



DEAD WORDS

Of arms and the man I sing,” intoned the teacher, red blotches of exhilaration glowing on her cheeks. She lifted her half-closed eyes to the blackened timbers of the classroom ceiling and continued. “That is to say, ‘*Arma virumque cano.*’”

“Arms? Like, well, arms?” said a girl, her nose crinkled in bewilderment as she looked from her copy of Virgil to her own arms.

“Weapons, Sally, dear,” said the teacher, Miss Klitsa, blinking rapidly, her bony knuckles turning white as she steadied herself with a grip on her lectern. “Swords, spears, catapults—you know, the tools of warfare. Now then, if I may recommence. ‘*Troiae qui primus ab oris Italiam fato . . .*’”

“Hey, I’m getting it. I’m really getting it!” said Sally. “That’d be something about a fat Italian, right?”

Snorts of laughter erupted throughout the classroom.

Miss Klitsa blanched, as if someone had slapped her. Her eyes fluttering at the class over her half-rimmed glasses, she blew her nose and began again.

Neil Perkins watched every gesture of the recitation from his desk at the north corner of the classroom. He always sat in the back, in the north corner, because through the leaded panes of a window he had a pretty good view of a stretch of moorland and sky—and of the wall. All things he'd seen before, too many times, but for day-dreaming there was simply no better seat in the classroom. Miss Klitsa's recitation continued, ". . . *multa quoque* . . ."

Neil rolled his eyes with embarrassment as the teacher's voice rose and fell, one hand clenched in anguish over her heart, the bony fingers of the other splayed with twitching fervor, changing gestures from hand to hand as she spoke. He frequently asked himself at times like these: *Why did Haltwhistle Grammar School, crammed up against an old pile of rocks in the north of England, why did the students from this hole-in-the-wall place have to have a teacher like Miss Klitsa?*

Miss Klitsa was not normal. What else was a boy of fifteen to conclude about a sixty-something-year-old spinster with hair so red it made your eyes go bloodshot looking at it? Worse yet, the curly mass seemed to spew from her head like molten lava from a volcano. *Come to think of it, she would have made a great physical science teacher, thought Neil, a living, fire-regurgitating specimen right in the classroom. Or maybe she should have taught ancient history. What could be better than a flesh-and-blood, walking, sneezing fossil for your ancient history teacher?*

Which brings up the matter of her nose. Neil's mother had tried to explain about chronic sinus difficulties and postnasal drip, but never to the effect of producing in her son an ounce of sympathy for the poor woman's condition. Finding a way to steal yet another of Miss Klitsa's lacy pink handkerchiefs, which she habitually stuffed under her

watchband between blowings, was a daily task that Neil assumed with disciplined regularity. Good days he succeeded. Bad days he failed. To date, his collection of pink hankies numbered thirty-four. Thirty-four good days out of forty-five days of school, he had to admit, was decidedly above average.

And there were other things about Miss Klitsa, like her tricycle. Neil found it difficult in the extreme to take seriously a teacher who pedaled a giant-sized tricycle, its pink paint chalky with age, its ancient basket huge enough to haul large dressed stones or a month's supply of coal. Every morning, every evening, in nearly all weathers, Miss Klitsa hiked up her skirts and hoisted herself into the driver's seat of that rattletrap piece of junk. She sometimes even rode in the rain, pedaling along with an unfurled umbrella. The thing was so old that Neil imagined that Iron Age Celts probably rode tricycles like Miss Klitsa's. Maybe they'd found some buried in the peat at the digs in Vindolanda. He'd have to ask about it.

Miss Klitsa's voice had switched back to English. She often broke in to explain something she thought was interesting—*she* thought was interesting, though Neil rarely did. "Some say Virgil wrote on papyrus, but he might just as well have written on thin wooden tablets, such as this," she said, holding up what looked like a flat sheet of wood a bit smaller than a sheet of paper. "Then dipping a stylus in ink, such as this—" She held up a tapered bronze pen-like thing. "He would set down his incomparable verse, which we now resume reading, ' . . . *hic illius arma . . .* ' "

Neil turned from the window and looked hard at the teacher. Odd as she was in nearly every other way, he mused, it was her interest—no, no, *interest* would not do—her obsession with Roman stuff, like tablets and that stylus, that made her the oddest. Of course there was the language—she was, after all, a Latin teacher. But she was obsessed. It was as if she came under its power. Neil

watched her closely. *Here it comes*, he thought: that ecstatic gazing past the students in her classroom, that transported tone in her voice, that relaxed wonder that caused her cheeks to sag. *She's gone*, said Neil to himself. *It's two thousand years ago, and she's in Rome*. He sighed and turned back to his window and to the wall. *Or she's marching around up there*.

Suddenly, he felt a lurching coming from his insides. He often got these overwhelming urges to break out laughing. He could just see Miss Klitsa, her hair groping in the breeze from under her helmet, marching along in lobsterback armor and one of those skimpy red kilt things Roman legionaries used to wear—her knobby knees—oh, and a polka-dotted leopard skin over her bony shoulders. Clamping his fingers over his lips and nose, desperate to smother the laughter, he felt like his eyes might pop out with the pressure.

Though the ridiculous old woman often had this effect on him, Neil did find himself at other times—times of extreme weakness—temporarily arrested by her passion for all things Roman. She would raise a bony fist, throw back her head with a shake that made her hair waggle wildly, then snuffle convulsively, and shout, “Strength and honor!” Though for the most part he couldn’t help thinking of Miss Klitsa as stark-staring, foaming-at-the-mouth, certifiably bonkers, he had to give the old girl this much: she had enthusiasm.

Miss Klitsa paused in her recitation of Virgil and began describing an ancient battle waged on nearby Hadrian’s Wall, painted Caledonians charging madly into the disciplined ranks of a Roman legion. And Neil found himself, firmly against his will, transported with her. *What am I doing?* he thought, with an irritated shake of his head. The fit passed, and he resumed thinking of Miss Klitsa as, well, Miss Klitsa—demented, certifiable, and as obsolete as an old Roman sandal. He turned again to his window.

Neil studied the sharp outline of the ancient stone wall undulating atop the ridge. Of course he didn't share Miss Klitsa's mania for all things Roman; he figured she hadn't had a real rival in that department since sometime before A.D. 476. But he had to admit, there were times when he wondered about who laid those stones and what they were thinking as they did it, or about the great battles Miss Klitsa described, waged right here. He could almost hear one: the clash of swords and shields, the hail of arrows and spears, the thunder of hooves from the cavalry, the cries of anguish and terror, the spilled blood—right there, on those stones. That was all pretty interesting. Again, Miss Klitsa's voice drifted into his thoughts, babbling away in Latin now. He'd had more than enough for today, and suddenly he had an idea.

He raised his hand. "*Magistra, magistra,*" he said, using the Latin name for teacher that he knew would arrest Miss Klitsa from her reverie. He'd used it before.

"*Neilus, discipulus,*" she said with a smile.

Pasting on his most earnest languishing-after-knowledge gaze, he asked, "Did I understand you to say once that someone has already translated Virgil?"

"Indeed," she replied. "Many have exerted their prodigious talents in the most worthy endeavor of translating his magisterial works."

"Allow me to translate," whispered Neil's friend John, hunkered behind his notebook in the next desk. "That's Klitsa-speak for yes."

Ignoring his friend, Neil wracked his brain for a suitable reply to Miss Klitsa. "Astonishing," he said.

Snorts of muted laughter rose from the class. Miss Klitsa didn't seem to notice.

"Moreover, one is safe in asserting," she continued, the bony fingers of her hands steepled in contemplation, "that all the known classics of the Roman world, Julius Caesar, Virgil, Horace, Marcus Aurelius, all have made their way—

at times a halting way—nevertheless, they have made their way into—” here she broke off with a frown, her hands fell limp at her sides, and her voice flattened to a monotone, “—into *modern* English.”

“All of them?” asked Neil.

“Indeed,” replied Miss Klitsa.

John leaned closer. “Now for the kill, mate,” he whispered, his lips not moving.

“Yet you still teach us Latin,” observed Neil.

“Naturally,” she replied, recoiling as if to do otherwise was akin to withholding the benefits of good hygiene from her students.

“If you will forgive me for pointing out,” he continued, “the *non sequitur*.”

“*Non sequitur*?” she replied. “I do not follow you.”

“Perhaps I am not making myself very clear,” Neil continued. “Allow me to frame my question using another language—like, English. Does anyone actually speak Latin today, I mean, when they go to the shop—or to the pub?”

“*Getis meum unam beerum*,” said John, under his breath.

More titters from the class.

“’Tis a great loss to civilization,” began Miss Klitsa, with a sniff. “But, alas, I am compelled to reply that no people group today speak in the lofty strains of antiquity. ’Tis an incalculable loss.”

“Am I hearing you say, then, *magistra*,” said Neil, “that Latin is, well—dead?”

Miss Klitsa narrowed her eyes at him, yanked her handkerchief from under her watchband with a snap, and made three delicate blasts on her nose.

“You shall hear me say many things, Neil,” she replied, stuffing the handkerchief back in its place. “But you shall never hear me say *that*.”

“But does the question not inevitably follow, *magistra*, that if everything worth reading is already translated into

English, what possible good can come,” he continued, “from any of us learning Latin?”

Miss Klitsa’s face took on a color dangerously close to that of her hair.

“Nuances, Neil Perkins,” she said, bony knuckles white as she gripped her lectern and leaned closer, her eyes snapping. “The devil is always in the details, and the meaning is always in the nuances. Never forget that.”

“Never,” he replied with feeling. Then added as an afterthought another, “Never,” calculating that a double negative of a negative imperative might actually be saying that he would never remember what she had just told him never to forget.

Drawing in a deep breath, Miss Klitsa clasped her hands together and gazed at the ceiling. “Now then, with Virgil, we continue. ‘. . . *altae moenia Romae.*’”

“And—and that bit’s something about Rome,” squealed Sally. “I really am getting it.”

“Very good, dear,” said Miss Klitsa, her voice taut with restraint.

“Now, what’s the rest say?” asked Sally, her face scrunched in bewilderment at the page.

“‘The lofty walls,’ ” said Miss Klitsa, “and yes, dear, ‘of Rome.’”

“See. I really do get it,” said Sally, giggling.

Neil stole a glance out the window at the wall, black clouds gathering above.

“Precisely, Neil,” said Miss Klitsa, following his gaze. She fixed her eyes on Neil over her half-rimmed glasses. “Our wall looms in our minds, does it not? Our wall, we say, but by rights it is Hadrian’s, really. And as familiarity so often engenders contempt, so we think little of it. Few of you appreciate the overwhelming privilege of living in the stupendous shadow of this ‘lofty wall of Rome.’ If those stones could only speak; if each mile castle would but give up her dead.”

“Yikes!” said Sally, burying her eyes in the back of her hand and squirming in her seat.

“To you all this is but common,” continued Miss Klitsa. “Today your fathers’ sheep graze on turf that received the tread of legions, the blood of Celts, the imprint of an emperor’s heel. But, oh, if you would hear the wall speak, how differently would you view those ancient stones, how lofty would they then appear to you.”

“The stones talk?” said Sally, scrunching up her nose more than usual. “Like, for real?”

“ ’Tis in figurative language that I speak, my dear,” said Miss Klitsa, patiently.

“Is that like Latin?” asked Sally.

“To some, I fear,” replied Miss Klitsa, a quaver in her voice.

Neil looked again at the wall. He’d grown up thinking of it as nothing more than a big pile of rocks, the southern boundary of his father’s farm, a source of stones to repair the barn, a narrow highway to balance his all-terrain vehicle on while searching for a runaway ewe.

Miss Klitsa lowered her voice ominously. “Hear me, students. Each new artifact uncovered, each sandal and spearhead, each coin and sword hilt, I say, each one does speak! Still more, the letters, the diaries, the dispatches! Oh, make no mistake, my students, if we but had ears to hear, eyes to see what lies beneath our feet the wonders of antiquity would be exposed, the mysteries of the ancients revealed, and the dead made alive.”

“Dead people made alive?” said Sally, her eyes screwed shut. “Oh, please, don’t. Not for real?”

“Yes, Sally.” Miss Klitsa leaned forward and stared hard from face to face at the class, her eyes flashing. Reddened from blowing, her nostrils flared as she drew breath in short pulls and exhaled in shallow wheezes. “For real.”

Neil was sitting up. *She means it*, he thought, narrowing his eyes at the teacher.

“And when those once-dead voices come to life and speak,” she continued, her voice teetering on the verge of hysteria, her wide eyes darting from face to face around the classroom. “They will speak—” her eyes locked and seemed to bore in on Neil, “—in Latin!”