

SECOND CHANCE

Mark actually liked the place ready. Back at his old school, he had never done much with the classroom, but this time around; he might just do a few things with it. He wouldn't bring in flowers, but there's no reason he couldn't paste up posters and pictures and cartoons that the kids might like. No reason for his students to know what a slob he really was.

But right now, before he did any serious decorating, he'd better glance at the books and the curriculum to make sure he could at least fake it for the first few classes. That's what happens when they offer you a job at the end of the summer. You arrive totally unprepared. Nothing to do but cram. But he could do it. He wasn't afraid to work. He'd be able to come up with a plan. And when he had a classroom full of kids, he would do just fine. There was no question. He could teach. He liked making the classroom come alive. He left the old place for other reasons – not because he couldn't teach.

Thus new place should be OK for him. It was in the Chicago area but far away from his last place. But the students would be the same – a lot of college bound kids and a few blue-collar types and enough diversity to make it interesting. He'd do fine here. He'd try to follow the rules and keep a neat room.

He was starting to make a list of things to do the first day when into the room marched a young teacher. She was wearing a red sweatshirt and carrying a U.S. History book with lots of yellow post-its sticking out. She looked to be in her late twenties – just about Mark's age. She walked up to the desk and stood there smiling. Mark looked back and grinned. "I'm Mark, the new English teacher. Who are you?" He reached out and shook her hand. "So, you teach history?"

"I'm Lottie, and yes, this is a history book." She took his hand and held it longer than she needed to. She had dark hair combed back and an athlete's figure. She probably jogged and did yoga. She had a clean, handsome face and a natural smile, but her eyes told a different story. This person could keep her kids quiet. No doubt about that. And quite soon, maybe sooner than she would like, her features would harden and her posture would decline and she would look more like what she was – a teacher.

“So why did they hire you?” She reached down and poked him playfully on the chest.

“You must know the story. Mrs. Abel died suddenly. They needed someone fast and my name happened to be at the top of the list. I was going to take off the whole year, but when this came along, I took it.”

She reached out and grabbed his list and turned it so she could read it. “What do we have here? ‘Introductions, class plan, Orwell story, discussion free writing.’ Very good, Mark. It looks like you have enough here to keep the little fuckers busy.”

“That’s right.” She already reminded him of a few teachers from his former school – funny teachers, irreverent teachers, slightly dangerous teachers. Did he attract people like this? Did he have some kind of aura?

She looked at him with what could only be called a dirty smile. “So, Mark, why’d you leave the last place? Nothing unseemly I hope.”

“Nothing like that. The principal didn’t like the way I played fast and loose with the rules. I’d turn in my grades late and I didn’t take roll. I was seen at parties with students and some other things. He accused me of pandering to the kids. But it was my choice to move on.”

“That’s it? Never got caught doing anything really bad?” Her tone made him a little nervous. Had she heard things?

“Nope,” He replied quickly. “He actually wrote a good recommendation for me. What about you? What’s your story?”

“You’ll find out.” She looked down at her history book and gave an exaggerated yawn. “This is my fourth year here.”

“Getting bored?” Mark wondered if she had a lover. His last girlfriend dumped him after he quit his job. He figured someone new would come along, but not this soon.

“You finish what you’re doing, Mark. I’ve got something to do over here.” And she walked quickly to the other side of the room and opened up the window. “I hope you put lots of flowers here just like Mrs. Abel did. She kept a beautiful classroom. Too bad about that bus.”

Mark looked down to study his notes and then looked back up again and started shouting. “What are you doing? What the hell are you doing?” He could not believe what

he was looking at. Lottie was taking a deep drag on a joint and blowing the smoke out the window.

“Just enjoying myself,” she said and took another drag. “Calm down, Mark. We’re not in Victorian times you know. Even teachers get stoned.”

He rushed over to the door and locked it. Then he ran back and opened the rest of the windows. “This is my first day for Christ sake! You’ll get me fired and that’s it. I’m out of teaching forever. Please, Lottie, put that goddamn thing out. Out. Out. Put that fucking thing out.”

But she didn’t. Instead she laid it on the windowsill and reached over and grabbed Mark by the arm and pulled him towards her. For a moment he held back, but only for a moment. Suddenly, he was in her arms. “Just relax,” she whispered and then kissed him. He resisted for only a second. And he didn’t resist at all when she reached behind him for the joint and slipped it between his lips. “I grew this in my backyard. Tell me what you think.”

He paused for just a moment and then took a deep drag. He hadn’t been stoned for a month, and the pot tasted wonderful.

Then he was kissing her again and then pushing sideways and then flicking the joint out the window as he moved her towards the closet. What the hell, he kept saying to himself. What the hell.

“Mark, my goodness,” she whispered to him. “Are you thinking of doing what I think you are? In the closet? On top of Mrs. Abel’s coat? But we can’t. You’ve got your English department meeting and I have to be some place. But I’ll be here all year.” She wiggled free and started to walk away.

Halfway to the door, she stopped, turned around, and lifted up her sweatshirt. She wasn’t wearing a bra. “Coming events, Markie. Coming events. See you soon.” She pulled down the sweatshirt, grabbed her books and skipped out the door.

He wanted to chase after her or at least pause and savor the memory, but he had no time. Grinning and shaking his head, he turned on the fan and took one last look at his notes. How could this have happened on his first day of school? Were all the teachers here like Lottie? What kind of place was this?

The English department meeting was held in a classroom down the hall. Most of the teachers appeared to be in their forties, but there were a few who looked younger than he was. The chairman was an angular, good-natured man named Barnes. He introduced Mark and the other new teacher to the group. Mark greeted his colleagues and said he felt lucky to be teaching in a school like Forest. He said he was looking forward to working on the literary magazine. The other new teacher, an older fellow named Bassett, told the other teachers he would be directing plays. He was also glad to be at Forest. He blinked a lot and chewed on his lips.

“I told these two men,” the chairman said with a grin, “that at Forest we never dangle our modifiers, and I know these fellows won’t.”

Everyone laughed. The chairman then talked about his recent trip to England. In June he and his wife and seven Forest students had traveled to Cambridge where they all took classes. “I can honestly say, people, this was one of the best experiences I have ever had as a teacher, and I know the kids felt the same way. So I’m going to have them tell you about what they learned this summer. This will be a good way for us to begin the year. We’ll have plenty of time in the afternoon to talk about the curriculum. Don’t you agree?” A few people actually applauded, and Mark, who was about to scribble a note to Lottie, joined in.

The chairman walked over to the door and opened it. Into the room filed several students. The first two to enter were clean-cut, confident looking boys. Mark recognized the types. Some day soon, they would be Ivy Leaguers. Even though it was still August, they were wearing neckties. The third student marched through the door just as confidently, but she was dressed more casually. In fact she was wearing a sweatshirt – a red sweatshirt.