

# JUST BEFORE RECESS

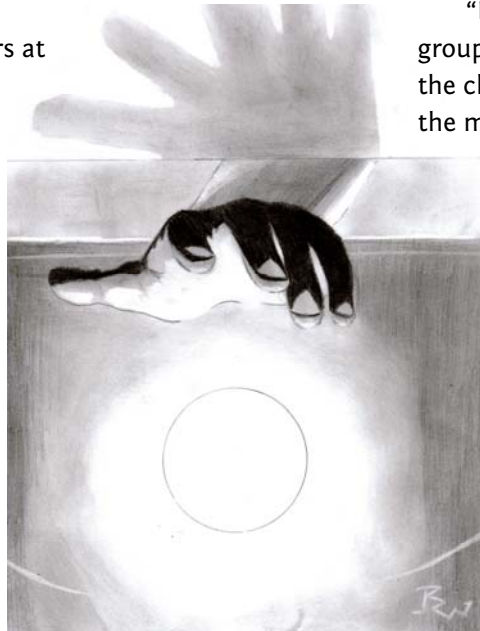
James Van Pelt

Parker kept a sun in his desk. He fed it gravel and twigs, and once his gum when it lost its flavor. The warm varnished desktop felt good against his forearms, and the desk's toasty metal bottom kept the chill off his legs.

Today Mr. Earl was grading papers at the front of the class, every once in a while glancing up at the 3rd graders to make sure none of them were talking or passing notes or looking out the window. Parker would quickly shift his gaze down to his textbook so Mr. Earl wouldn't give him the glare, a sure sign that Parker's name would soon go up on the board with the other kids who had lost their lunch privileges for the day. He could feel Mr. Earl's attention pass over him like a search light.

Slipping a pebble out of his pocket, Parker carefully lifted his desktop a quarter of an inch and slipped the rock in. It made a tiny clink when it dropped to the bottom. He leaned the desk away from him until he heard the pebble roll toward the sun, followed by the tiny hiss that meant the rock had vanished into it.

Two days ago he'd opened his desk to put his lunch in, but instead of the pencil box and tissue box and books he expected to see, a cloud swirled in the space, at its center, a dull, pulsing red glow. He shut the desk and looked around to see if anyone else had noticed. An hour later, the dusty swirl in his desk had contracted to a bright spot in the middle. He cautiously moved his hand toward it. At first he felt only the heat, but when he got within a few inches, the skin on his palm began to sting, like the flesh was pulling away. He snatched his hand back, then tried a pencil. When the point moved close enough, the pencil tugged toward the sun, then snapped out of his fingers into the tiny light, brightening it slightly in the process.



Now the sun was as large as a golf ball. When Parker rolled a marble across his desk, its path would curve toward the sun within, sometimes circling several times before resting exactly above it.

"Parker," Mr. Earl said. "Your reading group is waiting for you." In the back of the class, his three reading partners sat on the mats, their books on their laps. Parker pushed away from his desk and joined them.

"Where's your book?" Mr. Earl said, his eyebrows contracting into a single line above his eyes.

Parker shrugged. Mr. Earl growled. "You need to be more responsible, young man. Go get your book."

The other students looked on, relieved that Mr. Earl's attention was on Parker and not on them.

"I don't have it, sir," said Parker. It had disappeared into the sun along with everything else.

Mr. Earl's hands clenched slightly. Parker cringed as his teacher pushed away from his desk. Mr. Earl almost never left his desk. Students came to him. He didn't go to students unless the infraction was terribly, terribly bad.

"You, young man, are irresponsible. Remember our talk about responsibility on the first day of school?" He looked at each of his students who nodded in turn. "Isn't your book in your desk where it belongs?"

"No, sir," said Parker. How could he explain about the swirling dust, the pulsing red glow, the sun's pinpoint of light?

"Of course it is. That is where your books should always be. Everything in its place. A place for everything. Isn't that right?" His question sounded like an accusation.

Parker nodded. "But my book isn't there, Mr. Earl."

The teacher took two long strides and stood beside Parker's desk. Before the boy could speak, Mr. Earl threw the desktop open. For a second, he stared into it. A white glow reflected off his face. "What is this?" he said, as he reached toward the brightness.

"Careful, Mr. Earl," Parker started to say, but it was too late.

The teacher screeched before lurching against the desk. He went down quickly, his feet vanishing into the desk last.

A long silence filled the room. Parker stood, walked back to his desk. The sun within had grown, its heat baking like a tiny oven. He closed the top, which snapped down hard on its own at the last moment.

The other students hadn't moved. Parker looked at them. They looked at him. Over the intercom, a bell softly chimed.

"Recess," said Parker, and they all ran outside to play.



## JAMES VAN PELT



James Van Pelt teaches high school and college English in western Colorado. He has been publishing fiction since 1990, with numerous appearances in

most of the major science fiction and fantasy magazines, including *Talebones*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Weird Tales*, *SCIFI.COM*, and many anthologies, including several "year's best" collections. His first collection of stories, *Strangers and Beggars*, was released in 2002 and was recognized as a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association. His second collection, *The Last of the O-Forms and Other Stories*, which includes the Nebula finalist title story, was released in August 2005 and was a finalist for the Colorado Blue Spruce Young Adult Book Award. His novel *Summer of the Apocalypse* was released November, 2006.