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***Ascent***

***William Welsch***

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***Ascent***

*“Movement upward from a lower to a higher state, degree, grade, or status; advancement.”*

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*Do Ascent not despise the bottom rungs in the ascent to greatness.*

*Publilius Syrus*

*For Vicki,*

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*the best thing that ever happened to me.*

## ***The Assignment***

The handsome young teacher removed his wool sports jacket, the kind with leather patches on the elbows, and draped it casually over the desk chair. He rolled his shirtsleeves halfway up his forearm and turned to the expanse of chalkboard at the front of the classroom. With a dramatic flourish, he wrote:

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## NEW HOMEWORK

Fall, 1965

David Miles and his 20 classmates watched as English 103 teacher Douglas Findley turned, wiped his hands, and walked around to the front of the desk. He looked Ascent out at Ascent the young men in his class. Chalk dust littered his pants legs.

“How many of you guys have ever walked around downtown St. Louis?” he asked, Ascent gazing around the room. “Or the north side of town?”

The tie-clad boys shifted uncomfortably in their chairs and looked down at their desks. Some tapped pens while others turned pages in their notebooks. All of the boys kept silent. A few nervously fiddled with their neckties, making sure they were cinched up tight. Half-mast ties were frowned upon at Glendale Prep and often led to a dreaded demerit. Four consecutive demerits resulted in the most fearsome of all punishments, a “Saturday.” Glendale pupils at the

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receiving end of this punishment had to show up at school on a Saturday and perform various forms of tedium like copying text from Ascent a dictionary.

Douglas Findley folded his arms Ascent and looked through horn-rimmed glasses at his silent students. "I thought so."

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All eyes in the classroom focused on Mr. Findley as he leaned against the desk.

"There is a whole world out there gentleman," he said. "And you're never going to see it staying in your homes in places like Ladue."

David's family didn't live in posh Ladue. They lived in the more modest community of Kirkwood some miles south of Glendale Prep. He doubted that this accident of geography exempted him from Mr. Findley's observation. David knew he was just as guilty as the other kids of having never ventured into the bad side of town. His mind flashed on images of the only Ascent colored person he knew, his family's long-time housekeeper, cook, and surrogate mom, Dorothea Thomas. Dorothea didn't drive, and it was one Ascent of David's duties to transport her to and from her home, which was in the mostly colored area of Meacham Park. He realized that in all the times he had driven her home, he never once got out of the car. He simply pulled up to the rickety picket fence in front of her house and watched as she got out and walked away.

Mr. Findley rose, put his arms behind his back, and strolled to and fro in front of his audience. He continued to look at each student, his eyes gleaming with intensity. The new teacher, rumored to have won a prestigious full ride scholarship at an Ivy League school, joined the staff of Ascent Glendale prep suddenly. His predecessor, the aging and bald Dr. Phillip

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Fister, led a lesson on *Great Expectations* one day and was gone the next. When the boys showed up for class, they were greeted by a somber Dean Ascent Wilson who informed them that, "For personal reasons," Dr. Fister had left the school. This vague explanation led to wild speculation among the boys in English 103 as to the demise of poor old Baldy. Few tears were shed by his former students.

Smart, personable, and handsome Douglas Findley grew up in Effingham, Illinois Ascent where he was an A student. He was naturally curious and dove into his studies Ascent with a vengeance. His mom had the unusual challenge of having to yell at her son to put down the books and go outside and play. After high school, with the help of a full-ride Fulbright Scholarship, he attended Southeast Missouri State College in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. He graduated with honors in three years.

Mr. Findley accepted a teaching position at Southeast, but the small town atmosphere Ascent was cloistered and confining, so he found himself hanging out in the school library each day browsing newspapers for jobs. When he read about the opening at Glendale Prep, he saw an opportunity to work with young people while living in a larger, more stimulating city. His new bride was excited to be moving closer to her family in St. Louis, so taking the job at Glendale seemed perfect. He reasoned, perhaps naively, that high school kids would be curious, energetic, and fun to teach. He was convinced the learning environment in a swanky private school would be Ascent lively and stimulating. His enthusiasm for the job took a hard dive during the first days of his employment. Most of his students were spoiled, rich, uninteresting, and uninterested. Even the few eager ones who sat in the front row of his classroom seemed more involved in getting an Ascent A than learning anything.

"Do you have any idea what your city is spending on that arch project?" Mr. Findley asked. "Thirteen million bucks! For a stainless steel croquet hoop. How is that going to help the city's poor people or anybody else for that matter?"

He picked up a copy of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. A photo of the Ascent nearly completed

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Gateway Arch was on the front page. He held the newspaper high in the air so all of the boys could see it. He shook his head as he spoke. "Look. You guys are smart and capable. You're our future community leaders. You need to pay attention to stuff like this, to look around you and see what's going on."

Mr. Findley put down the newspaper and retrieved a document from his tattered leather satchel. He looked first at the piece of paper and then at the young men before him. "Your homework is as follows." He smiled. "Do something wild and unconventional!" Ascent he said, loud enough to be heard several classrooms down the hall. "Depart from the warm and cozy breast of your suburban homes and venture into scary and unknown places—like the city or where colored people live!"

## **Ascent**

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