

Best in Show Prose: Hanna-Renkes/Jan Smith Literary Award – High School

“Passing Notes”

By: Isabel Dunn

Grade: 10

School: Great Lakes Learning Academy (Virtual)

The first day of school was not James Murray’s favorite time of year. There had been a time when he enjoyed it. Once, he had actually been excited. He had just gotten a new haircut, and he was looking forward to showing it off. But when he heard some kids snickering behind his back, the words ‘ugly’ and ‘stupid’ coming out of their mouths, his day had been ruined.

Now that he was a junior, he wasn’t worried about seeing his classmates again, but he couldn’t say that he was excited. He kept his head down and stayed quiet. That was how he had learned to get through it all.

His first class of the day was history. When he entered the classroom, he noticed a girl that he had never seen before sitting at a desk in the back. He wondered who she was.

James learned her name when attendance was taken. The teacher called out, “Camila Pérez?” and the girl raised her hand. He couldn’t help but notice the subtle cringe she gave at the pronunciation of her name.

“You can call me Millie,” she said.

“Alright, Millie,” the teacher replied. “I don’t think we’ve met. Where are you from?”

“Puerto Rico. I moved here with my family over the summer.”

“That’s wonderful. I hope we can make you feel at home.”

Millie smiled slightly and nodded. “Thank you.”

After class, James saw a group of boys approach Millie in the hallway.

“Hey,” one of them said, “You’re from Puerto Rico, right? Can you speak Spanish?”

Millie nodded.

“That’s cool! I can speak Spanish too!” he grinned. “My-o name-o is-o Elias-o.” Then, with a chuckle, he added, “Uno, dos, tres, taco!”

Millie rolled her eyes. “Eres un estúpido,” she muttered, walking away. James was impressed. He didn’t speak much Spanish himself, but he had a pretty good idea of what Millie had said. He admired her bravery. He knew he never would have been able to do something like that.

In English that day, James was pleased to see that Millie was in the same class that he was. He smiled and introduced himself, but didn’t do much talking beyond that. They didn’t get to know each other until a week later when the note-passing began.

Before long, James realized that English was not his favorite class. Each day, the students received a worksheet that took ten minutes to complete. However, the teacher didn’t start the lecture until thirty minutes had gone by, so there was a good twenty minutes at the beginning of class where nothing was happening. The teacher had strictly forbidden talking, so James had taken to reading a book. That was until he felt a slight nudge against his arm.

James glanced over and saw that Millie was sliding a notebook to him. At the top of the page, she had written, *Even I could teach English better than this guy.*

James laughed and pulled out a pencil. *I’m sure you could,* he replied.

Millie smiled and scribbled, *Is that a good book you’re reading? Sorry for interrupting you.*

No, it’s okay, James wrote back. He paused for a moment, then added, *I’ve been meaning to tell you: what you did on the first day of school was pretty cool. With Elias, I mean.*

Thanks. Did you understand what I said?

No, but I think I got the message.

Glad to hear it. I may have been overreacting, but I can’t stand it when people mock

Spanish by adding the letter o onto the end of a word. Spanish is such a beautiful and complex language, and I hate seeing it reduced to a joke like that.

I don't think you were overreacting, James replied. *You probably face a lot of that around here, right?*

People can be ignorant, she admitted. *It's what I expected, though. Being the new kid is never easy, and being the new kid from a different country... you know how it is.*

"Mr. Murray, what are you doing?"

James looked up from the notebook to see the teacher glaring at him from his desk. He cleared his throat and held up his pencil.

"Just taking notes," he said. Satisfied with that answer, the teacher went back to his lecture. James glanced over at Millie, and they both smiled. English had just gotten a whole lot better.

Over the next few weeks, James and Millie continued to pass notes. James learned that Millie was really good at telling jokes, but she was also nice to talk to about serious things. The more that he talked to her, the more he began to like her.

Around Halloween, the homecoming dance was advertised across the school. People were getting dates left and right, and James decided that he wanted to ask Millie out. He knew that it was a simple question, and that, even if she said no, she would be nice about it, but he wanted to do it the right way. Finally, he decided what that way would be.

In English, after a few minutes of passing the notebook back and forth, James gathered up all of his courage and wrote, *Millie, there's something I want to ask you.*

Ask away, she replied.

James took a deep breath, then wrote, *¿Quieres ir al baile conmigo?*

Millie read over his note, then looked up at him with a big smile.

"Sí," she replied. "Yes, of course I do."

"Miss Pérez," the teacher snapped, drawing everyone's attention to James and Millie. "No talking."

"Sorry," Millie said, but the smile hadn't left her face. She looked over at James and reached under her desk to brush his hand. James took it in his and smiled back. In that moment, he couldn't have been happier.