

## The Seventh Grade

I remember clearly the day John arrived.

I was sitting in our drab<sup>1)</sup> living room, bored. The whole house, in fact, seemed to me very lifeless. My mother had furnished it with plain furniture. The walls were each assigned a dull art piece, just to be proper. All the rooms were colorless and plain, except one. It was the room in the attic<sup>2)</sup>. That room was never boring. Ever since I could remember it had always been full of the belongings of a boarder<sup>3)</sup>. Sometimes it was a relative or a friend, but most of the time it was just a stranger. Someone like John.

John arrived one Saturday afternoon in September. Our last boarder had gone off and gotten married or something so the attic room was free. I'd anticipated his arrival longingly. The boarders were the only break from the dullness of my life. When the doorbell rang, I wanted to jump up and answer it. I controlled myself, however. "Mother" always answered the door. "What if it is someone important?" she would say. "What would they think, a child answering the door?" I used to wonder how long she was going to call me a child.

Mother strode out<sup>4)</sup> of the spotless kitchen, the creases in her grey flannel<sup>5)</sup> pants swaying slightly. As she reached the door she typically placed her hand on the fierce knot of mouse—brown hair at the nape of her neck.

"Yes, it's still there," I mused silently.

When she was satisfied that everything was in order, she unlatched the door and swung it open. There stood John.

He was slightly taller than Mother (still not very tall). He had longish blond hair that sort of hung in his eyes. He was wearing a faded denim jacket, red jeans and a black and yellow striped teeshirt. On his feet were yellow sneakers—without laces<sup>6)</sup>. One look at him and I knew I would like him. One look at Mother's face and I knew she wasn't thinking the same thing. She didn't voice her disdain<sup>7)</sup>, however. She stepped politely aside and said, "Come in. My name is Mrs. Dawson."

"Hello," John said, barely audibly<sup>8)</sup>, "I'm John Steele." I jumped up and greeted him warmly. "Hi. I'm Kate." I said.

"Katherine, you needn't be so loud," My mother criticized. I pretended not to notice John cocking his eyebrow.

Though Mother may have had doubts, John turned out to be the perfect boarder. He had all his stuff brought in the next day while we were out at church. He was neat, quiet and polite. He almost never ate with us. That was lucky for him because Mother was a horrible cook. She wouldn't let me cook either. "Not until you've learned how at school," she would say. I often wondered where she had learned.

Anyway, all went well for about a month until one day I bought a new Beatles record and had it playing very loud when Mother came home from work. John was in the living room with me and he did something I hadn't expected. As Mother walked into the front hall and shouted "Kath—er—ine," pronouncing each syllable harshly, John jumped up and put his hands on the dials of the stereo. Mother appeared in the doorway and stood silently while John removed the record. He turned around to look at her.

“We do not play our music that loud in this household, John, ” she said severely. John looked down at his yellow sneakers now with laces courteously<sup>9)</sup> provided by the woman who was glaring at him. “Is that understood? ” Mother asked.

“Yes ma'am, ” John answered. Then, as Mother strode off to her room, John looked up and flashed me a big smile. I was too shocked to smile back. John was the first boarder we had ever had who seemed to care about me.

I liked him a lot, but I didn't really understand him. He was so quiet, yet he seemed so care free. He didn't seem to care that he had no money, or that he was living in a dingy<sup>10)</sup> town with nothing going for it. I wished I could be more like him, but there was always Mother telling me I was too young to do this or too old to do that. John seemed so free. Freedom was some thing Mother did not condone. She was really beginning to bother me at this point. Being in grade seven, I really was too young for some things and too old for the rest. Mother just made the feeling of “stuck—in—the—middleness” worse by always reminding me.

One night she was yelling at me for wan ting to stay out later than ten on weekends. I just sat and listened to her rave about being worried and trying to maintain discipline in a fatherless home etc. As she was telling me about children needing lots of rest, John appeared in the doorway behind her. His expression was one of dismay, like he didn't understand why she was yelling at me. He didn't look at me though. His eyes seemed to be fixed on the knot of hair at Mother's neck. That knot, the perfect symbol of strictness, properness and boredom.

I knew John wanted to butt in, but he knew it was none of his business. Or perhaps he wanted me to deal with Mother. He looked down and walked away. His appearance, however, gave me inspiration. I stood up and yelled (a little louder than I should have) “Mother, you're being so conservative. ”

“Young lady, you will not raise your voice to me, ” Mother said, eyes blazing. “Oh, for Christ's sake, ” I muttered. Another mistake.

“You can go to your room without dinner, Katherine. We do not take the Lord's name in vain. ”

Knowing that more arguing would do no good, I heaved an exaggerated sigh and trudged off up to my room. As I stomped up the stairs, I heard John say he was going out for a while and the door slam shut.

About an hour later there was a knock at my bedroom door. I opened it. John was standing there with a bag of chocolate caramel<sup>11)</sup> chews and at all glass of milk. He smiled.

“I thought you might like a snack, ” he said.

“Thanks, ” I said, a bit surprised. John started to leave; then he stopped and turned around.

“You know, you shouldn't talk back to your mother, ” he said speaking slowly and carefully. “It does no good at your age. Mothers are confuse d between being a mother and a friend. They soon get over it. Just wait. ” He smiled and left, closing the door behind him.

Later that night, after I had gone to bed, I heard noises from John's room. Since I was wide awake I decided to investigate. I tiptoed up the attic stairs, careful to skip the seventh step because it squeaked atrociously. John's door was open and he was sitting on his bed,

fully dressed, softly playing the guitar. He looked up and saw me.

“Hello, ” he said. “What are you doing up? ”

“I heard you. What are you doing? ” I asked.

“I’m... ” he paused, “writing a song, ” he finished.

“Really? ” I asked. “That’s neat. ”

“Yeah, ” John said smiling. “Did you enjoy the cookies? ”

“Oh, yeah. There are some left—here. ” I passed him the half full bag. He took one out and bit into it pensively.

“Do you write a lot of songs? ” I asked, not knowing what else to say.

“Tons, ” he answered. “In fact, that’s all I do. Well, I sing them too. ”

“You’re a musician. I didn’t know that. ”

“Yep, I am. Someday I’ll have a best-selling album and be rich and famous. ”

I laughed at his optimism.

“I will, you know, ” he insisted. “Why not? Other people have done it. ”

“I guess so, ” I said. “I never thought of it that way. ”

“I suggest you start thinking ‘that way. ’ It would make it easier to get through this time. ”

“What time? ” I asked.

John bit his lip, searching for the right expression.

“The in-between time, ” he finally said. “Too young but too old. You know —seventh grade. ” He stopped and licked the chocolate from his fingers, then he went on. “You go through lots of in-betweens in your life. You just got to stick it out. I figure you can’t go backwards and you can’t stay in the middle so you have to get to the other side somehow. ”

“I’m in an in-between time now—between being nothing and something, but I don’t let it get me down. I live happy in the present, but I don’t forget the future because right now, it’s all I have. ”

He looked up, straight at me. The helplessness in his eyes shocked me and his silent gaze pierced my heart like a dagger. Then it was gone and his cheerfulness returned.

“I may not have much now, but it’ll get better. I’m gonna make it. ” He tapped his guitar with his fingers.

“I wish I could feel that way, ” I said softly.

“You can. ” he insisted. “Don’t you have dreams? ”

“Yeah, ” I answered.

“Well, keep dreaming them. They’ll get you through. It’s alright to have dreams; it’s just a bad word for ambition anyway. ”

“Yeah, you’re right. ” I perked up a bit.

“Of course I’m right. I’m always right. Come here. ”

I leaned forward and he kissed me on the forehead saying, “As Mick Jones says, ‘Go easy, step lightly, stay free. ’ ”

“Free. What about Mother? ” I asked, blushing.

“Oh, mother. Let me take care of mother. ”

“What are you going to do? ”

“Oh, I don’t know, ” his lips formed an evil smile. “Maybe I’ll kill her. ”

I laughed loudly. John winced at the noise and mouthed the words “go to bed.” I got up and crept back to my room (skipping the seventh stair). I slept peacefully all night.

I don't know what John said to Mother, but the next day she asked him to move out. His things were assembled by that evening. He never said a word to me but as he walked out to his friend's truck, he turned back to me and held up seven fingers for good luck and then two for peace. I did the same with tears in my eyes.

I cried myself to sleep that night and wouldn't eat the next day, but strangely enough, Mother didn't say anything. In fact she left me pretty much alone for a long, long time after that.

Well, I'm in grade ten now, and I'm supposed to be an adult. I'm supposed to solve my own problems and deal with my own emotions. Mother's still—well—a mother, and life's still dull, but there are little things that give hope. Like last week, I was in Sound City, and there was John's face on the cover of the number one selling album. You know what he called it? The Seventh Grade.

by Gabrielle Prendergast

## 初中一年级

(作者在创作此文时，还是加拿大高中一年级的学生，此文曾获1984年加拿大萨斯喀彻温省中学生写作竞赛一等奖。)

约翰来到我家的那一天，我至今还记忆犹新。

我坐在死气沉沉的客厅里，感到很乏味。在我看来，我的家整个儿来说都是毫无生气的。屋内摆设着母亲买来的简单朴素的家具，每一面墙上都挂着一幅平淡无味的艺术画，不过是摆摆样子而已。所有的房间都很单调乏味，只有一个房间例外，那就是小阁楼，它从来不让我感到腻味。自从我记事以来，那间小阁楼总是放满了来我家寄宿的客人的行李和物品。偶尔，来寄宿的也有亲戚或朋友，但大多数都是陌生人，像约翰这样的陌生人。

约翰是在9月的一个星期六下午来的。前一个寄宿的人已经走了，可能是结婚去了，所以小阁楼是空着的。我一直期待着另一个人快点来。只要有人来寄宿，我就可以暂时从无聊的生活中解脱出来。听到门铃声，我巴不得马上起来去开门。然而我克制住了自己，因为总是母亲去开门。她常说：“万一是个什么大人物怎么办？人家一定会想：怎么让一个小孩子来迎接客人？”我常常想，不知母亲叫我小孩子还要叫多久。

母亲从一尘不染的厨房里走出来，她的灰色法兰绒裤褶轻轻地摆动着。她走到门口，习惯地用手按了按脖子后面那个令人讨厌的灰褐色发髻。

“甭担心，还在上面呢！”我心里说。

当她觉得一切都整理好了，才去拉门栓。门打开了，外面站着的是约翰。

他的个子不算高，比母亲略高一点。略长的金发有点遮住了眼睛；身穿褪了色的粗布外套、黑黄色条相间的T恤衫、红色的工装裤，脚穿黄色帆布运动鞋，没有鞋带。看上一眼，我就知道我会喜欢他的；再看看母亲的脸色，我知道她心里可不是这样想的。但她嘴上没说什么，只是心里鄙视他。她很有礼貌地往旁边一站，说：“请进，我是道森太太。”

“你好，”约翰的声音很小，几乎听不到，“我叫约翰·斯蒂尔。”我跳起来，热情地跟他打招呼。“你好，我叫凯特。”

“凯瑟琳，不要这么大声喊。”母亲训斥道。约翰朝我翘了翘眼眉，我假装没看见。

母亲可能有点不放心，但很快就发现约翰是个很理想的住宿人。第二天，我们去教堂还没有回来，他把自己所有的行李都搬了进去。他很干净，又很安静，待人彬彬有礼。他很少和我们一起吃饭，这可真算他走运：母亲做的饭菜太糟糕了。可她又不肯让我做，“等你在学校里学会了再说，”她常这样说。真不知道，她是在哪儿学的？

不管怎么样，大约有一个月的光景，一切总算是顺顺当当。可是，有一天，我刚买了一张新出的披头士乐队的唱片，在家里放得很响。妈妈下班回来了。约翰正好跟我在客厅，他做了一件我万万没有想到事：当母亲走进前厅，一字一字地大叫着“凯-瑟-琳-”，约翰跳了起来，立即把立体放音机关掉。母亲一声不响地站在门口，约翰把唱片拿出来，转过身来看着母亲。

“我们家可不兴把音乐声放得这么大，约翰，”她严厉地说。约翰低下头，看着他那双已系上鞋带的黄色帆布鞋，那鞋带是眼前这位狠狠瞪着他的妇女十分礼貌地送给他的。“明白了吧？”母亲问。

“明白了，太太，”约翰回答。当母亲转身走进自己房间时，约翰抬起头朝我咧嘴笑了笑。我都惊呆了，一时没有反应过来。在所有来我家寄宿的人中，约翰还是头一个关心我的人。

我还没有真正了解约翰，但我已经喜欢上他了。他那么安静，显得无忧无虑。他好像不在乎自己没有钱；住在这样肮脏的小镇上，没有刺激，没有乐趣，他好像都不在乎。我多么希望能像他一样！可母亲总是说我年纪太小还不懂这个，要么就是说我已经是小孩子了，不能再做那个啦，等等。约翰是那么自由，可我母亲，你若要自由，她决不宽恕你。在这一点上，母亲真成了我的一大障碍。我已经在读初中一年级了，的确，有些事情我还不不懂，因为我年纪还小，而其他的事情又不再适合我去做，因为我已经长大了。母亲常这样提醒我，弄得我老有种“卡在中间”的感觉，真是受不了。

一天晚上，她大骂了我一通，因为我想在周末晚上在外面玩到10点以后再回家。我坐着听她一个劲儿地叫喊，什么她很担心啦，她必须在这个没有父亲的家里把孩子教育好啦，等等。当她大讲特讲小孩子需要大量休息时，约翰走了进来，出现在她的背后。他满脸惊讶，弄不明白我母亲为什么要这样对我大喊大叫。但他没有看我，眼睛盯在母亲脖子后面的那个发髻上。那是严格要求的象征，一本正经、单调乏味的象征。

我知道约翰想插嘴，可他也知道这事与他毫无关系，或许，他是有意让我单枪匹马地跟母亲斗，他低着头走开了。约翰的出现，倒是给了我灵感。我站起来，大声（其实只是比平常的嗓门稍高一点）叫道：“妈妈，你也太保守了。”

“好小姐，你不该冲着我这么大声叫喊，”母亲说，眼睛像冒了火似的。“天哪，看在上帝的份上，”我咕哝着。坏了，又犯错误了。

“凯瑟琳，回到你的房间去，不要出来吃饭了。在这个家里谁也不许随便地提起上帝的名字。”

我知道再争下去也是白费口舌，于是我故意出声叹了口气，慢腾腾地走向自己的房间。当我踩着脚一步一步地走上楼梯时，我听到约翰说他要出去一会儿，又听到门“砰”地一声关上了。

大约过了一个小时，有人敲我卧室的门，我打开门，是约翰，手里拿着一袋耐嚼的巧克力奶糖和一大杯牛奶，正朝着我笑呢。

“我猜你也想吃点东西了吧，”他说。

“谢谢，”我有点受宠若惊。约翰刚要走去，却又停下，转过身来。

“你要知道，你不该跟你妈妈顶嘴，”他慢条斯理地说。“在你这个年龄，顶嘴是不会有好处的。母亲嘛，有时弄不清自己该做妈妈还是做孩子的朋友，不过她们很快就会想

开的，等着瞧吧。”他笑了笑，离开时顺手关上了门。

那天夜里，我在床上听到约翰房间里有声音。心想，既然没睡，干脆上去看个明白。我踮着脚上了楼梯，到了第七阶，我小心地跨过去，因为那一阶一踩就嘎吱嘎吱地叫。约翰的门开着，他还没脱衣服，坐在床上轻轻地弹吉他。他抬起头，看到了我。

“你好，”他说。“上来干什么呀？”

“我听到了你的声音，你在干什么呀？”我问。

“我……”他顿了一下，接着说，“我在作一首曲子。”

“真的？”我说，“太棒了。”

“那当然了，”约翰笑着说。“饼干好吃吗？”

“太好吃了。这里还剩一些，吃吧。”我把半袋饼干递给他，他从里面拿出一块，边吃边沉思。

“你写了很多歌吗？”我没话找话。

“多得很，”他回答说。“实际上我就是干这一行的。而且，我自己也会唱。”

“这下我明白了，原来你是个音乐家。”

“对，总有一天，我要出一张畅销专辑，来它个名利双收。”

他想得可真乐观，我禁不住大笑起来。

“我会成功的，”他固执地说。“我就不服，别人能成我也能成。”

“你说得对，”我说。“不过，我以前可从没有这样想过。”

“那我劝你从现在起就‘这样’去想。这会令你感到这段时期不那么难熬。”

“什么时期？”我问。

约翰咬着嘴唇，极力寻找着一个合适的字眼。

“中间时期，”他终于开了口。“太小又太大。你想想，初中一年级。”他停下来，用舌头舔了舔手指上的巧克力，然后接着说。“每个人的一生中都有许多个中间时期，在这段时间里，你就得挺住，坚持到底。欲退不能，居中又难保，你非得杀出去不可。”

“就说我吧，也正处在一个中间时期——在默默无闻和有所作为之间。但我没有心灰意懒。我现在生活得很快乐，但我没有忘记将来，因为目前我惟一拥有的就是将来。”

他抬起头来，直望着我，眼中一种茫然无助的神情使我感到震惊。他默默地盯着我，我的心像被刀子刺了一样。片刻之后，他脸上的无奈表情便荡然无存，随之浮现出喜悦的神采。

“目前我还是个无名小辈，但决不会总是这样的，我会闯出去的。”他用手指敲打着吉他。

“我真希望我也会像你一样自信，”我轻声地说。

“你完全可以！”他说。“你总会做梦吧？！”

“那当然，”我回答。

“好，继续做下去，梦想可以给你动力。有梦想并不是坏事。有人说不好，但抱负离不开梦想啊。”

“对，你说得对。”我也有点振作起来了。

“毫无疑问，我是对的，我总是对的。你过来。”

我倾身过去，约翰在我的额头上亲吻了一下，说，“米克·琼斯说得好，‘心胸宽阔一点儿，步伐轻快一点儿，行动自由一点儿。’”

“自由？那我妈呢？”我问，脸上一阵羞红。

“噢，她嘛，可以由我来对付。”

“你怎么对付她呢？”

“现在还想不出什么好主意，”他的嘴角上挂着一丝诡秘的微笑。“也许，我干脆把她杀掉。”

我大声笑起来。约翰吓了一跳，做了个鬼脸说：“快去睡觉。”我站起来，偷偷溜回我的卧室（第七阶楼梯我是不会踏的）。这一夜，我睡得特别香。

不知约翰跟我母亲说了些什么，第二天，她要求约翰马上搬走。当天晚上约翰的行李就收拾好了。他没有说一句话，但当他迈出门口准备朝他朋友的汽车走去的时候，他回头望了望我，伸出7个手指表示祝福，然后两个手指表示平安。我也以同样的方式向他告别，我的眼里含着泪水。

当天夜里，我一直哭到自己睡着了。第二天我怎么也不肯吃饭。奇怪的是，母亲一句话也没有说，而且在以后相当一段时间里都没怎么管我。

现在，我已经上高中一年级了，应该算是个大人了，得自己解决问题，处理好自己的情感。母亲呢，依然如故——还是母亲。生活依然是那么单调枯燥，但偶尔也会有点令人感到鼓舞的小事情。比如上个星期，我在音乐城看到一张最畅销的专辑，封面上印着约翰的头像。猜得出约翰给专辑取的名字吗？《初中一年级》。

### NOTE 注释：

1. drab [dræb] adj. 灰暗的，单调的
2. attic ['ætɪk] n. 阁楼，顶楼
3. boarder ['bɔ:də] n. 寄膳者，寄膳宿者，寄宿生
4. stride out 跨出
5. flannel ['flænl] adj. 法兰绒的
6. lace [leɪs] n. 鞋带
7. disdain [dis'deɪn] n. 轻蔑，蔑视
8. audibly ['ɔ:dəbli] adv. 可听见地
9. courteously ['kɔ:tjəsli] adv. 有礼貌地
10. dingy ['dɪndʒi] adj. 暗黑的，邋遢的
11. caramel ['kærəmel] n. 奶糖，饴糖