

MAKING IT WORSE

Glumly Frank listened to what Jenkins had to say. “Frank, you’ve always been a little neurotic. But this is ridiculous. You want to tell a student to stop dating someone else? Think about what you’re saying. We have been teachers together for thirty-five years. You’ve had good ideas and bad ones but this is the worst -- the worst you have ever come up with. Don’t do it, Frank. Don’t do it. Don’t do it. Don’t tell Chloe to break up with this greaseball. It’s not your business. Leave the kids alone. You wanted my opinion and you got it -- Don’t do it.”

Frank felt like banging his head on the table; instead he gazed across the faculty cafeteria to the announcement boards, where he could just make out the tattered blue and white poster inviting “All you dancing and signing fools” to try out for the annual teacher talent show. Nine months ago Frank had paused in front of the sign and toyed with the notion of getting together the old teacher singing group. But the idea fled as fast as it arrived. Let the younger teachers make fools of themselves.

Why couldn’t he have rejected the idea of interfering with Chloe just as easily? Why did it seem like such a great idea -- so great he actually might do something about it. “Jenkins, you asshole, you didn’t listen to me. I need to tell Chloe to dump Ollie. I feel that way, and I should let her know.” Jenkins just kept shaking his head and smiling. He pushed the glasses up from his nose and ran the fingers of one hand through thinning hair. His other hand held a copy of All Quiet on the Western Front, which he tapped on the table. He had been teaching this novel for every one of the thirty years he and Frank had taught together at Forest High School.

“Frank, we all think Chloe is a great little kid. We know her Dad -- a fine Christian fellow. We know she will make a great impact on this school. We also know that Ollie is scumbag numero uno. But let her find that out for herself.”

“I wish I could, but this is different. He’s so much worse. He could hurt her. Sometimes teachers have to step in. Christ, we’re always talking about moral choices when we teach literature. Well, this is one of those times. I really believe this is the right thing to do.”

“And you think she’ll listen.”

“She respects me. I know her Dad. Our wives play bridge together.” Frank had to hold down his voice.

“You’ve had ideas like this before.” Jenkins leaned towards him with raised eyebrows.

“I know.” Frank had expected Jenkins to talk about these other times.

“You wanted to tell the coach you saw Robby Martin smoking, but you thought better of it.”

“After you convinced me.”

“You wanted to make an anonymous call to the cops to tell them about the Badger brothers selling drugs.”

“And I didn’t. Anyway Billy Badger was shot. But this is different. This feels much different.”

“Frank, the year will be over soon. Nothing you say will matter. Maybe she’ll decide to keep dating that vermin; maybe some other scum will ooze into her life. Who gives a shit? Maybe she’ll start wearing leather and dating girl;s. Who gives a shit? Frank, think about what you’re saying. This is none of your business.”

“This is all of our business.” He regretted these words the moment they came out.

“Oh, please. Stifle that ‘no man is an island’ bullshit. You’re tired. That’s all this is. And you’re getting old like the rest of us. When you climbed out of your car yesterday I expected you to reach back for a walker. I couldn’t believe you were the same guy who threw passes to me in touch football games. Red eyes, stooped shoulders, frowning face. You could have been your own grandfather. I thought you were sick. Now I find out you looked that way because you’re afraid some little freshman is about to get humped by the school dirtbag. And now you look worse.”

And that’s how Frank felt -- old and defeated. He hadn’t slept the whole night after seeing Chloe with Ollie. He had tossed so much in bed that his wife asked him to please sleep on the couch in the living room, where he lay staring at the ceiling. By morning he knew that he had to do something. So he asked Jenkins to meet him in the

cafeteria.

“Sleep tonight. OK?” Jenkins was on his feet. He turned and headed for the door and his next class. Frank had another free period and then back to the classroom. He looked out the window across the field to the parking lot. Maybe he was tired. Maybe he should take early retirement. Maybe that’s what all this meant. Marge wouldn’t like this, but his children would. And he could spend more time with his grandchildren. He could write, fish, and travel.