



Hubey Rides the Bus

The Editors

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Hubey Pokorski is a lanky, growth-spurring ninth grader. His pantlegs hitch up and expose skin above his socks each time he strides. Stretching out, his head lurching forward, he hurdles two steps onto the school bus. He fumbles and then recovers his grip on a textbook and pad of paper. Sarah June, Hubey's seventh-grade sister, follows behind. She mounts the steps onto the bus with poise and careful intention. His eyes fixed on the floor of the aisle, Hubey turns a sharp corner at seat 7A and plants himself next to the window. Sarah June, looking straight ahead, smiles and waves to her cousin, Celi Vasquez, also a seventh grader. Sarah June claims seat 7B next to Hubey.

The bi-fold bus door closes with a squeak and Henry, the bus driver, sets the vehicle in motion. It is 6:39 in the morning. Hubey and Sarah June left their house at 6:30, walked to the end of the driveway, and were ready for the scheduled 6:40 pickup. Henry was a couple minutes early today. The Pokorskis' home at the very edge of Wintonka is the last house before the country opens to farmland to the south and west. Art Pokorski, a machinist at Blenton Manufacturing in town, left home this morning as the kids were finishing their breakfast. His wife, Maria, would be leaving shortly to start her day as cook at the elementary school.

Henry will make 17 stops over a 26-mile circuit, onboarding 24 more junior high students before depositing them at Blechford Junior High, the western wing of Blechord Senior High in the nearby town of Blechford. Six school buses will line up in the circular drive to take their turn releasing their cargo of youngsters for a day of school. Three of the busses will be back at 3:20 to return some of the kids to their homes. Three more buses will appear at 5:00 for the students who participate in after-school activities—basketball, cheerleading, student council, 4-H, Boy Scouts, computer club, chess club. A few more students will spill out of detention hall, sniggering, to join the late bus.

Most Wintonka junior highers board their bus at the Wintonka Grade School, but the Pokorskis' house is far enough away from the school to qualify for a stop. So Hubey and Sarah June ride the bus each day with Wintonka village kids already on board and the 24 country kids that Henry picks up after them. Rural youngsters all, both the similarities and the differences in their lives are instructive.

Three farm boys, all eighth graders, crowd into the seat behind Hubey and Sarah June. As their dad has explained to them, two of the boys—Beau and Josh—come from families that own large farms. Pete, the third boy, is the son of a tenant farmer; his dad works for Josh’s dad, and Pete’s family lives in a house provided them on the farm. Hubey overhears their conversations with curiosity and envy. The three boys from farms share a familiarity with the ways of farming, a familiarity that gives them a degree of bondedness that makes Hubey feel like an outsider. They talk of BX14 tractors and 30-bottom plows and Angus-Hereford crosses, all of which is like a foreign language to Hubey. But even within the ranks of the three farm boys, there is division. Beau and Josh’s families own the tractors and plows and cattle; Pete’s family works with them.

At one stop, by a farmhouse, Naomi boards the bus and takes seat 3A, where she sits alone. She turns her head and smiles at Hubey, who grins and waves. Naomi is a special needs eighth grader who leaves her regular classes for part of each day for help in the resource room. Her dad is a farmer and her mother a school teacher. Naomi’s sister Julia, a junior in high school, is the top student and president of her class. Hubey thinks about Naomi a lot, wondering that she seems sad even when she smiles. He worries that she is always alone, and that two of the boys sitting behind her like to tease her. The other kids on the bus are kind to her, but don’t really include her in their small clusters that form on the school ground and in the hallways.

Wintonka is an interesting town, surprisingly diverse, due largely to the types of employment it offers. For many years, the mushroom farm (actually a dark, indoor growing area and canning factory) has been a center of employment for families originally from Mexico. The Pokorskis and other workers at Blenton Manufacturing, are grandchildren and great-grandchildren of coal miners who came to this area from eastern Europe to work the mines. When the mines gave out, they took jobs in factories. More recent arrivals to Wintonka came for five-year stints as managers in the factories or as people of limited means seeking a lower cost of living and a less-harried life than they left behind in the cities. A few families, once inhabiting a section of town with grassy boulevards and two-story, Victorian houses, but now dispersed through the new developments on the outskirts of town, were here from the town’s beginning, replacing the last of the Wintonka tribe for whom the town was named, and providing the area with its merchants, lawyers, doctors, and school teachers ever since. Of course, the inhabitants of Wintonka and its surrounding farmlands do not see themselves as members of distinct groups, as this description of them might suggest. They intermarry. They become neighbors. They take on occupations once dominated by people of a different background. Many of them, especially the young ones, move away, and the character of the community continues to change according to who stays, who goes, and who arrives.

Children from all of these families take their seats on the bus with Hubey and Sarah June, their classmates. They grow up together.

In some ways, Hubey’s bus trip is like the one his father and mother took when they were students at BJHS. Hubey’s grandfather Joseph Pokorski was in school before the three districts around Wintonka consolidated. Joe walked to the old K–8 grade school each morning, collecting his friend Danny Rosenthal who lived on the way to school. The Rosenthals moved away from Wintoka when they closed their men’s clothing store, a fixture on the town square for 60 years. When Joe Pokorski returned from the army, he was pleased to land a job at Blenton Manufacturing, and the managers at Blenton, finding Joe to be bright and hardworking, were likewise pleased to apprentice him to a tool and die maker. By the time Joe’s son Art followed in his father’s footsteps at Blenton, Joe’s craft, with its “Jo blocks” and precision hand tools, was giving way to computers and robots. The kids from land-owning farm families still carry the surnames of their German, Dutch, and Irish forebears, but as their fathers and grandfathers, who inherited the farms, married women of different backgrounds, no longer could it be assumed the families were Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic.

The townies who meet at the grade school to board the bus each morning include children from families new to Wintonka since Joe Pokorski’s day. Dajuan Campbell’s father, a pharmacist, was born in Jamaica, and his wife, Sonja, a doctor at the Wintonka Family Medical Center, was born in New York. About the time the Rosenthals left town, the Patels and Hendricksons arrived to manage the new convenience store and the Ready-Mart. Hundreds

of other families left, and new ones came, and, overall, the population of the area notched downward a few percent each census.

How do their schools and communities prepare these rural children for the many paths they will individually trod in futures that will look very different from what they know today? That is exactly what the BJHS teachers were discussing on the very day Hubey and his schoolmates stepped off Henry's bus and into the schoolhouse. The teachers met that morning before school for a faculty meeting at which their principal, Ms. Fitzpatrick, introduced a consultant, Dr. Ferris, who will be working with them on how best to prepare students with such varied interests and talents, knowing also that their interests will change as they continue with their schooling. Who will go to college? Military? Technical school? Hard to know. Who will change their major? Change their occupation? When and how often? Also hard to know. Which students will remain in the area, and which students will move away? What common, solid foundation can a small, rural junior high school provide to benefit all its students? How can the school differentiate the learning paths to account for the differences in interest and ability? What specific subjects do some students need, in depth, that not all students will require? What do we teach through our extracurricular activities and off-campus work experiences? What strengths of this rural school district offset the limitations of its resources?

Dr. Ferris's Workshops

On the next day, a scheduled teacher institute, the students were dismissed at 11:30, and the teachers met with Dr. Ferris. Dr. Ferris asked them to read the story above— "Hubey Rides the Bus." Dr. Ferris then posed these four questions to prompt their thinking:

1. What do you think you know, beyond what is told you in the story, about each of these students and their families? Hubey, Julie, Dajuan, Sarah June, Celi, Beau, Josh, Pete, Naomi. Use your imaginations. We will flesh out a profile of each of them.
2. If a family is considering whether to relocate to our district from the suburbs, and the parents ask you to describe, with some specificity, what our district will provide their children that they may not have received in their suburban schools, what would you tell them? Let's discuss, and we will list all of your good ideas.
3. Because it is impossible to know what occupations or careers or even what postsecondary school majors or types of training a student might choose, what is essential that we teach them so that they are best prepared for succeeding with the choices they will make? Let's discuss, and we will list all of your good ideas.
4. Every school and district can benefit from improvement, and ours are no exception. To better serve all of our students, what do we need to shore up? Without the prospects for an increase in funding resources, what are some innovative ways we might make this improvement? Let's discuss, and we will list all of your good ideas.

Believe it or not, this was the beginning of six, two-hour sessions the faculty spent with Dr. Ferris. At the end of that time, they had compiled a substantial report, with recommendations for their school board.

Something to Think About

When Hubey, Julie, and Dajuan board the high school bus next year, and Sarah June, Celi, Beau, Josh, Pete, and Naomi again step onto the junior high bus, and little brothers and sisters walk to their grade schools, what do you think might have changed because of the faculty's recommendations? What do you hope never changes?