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Miss Emily opened the door to the first-year classroom at the girls' boarding school. The quiet murmuring of twenty-six freshmen subsided and they all stood up as though by command. They were wearing identical navy blue dresses that reached down to the mid-calf and buttoned up to the chin, completely plain, without the least embellishment. Even the buttons were covered with the same blue cloth. Only the white collars of their blouses interrupted this uniformity, varying slightly in shape. Not a single girl wore her hair loose; they all wore braids.

Miss Emily's brown dress was of the same plain cut as her students' uniforms. There was a small brooch pinned to its left-hand side that almost blended into the background. Her dark hair, streaked with gray despite its lingering thickness, was pulled back into a bun. Her tiny eyes gazed mouse-like through her

round wire-framed glasses. The low heels of her high-topped shoes did not add much to Miss Emily's height. She was still shorter than most of the sixteen-year-old girls who were now waiting, motionlessly, for the signal to sit down.

She went up to the desk and set down a stack of papers and a leather glasses case. Her eyes passed over her students and she nodded briefly. The room was filled with the rustling of dresses and scraping of chairs, and then she too sat down. She set her spine firmly against the back of the chair, from which it would not move until the end of the class, as though glued in place. Only her head in lively movement would be at variance with this stiff body.

First, she concentrated on arranging the objects in front of her. In addition to those she had brought, there was a small vase containing two purple wildflowers, a wooden pen holder, a long thin pointer, a large globe and a glass half-filled with water, covered by a linen napkin. She did not strive for any special pattern. The priority was that everything be lined up, to offset any impression of randomness. She abhorred disorder, both external and internal.

"Good morning, young ladies." Her feeble voice matched her stature.

"Good morning, Miss Emily," chimed twenty-six voices all together.

"I hope you slept well. From what you have written I can see that some of you are not getting the rest you need at night,

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particularly at your age."

She stopped talking and laid her hands on the pile of papers in front of her. It was a collection of dreams. Whenever she commenced teaching a new class, the first thing she did was have the freshmen write down their dreams of the previous night. This was the best way to get to know them. Nothing spoke more eloquently about the girls than what they dreamed. It was here that they showed their true nature. In addition, dreams are the first indication of the disorder that threatens to overwhelm young minds. And that could only be thwarted if discovered in time, before it seriously corrupted the personality. After that it was very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to remove.

Of course, there were always freshmen who would try to deceive her. They wrote unauthentic accounts of their dreams, resorting to invention for various reasons. Some simply had not dreamed anything or could not remember their dreams, but were reluctant to admit this. Others were ashamed of their dreams. The most dangerous, however, were those who made them up in order to outsmart her. Those were the girls in need of special attention. Such duplicity was a clear sign of a wayward disposition. What she found additionally offensive was the fact that they underestimated her. As though it were that easy to deceive her! With experience measured in decades, she was able to recognize without fail not only false dreams but those calculated to poke fun at her.

Among the twenty-six papers that had been given to her

at the end of the last class, she was certain that three belonged to this latter type. They were all signed, but since she still didn't know the girls, their names meant nothing to her. All the same, she would soon see which of the young ladies considered themselves smarter than she. Nothing would teach them a better lesson than to experience a little public humiliation. They had to find out immediately that they would reap what they sowed. There could be no leniency in this regard. It was the only way to set them on the right path.

She took the first sheet from the pile and turned it over. At the bottom, next to the girl's signature, Miss Emily had written a great warning sign in red ink: three horizontal parallel lines cut by a vertical line. She used many similar symbols, with meanings known only to herself. Generations of freshmen had done their utmost to break these codes, but none had succeeded as yet. To make them even harder to decipher, Miss Emily periodically introduced confusing changes that made sense only to her: new signs appeared and old ones changed their meaning.

"Will Miss Alexandra please stand up."

At the penultimate desk of the row next to the window a willowy girl with large eyes and prominent cheekbones rose to her feet. Miss Emily examined her carefully. Not at all unexpected. These freshmen who got their height early were the first to have swollen egos. They thought they were special because they were taller than their classmates and more attractive. As if that could make them superior! But she had a remedy for such

overconfidence.

"Ah, that's who you are. Fine." She put Miss Alexandra's paper to one side and then took another one from the pile. "Now would Miss Theodora please be so kind as to introduce herself."

A plump girl in the third desk of the middle row slowly stood up. She had red hair with curls that not even the tight braids could straighten completely. Her face was sprinkled with freckles. Miss Emily pulled up the collar of her dress slightly around her neck. She didn't like freckles at all. They were a mark. There was always a reason for them, as was evident this very instant. It was, of course, no accident that she had singled out this girl's dream.

"There you are. Very good." Miss Emily held up a third paper with a warning sign on it. "The last one to introduce herself is Miss Clara."

A short girl wearing thick glasses stood up in the first row, in the desk by the door. Her head was bowed and her right hand was clutching the three middle fingers of her left hand. Strange, thought Miss Emily. Of all the freshmen this is the last one I would have suspected. She could almost recognize herself some forty years ago. But experience had taught her how deceptive appearances can be. Even though Miss Clara seemed the epitome of modesty, what she had written clearly indicated that was merely a superficial impression.

"All right. Now would the rest of you girls take a good look

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at the three who are standing.”

This caused a stir. The girls who were sitting started to look around in bewilderment, staring at the three standing girls, who were just as confused. Several neighboring heads drew together and whispered. Miss Emily let the uncertainty gain momentum. She had put on this show many times and knew exactly when to speak again.

“You don’t see anything unusual?” she asked at last. All the faces turned toward her. “I don’t blame you. There’s nothing that can be seen. One would say there is nothing special about Alexandra, Theodora and Clara. But this is not so. There are things that cannot be discerned by the eye because they are hidden. Terrible things that are not the least fitting in the honorable individuals that we all hope you will become after you leave this school. One such thing is a penchant for lying.”

Miss Emily paused to allow her words full impact.

“This is a very bad characteristic. It is particularly dangerous when it appears in younger individuals. A girl who starts to lie early in life will most certainly not stop there. What inevitably awaits her is a wayward life of even worse sins. All lies, however, are not the same. Although no lie can be justified, some can be understood to a certain extent. Let’s take, for example, your compositions on what you dreamed. Almost half are not true. You thought you could fool me, but that, of course, is impossible. I am quite capable of telling real dreams from false. I do not hold it very much against most of you, though, this resort to

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fabrication. You did not act out of ulterior motives. You found yourselves in an awkward position and lying seemed the only way out of it. You will learn in time that sincerity always serves you best in any difficulty you might encounter.”

Miss Emily took the pointer and started to draw it back and forth through the closed fist of her left hand.

“But the motives of these three young ladies were not in the least naive. Their fabrications were fully intentional. They treated me condescendingly, wanting to show their superiority. Arrogance went along with the lies, and it is hard to find a worse combination. They were convinced I would not see through them, but they have greatly underestimated me. Now the time has come to face the consequences. It is always unpleasant, but cannot be escaped. In any case, it is for their own good. Confession and repentance are the first steps toward redemption and healing.”

The pointer stopped moving. A hush filled the room for several moments.

“So? Let’s hear what you have to say.”

It was not clear which of the girls was expected to speak first. Miss Alexandra glanced questioningly at Miss Theodora, who replied with a shrug of the shoulders. Miss Clara kept her head bowed. Her eyes had become glassy and wet. The tears had not yet started to flow, but it was certain that nothing could stop them. The tension in the classroom grew along with the look of impatience on Miss Emily’s face.

“They didn’t lie.”

The voice was soft and came from somewhere in the back. A multitude of braids swung when the inquisitive heads quickly turned around to look. Miss Emily twisted her neck.

“Who said that?”

The girl who rose from behind the last desk in the middle row did not stand out in any way. She was thin, with dark hair and regular features, quite common among the uniformed girls. Only her eyes set her apart. Miss Emily knew about such eyes—and didn’t like them. Behind their clarity, vivacity and penetrating power stood a character that was most difficult to handle. Willful and persistent, it resisted submission and molding, and served as a very bad example to the other girls. She had to be cautious from the very start.

“What is your name?”

“Miss Irena.”

The name sounded familiar to Miss Emily. She had taken note of it while reading the girls’ dream compositions, but forgot why. She took the pile of papers from the desk and started to leaf through it. She had gone through about one third of them when she suddenly remembered. The paper she was looking for was at the very bottom. She had left it there, intending to address that case at the end, after finishing with the ordinary ones. It was quite unusual. Over the years she had received a wide variety of compositions, but it had never happened that a girl would turn in a paper with only a signature and nothing else.

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“Ah, you are the one. Very nice. And this was your dream?”

Miss Emily raised the empty sheet of paper so all the girls could have a good look.

“Yes.”

“Should we conclude, based on this, that you didn’t dream anything?”

“No, you shouldn’t.”

“So that’s it. You did have a dream, but for some reason you did not consider it necessary to inform us about it. Would you perhaps tell us the reason?”

“I did tell you the dream.”

“You told us? I don’t see any report here. Do any of you freshmen see better than I do?”

She began turning the page over slowly from one side to the other, making an arc with it in front of her. The question was not directed at anyone in particular, but several girls nonetheless briefly shook their heads.

“It’s mist.”

Miss Emily’s mouse-like eyes immediately squinted.

“I don’t think I heard you too well.”

“That’s mist,” repeated the girl from the end of the middle row. “I always dream about mist.”

“You dream about mist?”

“Yes.”

Miss Emily put the pointer down, then adjusted its position a little so it was parallel to the edge of the desk.