

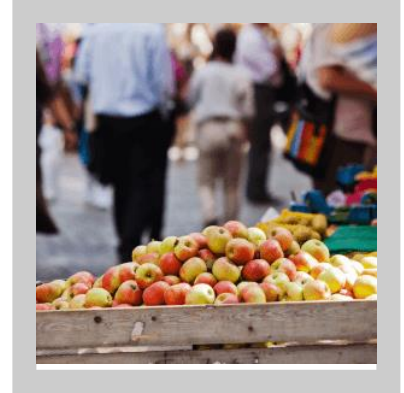
Name _____

Date _____

An Artful Dodger

It came to my attention one day that there was a young boy near the square. A sort of bandleader, you might say. An Artful Dodger.

It was hatefully hot. Sickeningly sunny. I was sitting in my usual place along the square, beneath the meager solace of my parasol. I had recently purchased a new book and was perusing it voraciously, my eyes hungrily devouring each line with delicate fury, my hand surreptitiously supplying my mouth with a steady stream of morsels from the quarry of nuts hidden deep within my shirt pocket. I looked up briefly, reluctant to tear my eyes from my book, and that was when, like a smear of darkness brought into the light, he was called to my attention.



Just past the crowded vendors' platform—that place where so many corpulent grocers bellow prices, obedient apprentices weigh goods, and compliant clerks shuttle crates to and fro; each man but a cog in a complex and frenzied machine—is where I found him. Standing little more than four feet from toe to toe, he must have been only eleven or twelve years of age. His nose a weathervane. His hair a glistening sheen of grease cascading from the head on all sides; it fell exactly long enough to hide two eyes of equal gloom. Together they sat cold and dark like cellmates conjecturing the color of the afternoon sky, peering out at the free world behind the iron bars that held them in. A threadbare vest, oversized and dangling about his thighs. The whole ensemble conspired to fabricate the appearance of being drenched, despite all the while absorbing the sun's wicked rays. I thought I myself might begin to melt simply by looking at the creature, this mirage, and I imagined myself pooling into the dusty platform, dripping down and slithering off beneath the cracks, but still, I watched him.

He was good; there was no denying it. I suppose any man (or, in this case, boy) desperate enough will adapt himself to any situation, take up any skill, any trade. The deftness with which he could make one of those plump, glistening orbs—an apple, peach, or a pear—disappear into his pants pocket, travel the length of the leg, and be liberated into the trembling hands of one of his many dutiful assistants crouching near the ground was nothing short of a marvel. These crimes were perpetrated so smoothly, so precisely they became just another section in the vast symphony playing out before my eyes. Everything around me whirled in perfect chaos, perfect harmony, not missing a beat. Under normal circumstances, I imagine one would have to pay for such a show