Harold Harris was an odd man. He had been an odd child, grew to be an odd teenager, and then . . . but you get the picture.

It wasn't that he was odd-looking. He did not have a gigantic head looming over a stick-figure body or a skull the size of a peach perched atop a huge frame. No, physically Harold was not peculiar at all. In fact, Harold was tall, almost six feet, and had eyes the color of hot chocolate in a white porcelain cup. He had curly brown hair and a strong chin. He had straight teeth in just the right number for his mouth. Harold might even have been considered handsome.

And while it was true that Harold did not dress in the latest fads when he was young – no baseball caps turned backward and low-slung jeans – or fashionably as an adult, it was not what he wore that made him different. His winter wool cap pulled down tight over his nicely-shaped ears, not placed rakishly on his head, bespoke a practical man, not an odd one. ("A cap," Harold said, "is to keep your head warm.")

It was more his inability to interact with others that made Harold seem odd. He was never observed to have a friend, not a single one, and he appeared to be most comfortable sitting in a corner reading a book or scribbling notes in a journal or on scraps of paper, which he would stick in the pocket of his shirt. Sometimes, a word would seemingly pop into his mind, and he would jot it down and stare at it as if mesmerized by the shape of it. His pocket bulged with bits of paper. Some of his shirts were stained with ink.

To understand Harold – if we can ever understand another human being -- we need to go back to the beginning. Not back to the egg and the sperm. Not that far back. But back to his childhood

when he had a chance of developing into a social being. Of making friends and becoming a part of groups.

Harold was an only child. His parents, introverts themselves, had fulfilled their biological imperative to procreate, and having done it once, felt no need to bring another child into the world. They loved Harold, in their own limited way, but they were not really sure what to do with the little person made, perhaps too closely, in their own image. They provided him with toys and books and, content that he was safe, pretty much left him alone to entertain himself.

The neighbor children played baseball in the park at the end of his street or shot basketballs into the hoops on their driveways. They rode bicycles and skateboards. At first, they would knock on Harold's door and ask him to join them, but he would always say no. Harold was not very coordinated or competitive. He did not understand the importance of winning or all the hoopla that occurred after someone made a basket or hit a ball. And the thought of being a "skin" instead of a "shirt" would have never appealed to Harold, who was a bit on the prissy side. Being refused over and over, the neighborhood children stopped asking.

His parents might have said: "Harold, why don't you go outside and play with the other children," but since they were content to stay inside -- just the two of them -- they did not insist that Harold socialize. The three Harrises, pallid and alone, made their home and their library of books their entire world.

Harold walked by himself to school each day, carrying his Scotch-plaid lunch box and his leather book satchel, while the neighbor children bunched together just ahead of him or behind him. They teased and jostled and chased each other, all in good spirits. What may surprise you is that, despite Harold's oddities and his refusal to participate in neighborhood games, for the most part,

the children did not bully him. They simply disregarded him. He became invisible. "That's just Harold," they would say if required to acknowledge him at all.

Being left alone suited Harold just fine. It required nothing of him, no small talk about subjects he did not care about or that the other children would not understand, no playful banter that seemed to him a waste of time. When he went to school plays and concerts, which were requirements to graduate, he went alone and sat alone, except on the rare occasions when his parents accompanied him. Since he had no more interest in attending sporting events than participating in them, he sat in his room and read while his school mates cheered on the school football and basketball teams. When he graduated from high school, he walked across the stage to the applause of only his two parents, who were uncomfortable in the midst of so many unfamiliar faces.

College was easy for Harold. Not particularly happy, but easy. He made no more friends in college than he had made in high school. He enjoyed studying and resented anything or anyone that interfered with his homework or preparing for tests. When other students moved with friends from the dorm to their own apartments off campus, Harold stayed in the dorm. Eventually, when every student assigned to share Harold's dorm room complained about living with him --because he objected to their music or their drunken friends crashing on the floor – he was given a room alone. The dorm manager found it easier to let Harold have a room to himself than to be constantly shuffling roommates in and out.

There had been no question about what Harold's major would be: English. He was overjoyed that he could be rewarded with a degree for just doing what he loved to do, read! Harold not only loved words but found the rules of grammar comforting. There were rules about when to

use commas, when to capitalize nouns, when to use the subjunctive mood. Literature was up to interpretation, granted, but grammar, well, it was as logical as mathematics to Harold.

The problem with majoring in English, his parents pointed out, was what to do with the degree. One evening in the middle of his junior year, Harold's parents asked him to join them for supper at a nearby restaurant. After their desserts and coffees, Mr. Harris explained the reason for their evening out together, a rare occasion not particularly relished by any of them.

"Harold, you know that we are not wealthy people. We can afford your college education, but you must prepare yourself to make a living. Have you thought about what you might do as a profession?"

Harold had not. He had assumed that he would just continue studying and reading, going about his life as it was.

"There are a few careers that might follow a degree in the arts. Have you thought about becoming an attorney? Or a teacher?" Harold's mother asked.

They discussed the merits and disadvantages of various careers, none of which appealed to Harold, but they finally agreed that Harold would become a teacher, so despite his obvious lack of social skills, he enrolled in the School of Education.

And, thus, armed with a teaching certificate and shielded by a degree of naiveté unusual even for a young man fresh out of college, Harold was hired to teach English to freshmen and sophomores at a high school near his family's home. How could someone who had spent the first 22 years of his life avoiding others function as a teacher, you ask. Harold's secret was this: he trained himself to regard the whole class as one faceless body, not 30 + individual students.

He did not see each student as a living, breathing person; he did not memorize their names or where they sat in the room. He did not look at anyone directly but focused on the clock at the back of the room. That way, he could disregard eye rolls, side-eyes, boys poking each other in the ribs, girls passing notes, suppressed giggles. But what Harold lacked in warmth, empathy, and humor, he made up for in dedication and perseverance.

Harold's life took on a pleasant and comforting routine. After school each weekday, he would have dinner with his parents, who showed only the slightest interest in how his day had gone, and then head to his room, where he would grade papers and prepare lessons for the following day. He would set out clothes for the next morning. He would do 20 jumping jacks and 20 sit-ups, and, if there was time, read a novel for a few minutes before going to sleep. The routine seldom varied.

At school, teaching became routine, too. Year after year, Harold drilled into his students basic rules of grammar and composition. "A sentence needs both a subject and a verb. A sentence should be able to stand alone," he would explain. He referred students to *Elements of Style*, which he thought even the laziest of them could get through. He was, of course, wrong.

Day after day, year after year, Harold was confronted with the same mistakes from his students. Patiently, he wrote with a fat red pencil in the margins of their papers, "'Your' is a personal pronoun indicating ownership. 'You're' is a contraction of 'you are,'" and "Ampersands are not appropriate in an essay in your English class. Please write out the word 'and.'" And then there was the ubiquitous "gonna" that cropped up in his students' essays regularly, to which Harold responded: "'Gonna' is not a word. The correct phrase is 'going to,' as in 'You are going to fail this class if you continue to use "gonna."'" A few students took note of his corrections and

suggestions, and actually seemed to learn from them, but the rest were satisfied to slide by with C-‘s and D’s.

Most of Harold’s students put minimal effort into their writing, and many asked: “When am I ever going to need to know this stuff?” (Harold suspected the students used “stuff” for his benefit. How they would have described his class to their friends would have been slightly more graphic.) Harold was flummoxed. How could anyone not understand the value of writing well?

Harold read short stories and essays in class that he thought would appeal to good and bad students alike. He read John Updike’s famous essay about Ted Williams, hoping to appeal to the boys in class who cared for nothing except sports, but in response got only puzzled stares and yawns. “Who’s he?” asked one boy. “Who cares,” replied another.

Harold shared his personal mantra about the importance of choosing words carefully and thoughtfully. “Mark Twain wrote,” he said, “that ‘the difference between the almost right word and the right word . is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.’” “Who’s he,” asked one student. “Some dead dude,” answered his classmate.

Harold tried hard to think of ways to show his students how strong verbs could make their writing more effective. The results frequently went like this:

> “Here are two sentences each telling us a boy came into a room and sat down. Which of these two sentences paints a more vivid image in your mind?
>
> The boy came into the room and sat in the chair, or the boy stomped into the room and flopped into the chair.”
>
> Ryan (a D student) : “Uh, I dunno.”

Becky (an A student): "Oh, the guy who flopped. Yeah, definitely him."

Harold worried that the impact of his teaching was negligible. The lessons in their English textbook did not seem relevant to what his students wrote and read in their personal lives (to the extent that they wrote and read anything at all out of the classroom), he thought. Students who could fill-in-the-blanks with the correct pronouns and verb forms in class were heard in the halls and on the playground using grammar that made him cringe. The key, Harold decided, was to tap into those personal encounters and teach from there, but, then, that would mean Harold would have to address individual behavior out of the classroom, and that was not in his comfort zone.

From time to time, opportunities presented themselves in which Harold could reach students in their unguarded moments. When they were not being graded on what they wrote. So when Harold saw graffiti on a wall in the boys' restroom or locker room, he felt he had a chance to reach students in their own time and place. As much as he disliked defacing school property, grammatical mistakes bothered him more. With his black Sharpie (his red pencil would not have shown up on the walls), he would add comments, cross out redundant words, and correct grammar and spelling:

"'Whitney is a ho,'" he suggested, "should read: 'W. (it was the least he could do to keep from maligning Whitney further) is a "whore," not a "ho." There is no such noun as 'ho.' " In response, there was a succinct: "Wat da fuck?" beneath Harold's notes, indicating the outrage the writer felt after reading Harold's comments.

Often the graffiti called for easy revisions. "The word is 'love,' not 'luv'" Harold wrote on one wall. Don't be lazy; spell it out!" Within a day, a response was scratched on the wall: "And your a dick!"

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Even though Harold ate lunch in the teachers' lounge and dutifully attended staff meetings, he did not form any relationships among the staff other than as co-workers. He was polite and considerate but disinterested in spending time with other teachers in his off hours, which he treasured. But then few of the teachers were eager to be friends with him, either. They respected Harold's determination to teach his students to write well -- even the dimmest of students-- but they found him too aloof, too cerebral, too dogmatic to invite to their cookouts and their children's birthday parties. If they could have given him advice, both in his teaching career and in his life in general, it would have been: "Lighten up, Harold."

You might think, or maybe you even hoped – admit it, no one is going to judge you -- that Harold might meet a woman, one as socially awkward as he to keep him company. To be sure, early in his teaching career, co-workers tried matchmaking, setting Harold up with single friends, but when those dates proved disastrous, they apologized to the disillusioned women and vowed never to try again. So Harold finding a woman is just not going to happen in this story. That would require a novel, maybe even a saga. Harold is just a short story

When he turned 65 years old, Harold retired. His teacher's pension and social security allowed him to live comfortably in the family home left to him when he parents died. He had no interest in traveling or gardening, or collecting any of the objects collectors collect. He simply wanted to read all the books he had never had time to read. All the books overflowing his book shelves,

stacked under tables, and covering the bed in his childhood bedroom. Harold might have lived happily ever after, reading, and reading, and reading. But, surprising even himself, after a few months of retirement, he still felt the need to teach.

And then Harold discovered social media.

Right away, Harold began noticing grammatical mistakes in Facebook posts forwarded by his three Facebook friends, a cousin and two former teachers, and in articles published online. He even found grammatical errors in fact check sites! He was appalled that writers, who should have known better, were making basic grammar mistakes. How could that be? There was nothing to do but correct these mistakes, and Harold set to this task with a vengeance.

The local weatherman alone could keep Harold busy. When on his Facebook page, the weatherman announced: "Tomorrow will be a perfect day weather-wise to join Sportscaster Dan & I at the March to End Juvenile Diabetes," Harold was almost apoplectic. In the comments section, Harold wrote: "Your grammar is scandalous for someone supposedly educated. Learn to use the objective case, please."

Although Harold was not a particularly political man, many of the memes that popped up on his Facebook page were political attacks – or defenses – and he corrected them, too. Since the memes themselves were set, he added his suggestions in the comments sections: "The author should use the subjunctive case after 'if.' The 'if' indicates that the action is conditional." Since some of those forwarding the memes knew – and excused -- Harold's idiosyncrasies, they usually did not respond, except for the occasional "Yes, Harold, but you might be missing the point here" or "Way to ruin a good story, Harold."

As years went by and when he had spare time after editing posts and memes and editorials in the daily paper and when he wasn't busy reading and stuffing notes into the pockets of his shirts, he reflected on his life. He wondered if he had accomplished anything worthwhile. All those years of worrying about grammar and the "right" words? What did it matter in the end?

Although he was never the teacher who was invited to the class reunions of his former students, the teacher mentioned when a student received an award, now and then he would get a letter from a student thanking him for making him a better writer. One letter, framed and hung above Harold's desk ,said:

"Dear Mr. Harris:

Thank you for teaching me to write well. My essay won me a scholarship to college. I would never have been able to attend college without that scholarship. "

Harold thought maybe that was enough. But then he had had no choice. He was who he was; he was just Harold.