

“BLANCA’S LAST CLASS”

“Does anyone know if Blanca will be back tonight?” Joe was seated on top of the teacher’s desk looking out at the half-filled classroom. Ordinarily he sat closer to his students, but in this old school all the desks -- even the teachers’ -- were bolted to the floor.

From the back row, a young Latino called out. “No, Jefe. Blanca meant what she said. She ain’t coming back. Ever.” All the others in the classroom-- Spanish and black alike -- nodded knowingly. From the corner of his eye, Joe could see their reflections in the windows. That was one thing about night school. When you looked out the window, you saw right back inside the room -- no buildings, no headlights from the passing cars. Only reflections and sounds. He could always hear the cars on Ashland, and if he listened extra hard, he could hear singing from the auditorium where the drama club was rehearsing for Grease. And every so often, like a long, ugly ribbon, a siren of a police car would slide into the room.

“You’re sure about that, Tito? Does she know this class has only four more weeks?” Joe thought he detected a faint whine in his own voice, something this crowd would surely pick up on if he weren’t careful. “Well, if you see Blanca around, say that I’d like her to come back. But if she decides to take her GED right now, that’s OK too. She’ll do just fine. I just want her to get the degree.”

He paused for a seconds to make sure he had the class’s attention and in a lowered voice began. “OK then let’s get started.” He knew fully well, of course,

that more students would file in. Mrs. Sanchez and Yolanda Williams were sure to show up and so would the Mendez twins -- Juan and Jose. ("You can't tell Juan from the other." Was how they introduced themselves.) The assistant principal had been right. "Don't expect punctuality from night school classes, Joe -- especially GED classes. These people all work. And they have families. They probably don't worry about time like we Anglos do. But that won't bother you."

The assistant principal was right. Latecomers did not bother Joe. Not much else did either. But not having Blanca in the second row did feel wrong. For some reason, he had grown to depend on this middle-aged Puerto Rican woman. At first she had looked at him like any other Puerto Rican female -- short, roundish features, reddish hair. But after a while she became something to him that he could never quite figure out. And now she might be gone.

In the every first class, after explaining a math formula, Joe had asked for questions. Up shot Blanca's hand, "Blanca don't know." When he said nothing, she repeated herself: "Joe, Blanca don't know." Joe blinked a few times and then took her more slowly through the theorem. This time she nodded. "Now Blanca gets it."

Tonight, Blanca or no Blanca, his students were going to write an essay, very much like the essay they would have to compose on the real GED. Joe had made that decision while eating alone around the corner at the Las Villas restaurant. He would give the students a statement and they would write about it. Tonight the statement came straight from a GED text: "Nothing is accomplished without lots of effort." Just to be safe, he reminded them, "You can agree o

disagree. Prove your point by using real examples from your own life or from what you have read or observed. You can also make up examples.”

While they worked, Joe sat. For a while he pretended to grade a stack of papers from his regular high school class, but finally stopped and looked out at his students. Except for Tito, who was staring hard at Yesenia Negron, the others were writing or gazing hard at their notebooks.

Joe had done a good job preparing them. They now trusted themselves to write and what they wrote was usually clear and intelligent. On her way out the door for the last time, Betty, his former girl friend, had stopped long enough to say, “You may look like shit, Joe, but you know how to get people to write. That’ll keep you busy with me out of the picture. Maybe it will keep you out of the bars.” he hadn’t bothered to stand up when Betty left.

Soon his mind drifted to Blanca’s last class. It all started with a review of capitalization. They had been discussing proper nouns, including holidays. While Joe was listing some holidays on the board, Blanca shouted out, “Blanca don’t understand why we take a day off for those special doctors.”

Joe turned around and frowned.

Blanca kept on, “You know those doctors that take care of animals.” Then suddenly Joe had known what she was about to say, but it was too late to stop her. “Haven’t you ever heard of Veterinarian’s Day?” Her voice could be heard in every corner of the old room. As the laughter started, she stood up and strode to the calendar hanging on the wall below the clock and flipped the pages back to

November with its orange and brown Thanksgiving scene. “November 11, Veterinarian’s Day. Blanca knows what she’s talking about.”

By the time Blanca reached her desk, she must have realized something was wrong because the room had erupted with laughter -- not polite and considerate chuckles but loud and cruel guffaws. Mrs. Gonzales, who did not get the joke at first, hooted the loudest of all after Tito had explained it to her. Joe waited, but when Blanca sat there calmly smiling, he buried his face in his hands. “Veterans’ Day, Blanca. Veteran’s Day.” he was finally able to gasp. It’s a holiday for Americans who fought in the wars. He added weakly, “Lot’s of people make that mistake.”

A few minutes later the class had resumed. But just as Joe was passing out a quiz, Blanca stood up and marched to the desk. “Blanca’s all through with you shits. I’ll leave so you can laugh all you want.”

“Please don’t leave, Blanca.” Joe had said evenly. “The class was just having a good time.”

“Good time laughing at Blanca.” she spat back.

“Wouldn’t you have laughed if someone else had made a mistake like that?” He didn’t want her to leave.

“Fat chance,” she snarled, and out the door she hustled and down the hallway. He had been surprised but not astonished. Why should she be different? No one liked to be laughed at, especially in this neighborhood. People along Ashland were always fighting over questions of honor. But he had expected her

to come back. He had even cut out an article about veterinarians hoping this would get a good laugh. At the moment, it was still in his pocket.

After class, Joe walked out with his students and then stood outside looking back at the school. He could just make out the letters above the door: "Wells High School." He had once thought the school was named for the black journalist, Ida B. Wells, but it was actually named for Captain William Wells. He had led the retreat from Fort Dearborn but things ended badly for him. Indians cut out his heart and ate it.

For some reason Joe often thought about William Wells. Lately, he had time to think about lots of people. And tonight it was Major Lance, a former Wells student from the 50's who had recently died. Back in the 60's Lance had been momentarily famous for his hit, "Monkey Time." After that he slipped into obscurity. When he died, few people paid much attention to the Major. When Joe told his high school students about him, no one showed any interest at all.

As Joe made his way to Blanca's house, he wondered if either the Captain or the Major would ever confuse veterans with doctors who cared for animals. Probably not.