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FICTION

from Leaves of Lilacs

JEREMY SCHNOTALA

Author's Note: Inspired from my own personal experiences growing up in the 80's as a queer youth and navigating the adult world as a gay English teacher, *Leaves of Lilacs* is a young adult novel about fourteen-year-old Naaman, who on the outside looks healthy and whole, but like the Old Testament commander and leper he's named after, is searching on the inside for a way to cleanse himself of his own fatal disease—in Naaman's case, homosexuality. Having recently moved from Michigan's rural Upper Peninsula to the suburbs of Detroit, Naaman has few mentors to turn to as he navigates his own personal life and its connection to the family mystery he finds hidden in the dumb-waiter closet of his new home. His mother and grandmother offer him prayer and Christian reparative therapy, while three new mentors—Walt Whitman, a neighbor boy, and a English teacher—reach out to him in ways he never expected. The excerpt below is taken from the first chapter.

For the rest of my first week at Plymouth High, I dodged through the halls and slipped in and out of my classes without even a weird glance from anyone. No one talked to me and I liked it that way. I had blended in, unnoticed. Just enough to make me believe that crossing The Bridge really had changed everything. But then, as sure as anything, my luck ran out at the end of the first week. It started when the counselor called me down to her office on Friday morning to say that they were switching me out from Ms. Elizabeth's English class and putting me into Mr. Wilson's because they thought it was a good idea for me to have some *male influence* in my schedule. It was no mystery to me why they thought this—Cleopatra had obviously called the school to pull me away from the evil clutches of my *worldly* English teacher.

"I have three other male teachers," I told the counselor, "and one of them is a coach—how much more male does my schedule need to be?" I was a little sarcastic, so I waited a second for the counselor to get all over my case, but she

didn't, so I just kept going. "My grandmother has some issue with Ms. Elizabeth, but I really like her. And I really don't want to change again after I just made a huge change a week ago coming to a whole new city and whole new school." I sounded whiny and was pretty sure I was going to walk out with a ticket to Mr. Wilson's class, because that's what I would have done with some whiny kid in my office, but instead, the counselor looked down at the schedule on her desk and tapped her pen like she was trying to get her brain to work. "Actually," she said, holding back a little smile that I could still see, "I made a mistake. Mr. Wilson's class is already full. So, I won't be able to adjust anything at this time. I will call home to explain the error." Then I swear that I saw her wink before she told me to get back to class.

I walked as slow as I could back to psych class where we were just watching another movie—the third one we had watched in that class in the week I had been there. The first one was about a wheelbarrow—I swear to God—the whole forty-five minutes—just a wheelbarrow and the crap it hauls and the people who haul it. And the second one was about an electric grandmother who could be programmed by the family to serve lemonade from her index finger or fly a kite from a string out of her pinky. Mine wouldn't even allow my cat in the house, so I was pretty much irritated with that movie the whole time we watched it.

The morning I got called down to the counselor, we were watching a French movie about a little boy and a red balloon. When I got back to class, I really just wanted to sleep like everyone else did during the movies, especially because the teacher never paid attention and also because I hadn't been sleeping well at my grandma's house—maybe because my mom stayed up most of the night crying in the room next to mine or maybe because of all the questions I had about the Eli cupboard that I hadn't dared to go back into. But this movie was different. And even though I couldn't understand any French, I understood the movie better than any of the others. The little boy in the film adopted a magical, red bal-

loon that he took everywhere and that all the other little boys wanted to pop. They chased him and mocked him and threw rocks at the balloon until eventually the little French boy sat alone on the sidewalk, crying, with the popped balloon next to him. But it wasn't a sad ending, because in the end, all the balloons from everywhere gave themselves to the little boy and carried him high above Paris, above the whole world, and into the credits of the film.

After psych class, I went to history, which was taught by one of the coaches in the school. Other than the fact that the boy in the tight white pants who I saw on the first day was in the class (and of course wore those pants almost every day), I didn't mind the class. Like usual, Coach, as they all called him, just put the assignment on the board and let us work the whole hour while all the jocks huddled around him and talked about the game. I just did my work, and then doodled a picture of the boy with his million balloons, and tried the whole time not to look up, even when the boys around Coach's desk laughed and slapped each other on the butt.

Other than my last hour, which was Ms. Elizabeth's English class, the rest of the day was so boring that I won't bother telling you the details. But something interesting always happened in Ms. Elizabeth's. I sat down in my seat before the bell rang and was adding a few last balloons to my drawing, when she announced that we would be doing poetry for the next three months so we ought to just cut out the groans and open up our minds. She said *doing* in a funny way and a girl in the second row asked what she meant and a boy in the back cracked a joke and said, "you know, *doin'* poetry, like *doin'* a chick." All his friends laughed and Ms. Elizabeth said she was impressed that he was smart enough to come up with such a witty pun, but she didn't appreciate his objectifying of women. Then she moved on to a passionate speech about how "doing" poetry meant much more than just reading a poem and saying you're done.

"It means writing poems. Analyzing them. Performing them. But most of all, learning how to feel the poem—and yes, Aaron," she said talking to the comedian in the back row, "we're all quite certain you'd really enjoying making another sexual pun about that as well!" The whole class laughed, including Aaron and Ms. Elizabeth. I laughed too, even though it felt a little weird to laugh because I was still trying to figure out all these new people, and because, well, basically I hadn't laughed in a long time.

Most days Ms. Elizabeth began class by having us write in our journals. She'd remind us to "fill the whole page with as much detail and truth" as we could. I understood what

detail was, but I wasn't really ready to write with as much truth as I could since she was pretty much still a stranger. "Don't worry about grammar or spelling—just write!" she would say and then scribble in the air with her small hand, which held an imaginary pencil. I was kind of excited that she said not to worry about grammar or spelling because that was pretty much all they ever worried about in the Upper Peninsula. I didn't have an official journal yet, but a girl who sat next to me was about to lend me a sheet of paper again like she had been when it all pretty much came to an end because some boy shouted out, "The queer kid needs a journal, Ms. Elizabeth!"

When I heard that, I just kept looking down at the scratches and graffiti on my desk and pretended that I didn't know it was about me, even though I did. I had almost made it a full week at that new school and there was a little part of me that thought things might be different there. But no such luck. Sure as anything, all of it had followed me there. Across the Upper Peninsula, through Ontonagon and Tahquamenon and other Indian villages I couldn't spell or pronounce, over the Mackinac Bridge, down the long, dark highway into Detroit, and even through the hallways to this very classroom, where I had, for a moment, felt a little bit ok.

I thought about the Mackinac Bridge for a second and pictured my mom and me crossing it again and me opening up my window, even with all the snow and ice, and throwing all the voices and thoughts and confusions over the side of that bridge. And just letting the wind and gravity take it all down into the waters. Just like all those little cars they say are blown off when the winds are real bad.

But even as I imagined it, I knew it hadn't happened, because everything was still there. I was a fag whether I was in the Upper Peninsula or Lower Peninsula. Whether I wanted to be or not. And all at once, the cupboard in my new bedroom with all its strange secrets, the tin soldier bedspread and curtains, Walt Whitman and his electric poems, Eli, the cute boy in the white pants, the little boy with the red balloon, even the electric grandmother herself erupted into some kind of a frenzied fever inside me, like some crazy dance that I had never learned and didn't want to be part of but couldn't escape. I was always going to be the queer kid. And even though it sounds dramatic, at that moment, I knew it in my soul. And my red face was telling everyone else who was staring at me right then that it was the truth.

"Aaron, come up here," Ms. Elizabeth said to the boy and then I heard her whisper something to him and the next thing I knew he was leaving the room. I appreciated Ms.

Elizabeth trying, but it almost made the whole thing worse and I knew that everyone who liked Aaron would have more reasons to hate me even though they hardly knew me. Even good teachers like Ms. Elizabeth think they can punish kids like Aaron and they'll just stop. Or that they can force them to be nice to the losers, but *it damn sure don't work like that*, as one of my mom's old boyfriends use to say about pretty much everything.

Another boy went up to grab the light blue journal from Ms. Elizabeth, which was really just a three-pronged folder with lined paper in it, and by the time it was dropped off at my desk, FAG was written in black pen right in the center of the cover. The boy put it on my desk and smiled. "Here ya go, cutie," he whispered and walked away. His friends were all watching—pretty much the whole class was—and everyone got a good, quiet laugh out of it.

Instead of writing anything on the journal prompt, I spent the whole time transforming the letters F-A-G into

both of her own. And I don't why, but I wanted to cry. I'm not a crier at all—at least not in front of people—so I felt awkward, sitting there, holding a teacher's hand and almost crying.

"Naaman," she said, in a voice that kind of told me it was ok if I did cry. "You are a very special boy, and even though I've only known you a week, I can already tell that you have a spark of creativity that few people have." She paused for a second and I kind of wondered if I was supposed to say something because she was still holding my hand and kind of squeezed it a little like it was my turn to talk. I felt a little like she was a grandma and a teacher and a best friend all rolled up into one and I was glad when she kept talking. "I know that other people, especially boys your own age, do not always understand you, and sometimes they hurt you..." And then I did cry. Just like a big old baby, and I couldn't wipe the stupid tears off because my one hand was holding my backpack and the other was still inside Ms. Elizabeth's hands,

I remind her of Whitman, I thought while I hurried down the musty hall. I knew Ms. Elizabeth loved him—loved how he challenged norms, wrote from his soul regardless what other said, and celebrated all sorts of things—life and love and even sexuality. And I kind of felt proud to be compared to someone so amazing.

some sort of a dark, art-deco-like version of my name—NAAMAN. It had scrolled corners and confusing angles, but it was bold and I liked it. It didn't, of course, completely cover up what it was, and I tried not to think about the truth—that F-A-G was destined to loom forever as some creepy shadow behind my real name.

At the end of class, I grabbed my books and shoved them in my backpack right as Ms. Elizabeth came up and asked quietly if she could talk with me for a second. "Sure," I said. She promised not to make me miss my bus, but I almost didn't care. She had such a simple, kind face, with blue eyes that were almost just like mine, and I wondered if anyone could ever say no to her. I could tell she colored her hair because she hoped it'd make her look younger and it kinda worked. She was short—I'm about 5'9" and she was shorter than me by at least a foot, but it felt like she had a ten-foot presence when she took my free hand and held it between

so I just let the tears run down my face. "I'm sorry they are like that," she said. "You know, I try very hard to reach them. To make a difference. But between you and me, sometimes nothing I do will stop them from just, well, being little shits." That's what she said, and I almost choked when I heard her swear because it was the first time I had ever heard a teacher swear, but instead I just laughed. And there I was, crying and laughing all at the same time, and it kind of felt wonderful. "But, I can't give up on trying," she went on, "to change them or trying to make school a better place for boys like you. Giving up is not how to change a world," she said. Just like that. Like changing the world was on her to do list with weeding the garden and cleaning out the attic.

She let go of my hand and said that I should hurry so I didn't miss my bus. "You know," she said right before I walked out, "you remind me a lot of Whitman." That's how she said it. Like the poet was one of her best friends. I looked

over at the faded poster on her wall of the bearded stranger in his straw hat. “He was special too,” she said. “And definitely a world changer.” Then she straightened a chair some student left in the aisle and looked me straight in the eyes. “And Whitman did it first by accepting himself, Naaman. Celebrating his uniqueness. You can see that in his poetry.” I could feel the blood throbbing my face and I knew that she knew I was different. She knew it all. And somehow she didn’t care. She hugged me, and for a second I felt like I was hugging my mom and that it was six months earlier and that nothing had been clouded over with gay yet.

Thanks is pretty much all I could say and then I ran out of the room. *I remind her of Whitman*, I thought while I hurried down the musty hall. I had only done the one Whitman poem she gave us on the first day I was there, but I knew Ms. Elizabeth loved him—loved how he challenged norms, wrote from his soul regardless what other said, and celebrated all sorts of things—life and love and even sexuality—that’s just how Ms. Elizabeth had put it in class. And I kind of felt proud to be compared to someone so amazing. I thought about all the emotions I had felt that first night when I read his poem alone in my bedroom—Eli’s bedroom—and I knew I had to get a copy of the whole book. I had to read them all. My mother and grandmother would think it was wicked, but they pretty much thought everything was wicked. And, well, that just kind of made the whole thing a little more exciting.

I decided to ditch the bus and stop by the school library instead. I would call my grandmother later from the office and tell her I got mixed up and missed it.

“Ma’am, can you show me where I can get a copy of *Leaves of Grass*?” I asked the lady sitting at the library desk who looked pretty irritated that some kid was still pestering her after all the other kids had gone home. She didn’t look like a librarian at all and stood up and took off her glasses when she heard the title.

“THAT book, young man, is restricted,” she said and I kind of laughed because I thought she was joking. Only she wasn’t joking.

“Really? Why? We’re reading some of the poems in class, so, that’s kind of weird,” I said and she sighed like I had just asked the dumbest question on the planet and then said that I could find *some of his poems in other collections*, but that *her* library had a *strict book acquisition process and the entire edition was not approved for this library*. She looked like she wanted to go on and maybe even hand me a copy of the acquisition policy, but I hardly understood any of what she was saying, so she changed her angle.

“Half of his poems, young man, are quite inappropriate for high school reading. Some of them, frankly, are nothing more than abominations.” I just looked at her. First of all, because I hate the word “frankly,” and second of all because I was trying to think about how a poem could be an abomination. But it really didn’t shock me much. If a gay boy could be an abomination to his own mom, then I guess pretty much anything could.

I just looked at her for a second. I wanted to say, “Well frankly, my dahling, I don’t give a damn,” but I couldn’t remember if that was exactly how the quote went, so I pretty much just said *thank you*. Plus, I was too new at the school to get into trouble with a grump librarian, so I just left. But I knew right then that I had to get a copy of *Leaves of Grass*—a copy with every one of his abominable poems in it.

Jeremy Schnotala is an English teacher, theater director, and union president for Wyoming Public Schools. He graduated from Calvin College and is working on his MFA in creative writing at Western Michigan University. He is currently writing a memoir and a historical fiction novel set in a tuberculosis sanatorium during in the 1930s.