode to catch up, finding it hard to match the pace without breaking into a conspicuous sprint. For a while I remembered myself, taking in the road numbers, mailboxes, weird buildings, any other mental bread crumbs I might leave to find my way back. It grew too difficult as I strained to keep up. Just as I started to close the distance between us, I skidded on some ice on the sidewalk, and fell on my backside and elbow. Cursing, I rose to my feet and looked for my quarry. He had escaped into the shadows as I was falling. I looked around – I had lost my bearings too.

With a few wrong turns, I made my way back to the coffee shop, walking away from the dimly lit sub-streets towards the bright traffic lights and billboards of the main drag. Colleen Birdseye’s car was gone. I heard a rattling in my shoe, and for a second I imagined my little toe had broken off in the cold, until reason took over and I understood a pebble had probably found its way in during my failed pursuit. I reached my car, scraped the window with the almost maxed out credit card, and drove to my hotel. I staggered wearily past a dozing desk clerk and down the hall. Fumbling, and then finally inserting the key card correctly with frozen fingers, I made it into my room. I got under all my blankets, still wearing a suit soiled with the dirt of three falls during the day. I briefly pondered having a drink from the bottle in my suitcase before exhaustion bested

me, just like the library assailant, Williamson's friend, and the fleet-footed stalker had, and I fell asleep.

To be continued...

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