

EARLY RETIREMENT

We were all surprised to hear that Mr. Brewster was retiring early. He was actually a pretty good teacher. I know this because I had him two years ago as a sophomore. He could be boring, but he knew what he was talking about and he could keep the class quiet. And he didn't load us down with ridiculous amounts of crap just to keep us busy. He wasn't one of those people you'd go out of the way to ask for, but if you got him, you wouldn't try to switch teachers the way you might for a hard-ass or incompetent.

And he was a pretty good guy. He didn't talk down to kids, but he didn't try to be one of the guys and do shit like smoke pot with kids on weekends. He could get along with minor fuck-ups like me and the major fuck-ups like some of my friends and with the assholes and the nerds and the jocks and the hippies, even geniuses like my friend Sally.

He used to have freshman homerooms and that's where people like Sally remember him from. Most teachers hated those things, but Mr. Brewster couldn't get enough of wanting to know the kids and help them get started. He'd take them to breakfast and do goofy things like fly kites down by the lake at 5:30 am in the morning. They even played charades. He's a big serious guy who still wears a tie, so it's hard to imagine him having so much fun, but everyone said he did. He was like a camp counselor or something. That's what he did.

I never had him for homeroom, but Sally did. She said he was great to her then, even though as a freshman she could be a real little bitch to the other kids. She never had him as a teacher because she was always taking honor classes, but she still talked to him in the hall about all the good times they had freshman year. She's the best student at Forest and the one who did all the volunteer work with the inner city kids, because she comes from a deadbeat family that lives outside of town. Her dad drinks beer out of half quart bottles and spends a lot of time sitting in front of their trailer rubbing his tattoo and talking to his dogs.

But even though Sally's a high flying honor student and active in things that adults like, she still hangs out with me and my friends. She even got drunk with us once

last summer. But now Sally's busy working at the mall. She got accepted to Stanford, which is amazing for someone from our school. She won't have to pay a penny either, which is good because her folks don't have a penny.

Anyway, I wasn't disappointed when I saw Mr. Brewster's name on my senior schedule. But I was surprised to hear that he would be taking early retirement next year. He wasn't that old and he certainly didn't seem unhappy. What else could someone like that do? All we heard was that he had "personal" reasons for leaving the place for good. And he wouldn't be doing freshman homeroom either because this is his last year. I'm not sure why that would matter.

But whether he was leaving or not, I knew what to expect. I knew he would be interesting enough but he would take time away from my dad's landscape company and from partying with my friends. I'm not stupid. I like to read a good book and talk about big ideas every so often. I'm actually a pretty good English student, but I don't want to be pressured by a lot of work.

The first day of class he told us we would be reading several novels and writing papers. He wanted us to work on the college essay so we could use these for our college applications. While he was talking I looked around the room. He had a poster of Jack Keruac and Virginia Wolfe. He had some movie reviews. One bulletin board was empty and I suppose he planned to fill the place with student papers. Judd asked him about leaving and he said that he was. When I asked why, he said that he and his wife had made some "interesting plans." He was fiddling with his tie and looking out the window. He had the look people have before they throw up.

In the fall we read Lord of the Flies and some other novels and a play and wrote a few papers. Nothing fancy. We'd write about what we had read or we could write about other stuff too. I wrote a paper about my dad and another paper about sneaking into a country club to play golf. He liked them both. Just like he promised, he had us practice with a college essay because most of us were finishing our applications. You could tell he wanted this to matter to us. He kept repeating that this was more than just an exercise. He made "exercise" sound like a dirty word. We'd nod and pretend to agree. He seemed serious and in a way he was right.

Right before Halloween, we heard Mr. Brewster was having problems with the other teachers. You'd think he'd just coasted on out in his last year, but evidently he was being a pain in the ass at faculty meetings. At least that's what we heard from Judd, whose uncle teaches history at Forest. The uncle had told him that for some reason Mr. Brewster kept getting mad at the wrong time and it made the meetings last much longer than they needed to. The uncle was pissed because he hated meetings anyway, and he wondered why Mr. Brewster had waited so long to speak up. For all these years he had gone along with whatever was happening at Forest.

But in class we didn't get any of this or if we did no one would notice. Plus, we all had other things to worry about. The football team was going to make the playoffs, and the volleyball team was the best in the school's history. My old man kept me busy raking lawns. Whenever I'd see Sally, she'd ask about Mr. Brewster's class. I'd tell her I liked the books and that I shot my mouth off in class discussions. I love to argue. She'd give me the usual shit about going to a university and not just a community college. We'd both laugh about that. She said she planned to do some partying with us second semester when things didn't matter anymore.

Right before Thanksgiving, Mr. Brewster stopped me after class and asked about a paper I was supposed to write for a higher grade. It was about a camping trip Judd and I had taken to the Wisconsin Dells. It was one of those "Experience" papers where I was supposed to say what I had learned. I was going to use it in my college application. He had liked what I said about learning to be more independent. He loved my description of the Motel Six room, but thought I could have said more. He didn't like the spelling mistakes either, but said he would give me a B+ if I rewrote it and he said I should definitely include this in my application.

Well, I never did rewrite it and this day he stopped me and asked me why. I gave the old high school senior shrug and we both smiled. He was a big heavy guy who usually frowned so he looked funny smiling. But then he said I should find the time to do these things because they mattered. Then he tipped his head and smiled and said, "I know you've heard this crap before from adults, but it's still true." Then he said something that really did floor me. He said my friends and I should spend less time partying if we wanted to get anywhere.

That's the kind of ignorant adult remark Mr. Brewster would never say. The reason we liked the guy is that he didn't say stupid things like that. I felt like telling him to mind his own business and to remind him that, for what it was worth, my friends and I were just like kids everywhere. We didn't go to raves every night and end up puking and crawling all over each other. And so what if we did. It wasn't any of his business. One time my mom asked me about the partying and I just walked away. And my dad is way too smart to ask me about my private life. So when Mr. Brewster asked me this, I just walked out the door of his classroom.

So, I wasn't sure if this was something that just came into his head or if it had been there for a long time and finally came out. Sally said that when he stopped her in the hall, they usually talked about homeroom days, but he did tell her one time that me and my friends should consider our priorities. She laughed right in his face because it sounded like so much teacher bullshit and he laughed right back.

Sally wondered if he was talking this way because of his son Peter. He had graduated from high school across town and then went straight into the army. Sally said he never came back to visit the Brewsters. Maybe Peter had gotten all fucked up on drugs and that's why his dad was acting this way. I never met the guy, but I do remember that sophomore year Mr. Brewster had a picture on his desk. He and his son were sitting together at a ball game. They were both wearing Cub's hats.

Then I asked her if she thought it was peculiar that Mr. Brewster kept talking to her about homeroom. She said, no, it wasn't. If I had been there, I'd feel the same way. She said they also talked about movies and college. He said that his brother lived right in Palo Alto right near Stanford and could be there for her if she needed help.

But he was just one teacher, in one class, and normally what he did didn't really matter. After Thanksgiving when my dad's work stopped for the winter, I took a job at J & B Bowling. I was in charge of shoes. I would hand them out and clean them. I would take names for new leagues. If a ball got stuck, I was the guy who would walk down the alley and get it unstuck. I was also the guy who put in that special bumper so little kids and old people could bowl without the ball going in the gutter. I loved the job. Sometimes I'd sit over at the side when it wasn't busy and just take in all the sounds. You could hear

a ball crashing into the pins and the hum of people talking. You could hear the country music from the speakers. And, of course, you could hear Larry when he'd announce that someone's name had come up to bowl.

Sometimes I wander down to the bar and snag a beer from the fridge when no one was looking. I'd grab a Bud and pour it into a Coke cup and then bring it back. If Jake, the bartender saw me, he'd look the other way. He knew my old man and he knew that it didn't matter if I had just one and that's all it would ever be. Plus, everyone said I looked old for my age. I hadn't been carded the whole year.

One day when I went back there for a beer, I saw Mr. Brewster and Sally sitting in a booth talking. At first I wasn't going to do anything but then for some reason I walked over and waved. They looked up and waved back. They didn't seem to want me to come over but they didn't look embarrassed either. You'd think a teacher – especially someone like Mr. Brewster – would feel funny being caught at a bar with a student. But he sure didn't act that way.

The next day I asked Sally what was going on. She said she ran into him at the mall where she worked at the clothing store. He just happened to walk by while she was closing the shop. He asked her she wanted a coke and they went to the alley. He had a hard time talking once they were there. She asked what he was going to do when he retired. He said originally he and Mrs. Brewster were going to move out west to be with his son. It had sounded like a good idea at the time, but now he could see it wasn't a good idea at all. Eventually he and his wife were going to move near her brother's house outside of Santa Fe. He was going to work at the library and maybe do a little writing. She told him how excited she was to go to Stanford. She thanked him for what he had done to get her off to a good start and ignoring her bitchiness. But he didn't say much except to repeat that it was a dumb idea to think he could move out to see his son.

I asked her if he might have something else in mind. I gave her a funny look and tipped my head to the side.

“You mean does he want to get into my pants?” she smiled. “I don't think so, Butch. It's much more complicated than that.” And then she walked off to class.

But whatever it was, I saw them together more often than you'd expect to see a student and teacher together, but it was usually at the bowling alley so maybe I was the

only one who knew. And, believe me, I did not give a shit. I might have known sally all of my life, but I didn't think it was any of my business. Most of the time she'd be talking and gesturing and he'd be sitting there holding onto his coke nodding. I had never seen anything quite like it.

Then one night before Christmas my friends and I got a couple of kegs and rented a lodge outside of town. My older brother knew the guy who owned the place and made arrangements for us. I called Sally to see if she wanted to come, and she said sure. That's what I like about her. She might be taking AP tests and going to one of the best colleges in the country and getting awards from the local Chamber of Commerce, but she'll still come to a beer party with her buddies. But she did ask me not to mention her conversations with Mr. Brewster. And that's when I started wondering if there had been some sort of secret after all.

At the party she and I went into the woods for a smoke and she started to talk about it. "Butch," she said, "I really appreciate your not telling people about my talks with Mr. Brewster. I really do. You don't know how much I appreciate it."

"So what's going on?" I asked. It was cold and I was a little drunk, but suddenly felt like she was going to say something I wanted to hear.

But I didn't hear much that was new. She said he would always mutter something about what a stupid idea it had been to think he could move out near his son. But if she asked questions about the son, he would shake his head and look at his hands. Sometimes they'd talk about college. He told her about his college days at Lehigh. Back then he had written for the school paper and that's when he met his wife. He won an English Department award for an essay about Sherwood Anderson.

And, of course, they'd always talk about homeroom. After they relived some moments, he'd tell her about some other things he'd done in other homerooms all of his years at Forest. She said one time his eyes were glistening when he told her about taking the whole class to a restaurant in Chinatown.

"Isn't it weird to be proud of something like that?" I asked. It was getting colder and I had to take a leek.

Sally looked right at me in a way she had never looked any time before. Her eyes got small. "No, Butch. It's not odd at all if you think about it." Then she must have

known that he words made me uncomfortable because she reached over and gave me half a hug.

What's with the son? I asked her on the way in. She didn't really know. He thought he had a chance to help the kid, but he didn't. What kind of help did he need? I asked, but by that time we were back at the party and she went off to talk to an old boyfriend.

When we came back after Christmas vacation, we heard that Mr. Brewster was getting in more shouting matches with the other teachers at meetings. The fights would be about silly shit like the attendance policy or approval slips for field trips. Once he complained to the department chairman about kids not being prepared for class.

He stopped me after class to ask about an essay I had written about one of Joseph Conrad's stories. He liked it. He said I think you should think about a four-year college.

I said that he must have been talking to Sally and we both kind of laughed and then he thanked me for not making a big deal out of the two of them talking.

I said that people were going to miss him around here. Then I thought, what the fuck, I'll ask about his son. He was surprised. I guess, that Sally had mentioned him. He was just a quiet kid and when it came to college he went into the army instead. And when it came time to come back home, he decided to stay in California. "For good." For years he had been looking forward to getting a chance to know his son.

"You shouldn't retire."

He looked at me and nodded.

"At least you have Sally," I said as he started to walk away.

He looked back with the saddest expression I have ever seen on an adult's face. "Not for much longer, Butch. Not for much longer."

Then last week I was at the alley. I went back for a beer and Sally and Mr. Brewster were in their usual spot right under a Miller sign. But this time they weren't alone. A man in a t-shirt was sitting across from them and I could hear him shouting from across the room. It was Sally's dad. He was drunk. He'd shout and Mr. Brewster would try to answer and then Sally's father would raise his voice even more. I started to come over, but Sally looked up at me and waved me away. Tears were rolling down her face.

Then Mr. Brewster stood up. He reached out his hand, but Sally's dad slapped it away.

Mr. Brewster stood staring at him for a second and then hurried past me and out the door.