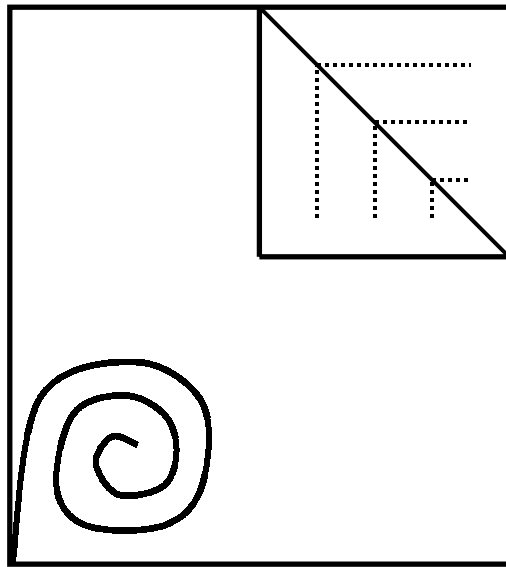


**ALISTAIR McCRAVE:**

**BOY GENIUS**

**a novel by Matt Heffernan**

*For somebody.*



*slithy*  
**TOMES**

Great things were expected of Alistair McCrane. After all, his parents Henry and Sylvia had long been known in social circles as one of the smartest couples around.

Henry was a prodigious child, quickly recognized for his remarkable abilities in math and, later, the sciences. When he first heard of ENIAC as a junior high school student, he became instantly obsessed with the concept of computers. Not that he needed any help with his arithmetic; he found computing Riemann sums quite tedious and saw the obvious benefit of doing all the grunt work quickly, leaving his mind's power to more complex pursuits.

He knew that the cost of building his own ENIAC was prohibitive, but at 15 years old, he did the best he could. The McCrane Logic Engine was able to compute logarithms to ten places, which, while not accurate enough for military purposes, served young Henry well in his advanced trigonometry class. He told his math teacher, Mr. Holmes, about his home invention (made with used relays and a few vacuum tubes from old radios), explaining how it worked and how he spent nearly two years and all of his allowance on designing and building it. To say the least, Mr. Holmes was impressed, and suggested that young Henry try to patent it.

The venture succeeded, and by the time Henry applied to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he had a half dozen patents to his name. He enrolled in the class of 1954, but graduated after three years, earning a Bachelor of Science in electrical engineering. He stuck around to get his doctorate, but decided that he should go across town to Harvard to try his hand at pure mathematics.

Yet while he was there, he didn't meet a certain other gifted student on campus. Sylvia Lindemann had been studying a great number of things at Harvard and Radcliffe, but never took more than her core requirement in math.

She did come to Cambridge with a similarly impressive background. She was recognized as a great artistic prodigy before she could even speak articulately. Her poundings at the family piano soon gave way to imitation of the concerts she heard on the radio. After two years of lessons, at the age of six, she was playing Chopin sonatas. By ten, she had mastered most of Rachmaninoff's canon. She grew bored with the piano, and tried moving on to the violin, the French horn, and even the bass drum in her school's marching band. She didn't really find her true passion in music until she tried her hand at composition.

Suddenly the piano became more interesting again when she was playing her own notes. Her parents realized that the local high school was no place for her, so at the tender age of fourteen she enrolled at a conservatory. After two years of intense training in orchestral composition, she was ready to write her first symphony at age 16. The faculty realized that there was little they could do to teach the new Schubert, so they let her conduct the first-year orchestra.

She continued to be a standout at Berklee, where she earned her PhD in music composition. She then went to Harvard, where she could explore her other passions of art history and philosophy, eventually getting doctorates in both. The philosophy degree required a course in logic, but she took it the semester after teaching assistant Henry McCrane was holding the lectures.

Sylvia, through her connections at Harvard and Berklee, soon found herself in the company of America's music elite. Leonard Bernstein was the friend of a friend, and they met once after a performance of the New York Philharmonic. Little did she know that while she was engaged in her first and last handshake with Bernstein, Aaron Copland was overhearing their conversation. He quickly walked up to Sylvia and introduced himself.

"Miss Lindemann, it is a pleasure to finally meet the best young composer around. Sorry, Lenny, you're not quite as young as you used to be."

Sylvia was shocked at once to realize her own fame and to see Bernstein walk off in a huff, turning red. Copland had seen her play an original piano concerto a few weeks earlier, and had been asking people about her ever since.

"They need a conductor at Carnegie Hall for yet another performance of 'Appalachian Spring'. I heard you wielded quite a baton at Berklee, so what do you say?"

For the next few years, Sylvia's reputation grew throughout New York, and later Philadelphia. Boston had been taken care of long before she left the area.

Henry was still there, working as an associate professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, running after grants in between research projects. By 1962, he was up for tenure, and his five-year reunion at Harvard. He heard that some of his former fellow T.A.'s were going to attend, so he decided to go.

All the different colleges on campus had invited their alumni for some reminiscing and more than a little social drinking. Sylvia had her invitation, and decided to attend at the last minute when a concert in Central Park had been cancelled because of a bad weather forecast (which turned out to be far from prophetic).

On the grounds there was a large tent pavilion, with a parquet dance floor and a small swing band. It was there that Henry and Sylvia finally met. Henry had lectured logic to one of Sylvia's friends six years earlier, and was remembered as a warm oasis among the cold, dry mathematics faculty. Henry was the first person Sylvia had met in a while who didn't know her already.

"Yeah, I like music. I have a bunch of Sinatra records, and there's some good stuff coming out of Detroit, but I must plead ignorance when it comes to classical stuff."

Sylvia was racking her brain for a witty response, but then the band started playing "Summer Wind".

"Care to dance?" asked Henry.

"Okay," was all Sylvia could mutter, and off they went.

In no hurry to get back to New York, Sylvia agreed to meet Henry in Worcester on the following Monday evening.

Seventeen months later, they were married, but having children was not in their immediate plans. There were no eager grandparents-to-be, as the Catholic McCranes and the Jewish Lindemanns were still dealing with the fact that they were now related. The new couple decided to move to Morristown, where Henry found work in the corporate world, designing the computers of the future. It was also a good location for Sylvia, who could easily travel between New York and Philadelphia with New Jersey as a home base.

While Henry became head engineer at his company, and slowly entered Sylvia's social circle, Sylvia got her first permanent position as conductor of a major orchestra.

She was the youngest woman to ever hold the distinction, and her compositions continued to make the rounds at concerts worldwide (conducted, no doubt, by jealous male colleagues).

Henry and Sylvia enjoyed their thirties together, a tight unit unto themselves, but they realized going into their forties that their reproductive years were ending soon. They had wanted children all along, but by 1973, conception became their top mission.

Sylvia took a sabbatical from conducting to chart her cycles, calling Henry at the office when her calculations indicated ovulation. Henry didn't care for the interruption, despite what it was for, but he didn't offer to help in the math department on these matters. Sex became a utilitarian chore, an extended coffee break, with an obligatory, "Thanks, Honey—see you when you get back home tonight," at the end.

Finally, their quest was complete, and by the summer of 1975 they were studying natural child birth (a strange pursuit, thought Henry) while Sylvia was great with child. They had a name in case the baby was a girl; Sylvia's grandmother Sarah had just passed away, and this would be the next child in the Lindemann clan. They were stumped for a boy's name until one night when they were watching *Guns of the Navarrone* on the Late Show.

"Alistair Maclean has a good ring to it, we could have a child who rhymes with an author."

Sylvia was skeptical of Henry's offering, but said, "I suppose Alistair is as good a name as any. A bit pretentious perhaps, but still noble."

She was quite certain that she was going to have a girl anyway, so this humoring of her husband seemed harmless.

Alistair Henry McCrane was born on July 8, 1975, at seven pounds, eight ounces, appropriately enough. He was a very quiet child, and lay in the maternity ward with what appeared to be a pensive expression while all the McCranes and Lindemanns ogled his little form.

The chatter was anticipatory, to say the least.

"He'll be a genius, for sure."

"What do you mean, look at him! The boy's a genius already. See how he's looking at me? Knows just what I'm talking about. Look, he nodded!"

"Brilliant and beautiful, in this family of all?"

"I hope they've already started saving for his education. It'll be the year 2000 before he even gets out of medical school."

"A doctor? Clearly the boy is a great thinker. He'll be a great..."

"He'll be president, if anything."

"Oh yeah, another genius like Gerry Ford."

"Oh shut up, the boy's life has barely begun. No need to get him involved with politics already."

"There'll be no need to involve him in anything right now," said the nurse. "Visiting hours are over and it's time for the babies to get some rest."

Despite the expectations, Alistair's infancy was rather unexceptional at first. He nursed, cried, vomited, soiled his diapers, and slept most of the day, like any other baby. His pensive demeanor turned out to be only temporary.

"Probably the result of gas," said the doctor.

The child's vocalizations were very specific, however. He wouldn't merely coo or cry; he genuinely expressed himself in ways that were perceptible beyond the normal parental intuition. Henry and Sylvia couldn't quite describe it, but whenever they showed off little Alistair to somebody new, even the stranger could get a sense of the boy.

This indescribable code became moot by the end of Alistair's seventh month, when he uttered his first real word.

"Sing," he commanded one day.

Sylvia made sure he was immersed in music throughout his life, even in his prenatal months. She would sing to him (Henry would make his best attempt at unison an octave below) and play her favorite piano pieces by Mendelssohn and some of Beethoven's more soothing sonatas. Alistair would light up at music time, smiling more broadly than ever, which only encouraged Sylvia to sing more. Henry was relieved when Alistair finally started singing along with tuneful sighing; this gave him time to read his trade journals.

But now Alistair was quite adamant about what he wanted from both his parents. After the first successful pronunciation, he kept chanting, "Sing, sing, sing," in time like a miniature Louis Prima while Mom and Dad sang a duet of "You Are My Sunshine."

New words came every day, and soon he was forming phrases, sentences, theses, and full dissertations on his situation. Unlike both his parents, Alistair became quite loquacious, doing enough talking for the three of them.

Exasperated from the endless monologue, Henry went to the store and brought back a large pad of newsprint and a box of fat crayons to fill Alistair's little hands. After being shown a quick demonstration, the boy took to the pad, scribbling the hours away. At last: silence.

He was still a few days away from turning two when he woke up his parents one morning shouting, "Mommy! Daddy! Look at what I drew today!"

He shoved a crayon-filled page in their groggy faces and quickly ran out of the bedroom to return to his work. Sylvia was studying the picture with great intensity while Henry was fumbling for his glasses. By the time his hand found them underneath the bed, Sylvia was already narrating the scene.

"It's the back yard. There's the tree, and the garden by the patio. He must have been sketching it since the crack of dawn. Look at this detail!"

Henry finally regained sight with his glasses at a strange angle relative to his brow. He noticed something right away.

"It's the branches, they're... they're all right," he stammered.

"What do you mean, 'alright'?"

“No, no, I mean the structure of the branches are accurate. He’s used the Fibonacci Sequence without even realizing it. He’s a math prodigy!”

“This is art, Henry, not science,” she protested, thinking Henry had overestimated his sphere of influence. After all, she was the one who was with him all day, taking him along to concert halls and art galleries. Clearly, the boy was a great artist.

Henry just muttered something unintelligible under his breath, and headed for the shower. Once the water was running, he finished his fantasy conversation with Sylvia.

“You didn’t study math. You wouldn’t know the Fibonacci Sequence from the Pythagorean Theorem. He’s demonstrating a proportional arithmetic series in the tree’s branch growth. It’s practically calculus. Not that you would know, Little Miss Schubert.”

He turned off the water, which had now become cold after he depleted the contents of their small water heater. Good, he thought, she can deal with a cold shower if she knows so much. He towed himself off, put on his bathrobe, and went into the living room to talk to his son.

“How high can you count, Alistair? You know, one, two, three…”

“Uh, I dunno. One, two, fuwee, foah, five, sik, semmen, uh… ten?”

“Good enough! Let me show you something. This is a ‘one’.” He drew a simple vertical line on a blank sheet. “Now you try.”

Alistair took the crayon and drew another nice, straight line right underneath it. “Dat’s easy!”

Henry showed him the rest of the numerals the boy knew, up to “semmen”. Alistair mimicked them all with little difficulty, and Henry beamed. So much for Chopin, he thought, Here comes Euclid!

For weeks, he had Alistair practice his numerals, both pronouncing them and writing them. Once he got him up to nine successfully, Henry introduced a new concept.

“This is a plus sign,” he said as he drew a small cross, “it signifies addition.”

“Sig what?”

“Just try to draw one yourself.”

“Okay. Like dis?” He drew a nice, neat little cross.

“Excellent! Now if you put that between two numbers, it means you add them together. You see, if you have one crayon, and I gave you another, what would you have then?”

Henry handed him another crayon from the box.

“Gween an’ bwack!”

“No, no. How many crayons do you have now?”

“Oh, um, one, two. Two!” Alistair was happy to humor old Dad by this point.

Henry was ecstatic, but he tried to keep his composure. “Very good, Alistair. Okay. Now you see what happens when you add one to one. One plus one equals two.”

Henry drew “ $1 + 1 = 2$ ” on a new sheet, and pointed to the horizontal parallel lines. “This is an equal sign. That’s how you signify the sum of the addition.”

“Okay.”

Henry and Alistair nearly filled up the pad when Henry realized that it was midnight and he had spent his whole Sunday teaching his 23-month-old son basic arithmetic. At least he thought he had. At any rate, the boy was exposed to the concept

and Henry figured that he should catch on eventually. He dreamed that night of bragging to the whole office about his son, the mathematical genius.

With Henry at work re-enacting his dream, Sylvia was scrubbing green and black crayon figuring from the walls, of which Alistair was quite proud.

“Look, Mommy. I know addin’!”

“Yes, but you should also know better than to make a mess of the walls. Besides, did Daddy just show you how to draw numbers?”

“Yeah! One, two, tree, four, five, sisk, sebben, eight, nine, ten!”

“But what about your ABC’s? Don’t you remember the song I taught you? You can draw those, too.”

“I wike numbahs!”

“Oy, not another engineer in this house,” she cried, “dealing with one is quite enough!”

At that moment she decided that Alistair should study music. She read about kids in Japan, only slightly older than Alistair, who were already learning the violin. She went to the yellow pages and found “Hideo Yamamoto: Suzuki Violin Method” under the “Music, instruction” listing. Henry wasn’t going to win that easily.

By the time he was three, Alistair had gotten quite far in his lessons with Mr. Yamamoto. He took well to formal instruction; he was very attentive and eager to learn. He was also Mr. Yamamoto's favorite student.

"Alistair-san! What a pleasure to see you again! Have you been practicing what I taught you last week?"

"Of course he has," exclaimed Sylvia. "He loves the violin, don't you, honey?"

"Yeah, I pway da violin while Mommy pways onna piano."

"You're a very fortunate boy," said Mr. Yamamoto. "Your mother plays with the best musicians in the world. I could only dream of the honor."

Alistair had been noticing lately that everybody admired him. Not just his parents and Mr. Yamamoto, but everybody he met. He was surrounded by adults who would alternately stare and laugh at him. They weren't really laughing *at* him, but he didn't know any better. He confused surprise over his precociousness with derision. He thought he was a freak, but didn't know why. Without any other children for comparison, he was lost.

That would all change in the fall. Henry and Sylvia managed to enroll him in the most prestigious nursery school in Morris County. They were told that it was like an early admission to an Ivy League university, which pleased them both to no end. Alistair, on the other hand, didn't know what to make of the situation.

When Sylvia dropped him off for the first day, Alistair found himself, for the first time, in the presence of more children than adults. In fact, he had barely even known any kids his own age; most of Henry and Sylvia's friends' children were much older, if they had children at all. But here were fifteen other three-year-olds, and two young women looking after them.

The first young woman, Kathy, who seemed to be in charge, asked everybody to introduce themselves. She started with herself, naturally, then her partner, Sheila, followed by the class. Alistair watched as each child excitedly called out his or her name.

"I'm Bobby!"

"Hi Bobby!" echoed everybody in unison, except for Alistair.

When it finally came to his turn, Alistair was quiet for an uncomfortably long moment.

Cutting the suspense, Kathy asked, "What's your name, dear?"

"Oh, I'm Alistair."

Silence.

"Alistair Mikwane."

The children burst into laughter. Some chanted "Mikwane," mimicking Alistair's speech impediment, while others wondered aloud, "What kind of name is Alistair?"

At that point, Alistair wanted to crawl under the big sofa against the wall and die. Not only was his first interaction with his peers a disaster, his parents weren't even there to console him. Choking back tears did little to improve the situation. The laughter just escalated.

“Quiet down, now,” Kathy commanded, “and be nice to Alistair. This is supposed to be a friendly place.”

Alistair certainly didn't see it that way. He wanted nothing more than to be back home again. Nursery school was nothing like his lessons with Mr. Yamamoto. Nobody made fun of him if he held his bow improperly or used the wrong fingering. It was just he and Mr. Yamamoto talking about music with Sylvia, or sometimes Henry, sitting nearby reading a book or magazine.

The only familiar element in this classroom was the piano. Sheila gathered the kids around to sing some songs while she plunked away at the keyboard. Alistair was used to his mother's expert playing on their baby grand at home, or Mr. Yamamoto's accompaniment on his shiny concert Yamaha. He winced at the sound of the tinny, out-of-tune upright, which spewed songs he didn't know.

The rest of the class caught on immediately to “Bingo” and “Old MacDonald” and all the other songs that Sheila knew. She encouraged the kids to play along on the other instruments that were in the big blue box. They all swarmed over there, fighting over drums and triangles and maracas.

Alistair looked from a few feet away. Eventually, he summoned up the courage to ask Sheila, “Is dere a violin in da box? I don't pway da dwums.”

She didn't know how to respond to that. Kathy overheard the one-sided conversation and knelt down next to Alistair.

“Do you know how to play the violin?”

“Yeah. Mista Yamamoto taught me, but I didn't bwing mine.”

Kathy turned to Sheila. “You know, I forgot. His mother is that famous conductor, Sylvia Lidowitz or something. He's probably used to Beethoven and stuff like that.”

“No wonder he doesn't get along with the other kids,” said Sheila, “he must be a genius.”

There was that word again: genius. Alistair had been hearing it as long as he could remember, but he didn't know what it meant. All he could tell was that it caused a big, hushed reaction, followed by more staring. Now Kathy and Sheila were doing the same thing that all his parents' friends had done. Alistair just looked at the floor.

The end of the school day didn't come soon enough for Alistair. Even though it was only four hours, it seemed like half his life. When Sylvia arrived to pick him up, he darted right to her.

“I wanna go home, Mommy,” he said softly, his little red face pressed into her knee.

They walked to the car, buckled up, and they were on their way back. Alistair was finally big enough to see out the window, so he intently watched the school as it ducked behind trees and finally disappeared as they rounded the corner. He sighed deeply and loudly enough for Sylvia to hear.

“How was your first day of school, honey?”

“I didn't like it, Mommy. Do I hafta go back?”

“Well, I think once you get to know everybody, you'll have a better time. I'm sure you'll make some new friends.”

New friends? As far as Alistair knew, he didn't have any friends, other than Mr. Yamamoto. He just sat quietly and stared at the buttons on the car radio. The outside world didn't interest him anymore.

When they got back home, he just went into his room and shut the door. He was relieved to be alone again. It seemed that even his mother didn't sympathize with his recent trauma. He pulled himself onto his bed and stuck his head in the pillows. He whimpered softly for a few minutes, then fell asleep.

He straggled through the rest of the year at school. He made masks with the rest of the class for Halloween and handprint turkeys for Thanksgiving. Kathy always held up Alistair's work as an example to the other kids, but that only seemed to make them resent him more. He was always getting special treatment from Kathy and Sheila, and soon he realized why. Everybody else seemed to lag behind him when it came to class projects.

He even signed his name—"Alistair M."—to all his work when almost none of his classmates even knew the alphabet. They learned the "ABC's" song, but that didn't make them any more literate.

Nobody seemed to be interested in math, which by then consumed most of the time Alistair spent with his father. He was adding and subtracting all the single-digit numbers to and from each other, even getting into double-digit sums. Soon, his father said, they would get into multiplication, whatever that was. All they did at school, however, were counting games, but never beyond five. Apparently, Alistair thought, anything you couldn't count on one hand wasn't worthwhile in the academic world.

When December came, the class discussion turned to Christmas and Chanukah. Kathy talked about the first holiday, and Sheila the second. Alistair didn't know much about either since neither Henry nor Sylvia was at all religious. Without so much as a common family tradition between the McCranes and the Lindemanns, the holiday celebrations at home pretty much began and ended with New Year's Day, for which the family once hosted a party for their closest friends, who all took turns staring at the boy.

The class sang "Frosty the Snowman" and "Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel", and the classroom saw a Christmas tree and a menorah lit together across from the sofa. Apparently, this season was a big deal to all the other kids, who were all hungry to get their presents. Alistair remembered getting presents on his birthday—including a Big Wheel and a little record player that folded up into a tiny case—but nobody ever told him about another day for gift-giving.

When he got home, he asked his mother about Christmas and Chanukah.

"Well, when I was a young girl, my family celebrated Chanukah, but it wasn't that big of a deal until I was older. I think your father really misses Christmas. He still exchanges a few presents with your Grandma and Grandpa McCrane."

This was all news to Alistair. He never received so much as a card. Henry and Sylvia both decided when he was born that they weren't going to bother confusing him with all the different holidays, and they asked their families to go along.

"What? Deprive the boy of Christmas? He'll grow up resentful," protested Sylvia's father-in-law.

“Well I and the rest of the non-Christian world grew up just fine without it,” insisted Sylvia three years earlier. She was afraid that the Christmas of 1978 would have to be different.

She always abhorred the commercialized holiday. It bore no relation to faith, as she understood it. All she saw were pictures of Santa Claus holding up bottles of Coca-Cola, sales on cheap plastic snowdomes, and mad rushes at all the big department stores. Then there were all the sentimental shows on television (which was only watched in the master bedroom—no mind-sapping for young Alistair), including the endless airings of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Henry always thought she over-reacted to whole affair.

“C'mon honey, it's just once a year.”

“It's a good month out of the year, the way it's grown. And don't give me anymore of that 'Scrooge' nonsense. It's a shameless spectacle and I don't want my son to have any part of it.”

“Well, just you wait.”

Soon enough, after repeated inquiries about when his presents would arrive, Sylvia found herself battling the crowds at Macy's.

Just how big is this damn place, she asked herself while riding up what seemed like the twentieth escalator. There's men's clothing, Junior Miss, swimwear (Swimwear? It's December in New York!), luggage... Wait a minute. Must have missed the children's wear.

She didn't even venture into the toy department. Henry could handle that himself.

She struggled with all of her boxes and bags as she walked down 34<sup>th</sup> Street to the garage. She carefully laid down all of her merchandise and rummaged through her handbag for the stub.

“Merry Christmas!” yelled the attendant as she sped off for the Lincoln Tunnel. There was a forty-minute wait to get back into the Garden State. In her rearview mirror she could see the Empire State Building looking down at her as twilight gave way to dusk and the upper levels lit up red and green.

In the new year, the class continued to do the same activities with the themes changed for the current season. In February, they all made valentines for each other, including Alistair.

Kathy produced a ream of red and pink construction paper from the supply closet, along with a metal tray of safety scissors. Each kid rushed to get two sheets of paper and a pair of scissors, and then to one of the craft tables by the big window. On each table was a large jug of Elmer's paste, surrounded by little plastic containers filled with glitter, sequins, beads, and bits of macaroni. Alistair, however, was still lingering by the scissors tray.

“Doncha have lefties?”

Kathy was puzzled. Most three-year-old barely even knew how to use scissors, much less that they came in different designs, nor would they care if they did. “Is that what you use at home?”

“Yeah. Da wighties are too hard to use wive my left hand. Da lines are all cwooked.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but we don’t have any lefties, just regular—I mean righty—scissors. Just try using your right hand to cut. I’ll show the class what to do right now.”

Kathy showed the class how to fold the pink sheet over and draw the half-heart design on the folded edge. Then she had them trace a slightly larger pattern on the red paper and paste them together.

A wide array of designs emerged, most looking like deranged flamingo heads. Alistair’s was the closest to Kathy’s, even though he struggled with using his right hand. He could still use his left hand to trace the design, at least.

The kids who weren’t trying to eat the paste were smearing it all over their designs, then pouring macaroni all over them. Over the macaroni, they spread more paste then poured an odd mixture of green and pink glitter over the semolina landscape. The results were not unlike topographical sculptures of Arizona.

Alistair lightly spread some paste on the exposed red paper, then in another, smaller heart design concentric to the edge of the pink paper. He neatly arranged the sequins along the red, and used elbow macaroni for the interior heart. Then he used a red crayon to write “LOVE” in the center, and a black crayon to sign his name to the back.

He handed it in to Kathy, who assumed it meant a budding affection from her star pupil. Instead, it was just Alistair doing his best on an assignment, as he always tried to do, and handing it in for approval like any other project. He didn’t even know what Valentine’s Day was supposed to be, except that it had something to do with people making hearts that were inscribed with “LOVE” or some other sentimental phrase. With the space allowed, the simple four-letter word had to suffice. He had several examples of pre-printed valentines with him, as did the rest of the class.

The week before, everybody received a list of all the kids’ names which was preceded by a note to the parents to make sure they would buy enough valentines for the whole class. Alistair and Sylvia worked the night before on filling out the cards, bought in bulk from the Hallmark store, and sealed them in little pink envelopes, which were then affixed with the proper names. The whole exercise was more like a compulsory assignment for both of them instead of a fun family activity. Sylvia promised him that once they were through they could have some music time, which Alistair always awaited eagerly.

The rest of the class had gone through the same ritual, and everybody handed their envelopes to Kathy and Sheila, who then re-distributed them. Alistair found himself with a new collection of envelopes, and opened each one to find similarly manufactured cards, several of which were identical, and all were signed in adult hands of varying neatness. It was quite apparent that none of his classmates had to be as involved with the ritual, so he began to resent the whole affair.

Spring began and couldn’t end soon enough. In mid-June, Kathy and Sheila said their tear-filled good-byes, and the other kids were getting broken up themselves. Many friendships were made between children who lived in different parts of Morris County, and some others lived as far away as Piscataway. Alistair thought Kathy and Sheila were pleasant enough, but there was no love lost with his classmates. He spent the year being continually ostracized and mocked by his peers.

Summer proved to be an excellent reprieve. Sylvia took him along on a tour through New England, and on to Canada, where she conducted a three-week run of *La Bohème* in Montréal.

The French language fascinated Alistair. By the time they were ready to move the show to Toronto, he was yelling “Bon jour!” and “Je m’appelle Alistair!” all over the place. Most of the Quebecois just stared at the boy, like their American counterparts.

Eventually it was time to return to school. Alistair went to the same building, but in a different room with different teachers and a few new classmates. The kids from his class last year clued the new kids into the odd boy called Alistair, and the rest of the year commenced as the previous one had. They went through all the same exercises, all the same seasonal activities, and Alistair just grew increasingly more impatient.

He didn’t manage to ingratiate himself with the new teachers. He was reluctant to participate and started lashing out at everybody. When Sylvia picked him up at the end of each day, he left in a huff and ran right into the car, slamming the door as he sat down. Once home, his mood lightened only slightly; he was still generally disgruntled right until bedtime. He merely pawed at his dinner, then claimed that he wanted nothing to do with music time.

Mr. Yamamoto noticed his new sour state better than anyone did.

“What’s wrong Alistair-san? Don’t you like school?”

“No! I hate it! It’s stupid—all of it!” Alistair felt more comfortable revealing his frustration to Mr. Yamamoto. His parents had both enjoyed school, as far as they could remember, and didn’t seem to sympathize.

“Well, then. I think I have something to show you that is not so stupid.”

From his shelf he pulled out a record that read “Paganini” in big, bold letters at the top and featured an oil painting of a thin man with a long nose playing the violin with a devilish look in his eye. He pulled the disc out of its cover and laid it on the turntable.

“I want you to listen to this, Alistair-san.”

While the needle dragged along its surface, a terrific sound came from the speaker. It was a solo violin, no piano or cello in the background, and it was playing faster than Alistair had even thought possible of the violin. It was beautiful, as well, in the way that it sounded so layered and conjured an image of complex lines flying through the air and intersecting in even more complicated patterns, forming the most beautiful visions Alistair had ever experienced in his nearly four and a half years. This was certainly not “The Farmer in the Dell”, which his class had learned earlier that day.

Just when it was getting really fascinating, Mr. Yamamoto turned his hi-fi down. Alistair looked straight at him, but Mr. Yamamoto pre-empted whatever complaint was forthcoming.

“What would you say, Alistair-san, if I told you that you could play like this?”

“Me?”

“Yes! You know, you are a very gifted violinist, especially for someone your age.”

“But nobody at school pways da violin. Dey jus’ sing songs about animals and stuff. And dey all hate me!”

“I’m sure they don’t hate you, Alistair-san. They’re just jealous of you. I’ll tell you what: how about you learn this Paganini piece, and then you can bring your violin to show-and-tell and play it for the class. I’m sure they’ll enjoy it.”

“I don’t tink you know much about dem, Mr. Yamamoto.”

Alistair took the sheet music home anyway, and showed it to his mother. She was very impressed.

“Mr. Yamamoto wants you to practice this?”

“He says I can do it, but I don’t wanna do it in cwass, like he says.”

“I think they’d like it.”

Alistair realized that there was no sense in arguing the point any further. He learned the piece, bit by bit, in about two weeks. He held a recital in the McCrane household, and Henry and Sylvia gave a standing ovation. He played it for Mr. Yamamoto at his next lesson, and the old master beamed with pride. But Alistair still had no desire to play for his classmates. It was time for Christmas/Chanukah again, and everybody was preoccupied with making menorah-shaped tree ornaments.

Summer finally came again, but Alistair received the worst news of his life. In the fall, he would have to go to Kindergarten, which would be five hours a day, five days a week, with even more students in his class, in addition to a number of his classmates from nursery school. Plus, he would be going to the elementary school, with kids as old as twelve walking around. He struggled to enjoy every last bit of summer before the next phase of his formal education began.

End of preview. If you wish to read more of *Alistair McCrane: Boy Genius*, please email [matt@slithy.com](mailto:matt@slithy.com). Thank you.

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