

## SUMMER SCHOOL

### FLETCHER

Sitting at his desk, Fletcher raised the binoculars to his eyes and looked out the classroom window. He paused briefly at the red and black sign on the lawn: “Forest High School, Home of the Fighting Panthers.” He angled the binoculars higher and focused on a group in the parking lot. There was Ike with his sluts and toadies. Fletcher watched him yank his wallet out of his back pocket, reach in and grab a wad of bills and hand them to an older looking guy. Fletcher knew him too. Santini. A few years ago he had been one of Fletcher’s American Lit students. Everyday, he’d stumble in late and shuffle to the back of the room where he’d drop into a desk and smirk. Then one day he’d stopped showing up and now he was Ike’s buddy. So what else was new?

Fletcher put down the binoculars and looked around his classroom—probably for the last time. It was 7:00 in the evening. Still light. His room was cheerful in—as he once overheard another teacher observe—a “classroomy” kind of way. There were posters of Shakespeare, Joyce, Shaw, Cummings, and Dickinson. There were large photos by Ansel Adams and movie posters of Casablanca and Citizen Kane. One poster summarized the steps for a successful research paper: “Pick a good subject.” “Limit the subject.” “Design a thesis.” “Decide on a plan.” “Research thoroughly.” “Polish! Polish! Polish!” On bulletin boards beside the door and near the chalkboard were student papers, which Fletcher had retyped himself. Most were analyses of *LORD OF THE FLIES*. Anthologies filled the bookcases. Flower pots lined the window ledge. A Navajo rug covered much of the floor.

Before long, Fletcher would take all this stuff down and pack it away. He had intended to do this earlier, but he kept putting it off. It was summer school, and no one else was using this room anyway.

He was 45 years old, and it was time to walk away from his teaching life. He had told people that he was leaving to go work for his brother who owned a hunting and fishing lodge in Manitoba. Everyone at the school—even Rocco the janitor—said it would be a good move. Fletcher, people all agreed, simply could not teach. He knew it and the kids knew it. His department chair knew it and so did his former wife. He knew how to look like a teacher and act like one, but he couldn't be a teacher. It just wasn't there. When he started out, he had shown promise, but he never could pull it off.

He wasn't one of those teachers the kids harassed. He could keep them quiet. No one told him to get fucked. No one threw eggs at his house or bumped him in the hall. No one shit in his closet or wrote graffiti on his announcement board. It was just that no one took him seriously. He spoke and they stared.

Next year when Blake or some other young teacher moved in, people would say that it just wasn't the same with old Fletcher gone. No one could make a room look the way Fletcher could. They'd yap about how the new guy didn't really give that much of a crap about his teaching environment. They'd confess that there were some things you just couldn't do. And then they'd go on assigning term papers and grammar tests and vocabulary exercises. And that would be it.

Fletcher wouldn't mind people joking about him in that way. It was OK to be remembered as the guy who could make a classroom beautiful. No apologies. Nothing

wrong with taking your job seriously, even though he was far better at decorating the room than he was at leading a discussion.

And people would understand why he wanted to quit. Why keep on failing? They knew he put so much into his classes and so little came out. Any normal person would look at his choices and head for the exit.

And he wasn't going to say good-bye to anyone on the way out. Certainly not Armond, not that lovable old prick closing in on retirement, but still teaching up a storm. Armond was organized. He was confident. Students always listened when Armond talked and they followed his orders; in this place you were supposed to follow his orders. At vacation times, his former students, back from college, would crowd into his room and tell him what a difference he had made in their lives. Every afternoon he could be found quietly grading papers in the far corner of the teachers' cafeteria. "Armond's spot," people called it, and no one ever bothered him. He lived on his reputation and that was it. If they had started at the same time, Fletcher would have kicked his ass. But it didn't work that way. When Fletcher arrived on the scene, Armond was already around and had all the moves. Old and respected. An icon. A despicable icon.

Fletcher wasn't going to miss the younger teachers like Blake either. Guys like Blake coasted on their long hair and youth. They knew how to act, but that was it. Well, Blake was getting older and losing his touch and as far as Fletcher was concerned, that was good news.

Then there was Coach, the old simple guy who worked as a gym aide. Coach had failed as a teacher even worse than Fletcher. And he knew it. He tried to identify with Fletcher, telling him not to worry. The kids were really OK. You just had to get to know

them. Well, if Coach had known them so well, why had they taken him out of the classroom and made him a flunky in the PE department?

And he wasn't going to miss Ike any more than he ever missed the other grease balls that had come before him. This year was Ike's turn to be the thug in residence. Next year would be someone else's. He despised them all—every one of them, but he had a special hatred for Ike.

Fletcher pulled out the top drawer of his desk and reached for a cell phone. He punched in some numbers and listened to the ring. He picked up the binoculars with his left hand and looked out again into the parking lot. He saw Ike reach into his pocket and pull out his cell phone. The next thing Fletcher heard was a message: "This is Ike. You know where to reach me. This better be important." his voice came through clear and threatening. Just as Fletcher had hoped.

Fletcher took a deep breath and spoke in his best teacher voice. "Ike, this is Mr. Fletcher. Mr. Fred Fletcher, the English teacher. We need to talk." He paused and touched the button to end the call. Then he pulled open the desk drawer and laid his cell phone just to the left of a revolver.

BLAKE

"You're a moron! How did you let it happen?" John was pissed. "Can you imagine Fletcher doing something that stupid? Or Armond?" Blake did not enjoy what he was hearing, but what else could John say—considering the circumstances? So Blake sipped on his beer and stared at himself in the mirror behind the bar. He looked the way

he felt—hung over and worried. He reached for a cigarette and let John go on ripping into him. “You mean you forgot about a student? You actually forgot about a student. You forgot the immortal Ike was signed up for your class last semester and never bothered to show up and now you’re stuck. They could fire your ass. You know that, don’t you—especially after all the other shit you’ve pulled off. The administration’s still pissed at you for borrowing money from the students.”

“I paid it back ahead of time.”

“They’re still mad.” John paused and reached for a cigarette. Blake looked over at him but didn’t speak. Like Blake, he was in his early thirties, but better dressed. Tonight he was wearing a blue and white golf shirt and shorts. His hair was neatly combed. Whenever Blake’s parents called from Detroit, they always asked about that nice young man from the East.

Blake picked a piece of tobacco from his tongue and looked down the bar at an elderly man snuggling with his lady friend. Any moment now she might slide her gnarly hand into the old boy’s trousers. They looked away when Blake looked over. They’d been listening. No doubt about it. That’s all he needed: even more people knowing how thoroughly he could fuck up. Even those Mexicans sitting back in the booths—the guys that worked at the paper cup factory—probably knew who Blake was. They had just finished the day shift at the paper cup factory and now they were polishing off a few coronas. Blake wanted to laugh like these guys could laugh. These guys didn’t get depressed by the beer signs on the wall of this shit hole or a bar or by the flickering lights or by the toilet that never flushes.

Blake turned back and spoke to John, who was glaring at his beer. “Look it, you self-righteous prick, you’ve fucked up just as much as the rest of us. You just never get caught. Ike was supposed to be in my class. His name was on the list. He got a D for the quarter. One of his little sluts slithered into my class one day and told me he had changed teachers for some reason. She said the drop papers would be coming through soon. I erased his name from the grade book and never bothered to see if a drop form had come through. Meanwhile he was out doing whatever it is scum bags like that do.”

John sighed and reached into his pocket for a cigarette. “And then the grade forms arrived and you saw his name and almost shit and then gave him an incomplete. How stupid is that?”

“What was I supposed to do? I made a preemptive move by calling Schwartz, I told him Ike was working on a project that would take a little longer. I told him I would see Ike during summer school to make sure that this was being taken care of promptly. I’m sure he didn’t believe me, but what’s he supposed to do?”

“He’s giving you a chance to cover your ass.”

“And to cover his own. This kind of thing makes an assistant principal look bad too.”

John made no effort to stifle a yawn. Blake knew John would rather be back home grading papers or reading science fiction or watching the Cubs. He didn’t want to hear about Blake’s fuck up. But here he was on a Monday night sitting at the bar of the town’s worst tavern, smoking Winstons. He may be yawning, but he was here. John was a friend.

“John,” Blake put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Here’s what I think we should do.”

## ARCHIE

Archie stood with the other seniors on the field and watched Coach and the exchange student walk toward them. He could never figure out if Coach was an old guy who looked young or a young guy who looked old. His skin was wrinkled and had some geezer spots, but he sure acted young. From a distance—all the way across the athletic fields—Coach actually resembled a high school senior. It was something about the way he moved—more like a kid than an old person. And like a kid, little things excited him.

The truth of it was that Coach was just a little slow, not retarded but just slow. That's why he worked as a teacher's aide in the PE department and not as a regular teacher. A few years back, he taught social studies. Archie's older brother had been one of the coach's students back then and said that he loved to talk about World War II. And he really knew his stuff. He also liked to talk about music. One day he brought in his whole collection of blues records and played them for the class. Archie's brother said that Coach didn't know when to stop talking, but he was actually quite interesting. But he couldn't get the kids to shut up and his classes were generally a mess, so the school found another job for him in the PE department. About that time, someone started to call him "Coach."

Archie knew him only as the fellow who would help out the regular gym teacher. He would hold the yard line markers in touch football games and climb over the fence to get foul balls that ended up in someone's yard. If someone forgot the bases, Coach would sprint back to the locker rooms. Sometimes, on his way back, he'd take an extra lap around the field and all the guys would shout "Go Coach!" He'd help out on the sideline

at football games, but the players asked him to leave because sometimes he'd cheer for the opponent.

Still Archie and his buddies liked the guy, even though they made fun of him. And by making fun of him, they meant calling him Coach and maybe being a little sarcastic. Or they might imitate him a little behind his back, but nothing mean. You had to be a senior to do these things to Coach, and you had to do them right. Seniors like Ike made sure of that. It was like Coach was the senior mascot. This was the first year Archie could make fun of Coach if he wanted to, but that was not something he really felt like doing. Just like he never felt like giving Mr. Fletcher a hard time. Why be shitty to someone who tried so hard?

One time when Archie was working the register at his mom's restaurant, Coach and his wife had come in and taken a seat in the back right next to the travel posters of Italy. They didn't talk much, though a couple of times she flicked something from his shoulder—probably a crumb or something. She had gray hair tied up in back and a serious face. Someone said her dad was a minister somewhere in Indiana. She worked at an insurance company in the city. During the summer, she gardened.

After the meal, at the counter Coach introduced Archie to his wife. "Genevieve, this is Archie Ori. He's one of our seniors at the high school. He likes music just like his brother Danny did." Coach's wife shook Archie's hand firmly. She asked him how long the restaurant had been in business, what his responsibilities were, and where he was going to college. She frowned when he told her he planned to take night classes at the community college instead of going to a real university. "That's too bad, but I guess work comes first." She asked about Archie's father and he told her he had died of throat cancer

last year. She reached over and touched him on the shoulder, paused for just a second and then gave Coach a little nudge. “Come on, Willis,” she ordered. “We have work to do in the garden.” She led him out the door.

Today, as the Coach and the new kid got closer, Archie could see that Coach was doing all the talking. This new guy, whose name was Hartmut Wohlrapp, was here just for the summer. He wore his pants too high and laughed at the wrong time. He stood too close to people, and he had a funny smell. Instead of “vacation,” he would say “waycation.” He was a senior and would be going back to Hamburg at the end of the summer to start college at a German university. Someone had the stupid idea to stick him into Forest for the summer. Archie seemed to remember that Coach’s wife had something to do with him being here.

Naturally, Ike didn’t like the new guy. People like this just made Ike mean. He’d make sarcastic remarks or ignore him. When he’d pass him, he might bump him. Behind his back he might fire off a Nazi salute. That was about it. Ike had more things to think about than a grinning kid from Germany.

Archie was about to give Coach a hand with the bases when suddenly the German, who had walked off, came back right behind Coach and did this really stupid imitation of him. And then he pointed to his head probably to say that Coach was a little strange. Archie figured the guy was doing this for laughs. He wanted to be one of the guys. But when Ike saw what was happening, he charged up to Hartmut and threw him down on the ground. Then he got right into his face. “If you ever do that again, you fucking German, I’ll turn you into a cripple.”

Naturally, everyone moved in to see if there would be any punching. Archie squeezed to the outside just in time to see Coach. He was standing frozen with the bases in his arms. His eyes were bulging and his jaw was shaking. Then he dropped the bases and tore across the field. But instead of heading for the locker room, he sprinted through the parking lot and down the sidewalk. He was running home. By now, Ike and Hartmut were standing up. Hartmut stood still. The official PE teacher, who as usual was late, ran up and did a lot of shouting and then ordered the boys back to the locker room. They all started heading that way except for Hartmut. He stayed back alone. When they reached the school, Archie looked back again. Hartmut was still standing there. Blond and defiant. An angry blond guy.

## JULIE

Julie gathered up her papers. Time to meet Armond. How strange! A 30-year-old teacher like her meeting an old guy—an old guy who would tell her funny stories. Was there anyone else on earth who could say that was what she was planning to do? Armond would be on the lawn at the side of the school reading a book. The book would be something he was doing with his class and he would be underlining. He'd look surprised. She'd sit down next to him or maybe today they'd go to her porch. She would tease him a little and he would start to tell more stories. He would stop occasionally and just look at her. No need to talk. I've never done this before, he must be thinking, I've never been funny before. Then he would go and tell her one more funny story.

Down the hall was a man named Fletcher. He was about to pack up his stuff and head to Canada. The two times they passed in the hall, he had not returned her smile. He

looked awfully unhappy. Armond said he had once been a promising teacher, a guy who knew what literature was all about. But he never could relax with the kids. He never got their respect. Armond thought his failure had something to do with his wife running off. “No funny stories from him,” Armond had said before telling one more of his own.

## FLETCHER

Fletcher’s room was getting darker, but he didn’t turn on the lights. What would it have been like, he wondered, if he had taught in the dark? Somehow the shadows might have made it easier. When one of his lessons flopped, he wouldn’t have been as easy to spot. With the lights on and him standing in the front, he was such a public figure—responsible for what happened—or didn’t happen.

A few students like Archie would be patient with him, but most just expected his ideas to die and they always did. When he tried to run discussions, the kids wouldn’t listen to his questions or they’d just shrug. If he tried an old-fashioned lecture, people would fall asleep. Before tests, he would tell the class what he expected them to know. The smart kids would do well; the others wouldn’t. If he came up with an especially clever essay question, no one seemed to notice. His classes were never out of control, but there was a lot of shouting and hooting. He’d get notes from the administration asking him to keep a tighter ship. Worst of all, students would drop his class and change to a younger teacher like Blake or to an old serious one like Armond.

A sharp ring brought Fletcher back to reality. He reached into the desk drawer and pulled out the ringing cell phone. “Hello.”

“It’s Ike. You want to talk to me. Right?” He sounded a little angry.

“That’s right. I want to talk to you.” Fletcher kept his own voice level. No time to sound nervous.

“I don’t like to talk to teachers—especially if I don’t have to. I don’t need to talk to people like you. And you’re not even my teacher. What the fuck are you calling me for?” He was getting mad and Fletcher hadn’t even said anything. This kid was just as nasty as he had imagined. This would make it easier. He was glad they were on the phone. In person, Ike might have stared him down.

“I know this might seem a little odd, Ike. But we have to talk.”

“About what? What would we have to say to each other? You’re the teacher who’s about to leave this place. You’re the guy who looks so miserable.”

Fletcher swallowed and hardened his voice. “Something important. Believe me. You’re going to want to hear what I say.”

“How about the parking lot?”

“How about my classroom tomorrow after school? It’s summer. In the afternoon, no one will be around.”

“I don’t want to go into a classroom. I’ll meet you in the lawn in front of the parking lot.”

“That’s fine.” Fletcher paused and turned off the phone. Now that they would be meeting outside, he could start cleaning out his classroom. He could shoot him on the lawn lot just as easily.

BLAKE

John ordered one more beer. “So you want me to lie for you. Is that it? That’s your plan. You make up a story and have me OK it. Jesus Christ, Blake. Give me a break.”

“It’s simple.” Blake suddenly felt more optimistic. “I’ll talk to Ike. He can take a survey or do a photo essay or see a bunch of foreign movies or interview people. He’ll have to come back to class and do some work. But that way he can pass and graduate and be gone forever. He’ll do the work. It’s not that much of a lie. I figure he does want to graduate. You’ll just have to say that you knew about this. Just back me up. You can say it’s a good thing to do with seniors—especially in the summer.

“Jesus Christ, Blake.” John slid off the stool and headed for the door. The old couple turned to watch him leave.

“You’ll do it won’t you, John?” Blake called after him. “You will back me up, won’t you?”

Just as John started to leave, he turned. “This is the last time, asshole. This is the last time ever.”

Blake looked at the old couple and winked.

“And one more thing,” John called back. “You’re losing it and it’s a sad thing to see. Before long you’ll be just like Fletcher or Coach.” Then he was gone.

Blake knew what he meant by “it.” “It” was that energy Blake had as a young teacher. Now he was in his early thirties and he was getting tired. John was right, but he wasn’t right. Blake could teach well—if he had to. He could hold his own in a discussion.

He liked books and he could get the kids to see why he liked them. That was always the challenge, wasn't it? But he always figured he would get better and better as a regular classroom teacher. Then he would grow more confident and controlled and tighten up a bit as he got older but never really lose the magic he had as a young man. By then he would have discipline. He'd get those papers back on time. He would be prepared for conferences. He'd publish some books of poetry along the way and maybe an article in *ENGLISH JOURNAL*. Maybe he'd pick up an advanced degree. Hang out in the right places. That would be OK.

But now he was well into his thirties and he wasn't sure it was happening. The kids liked him. They even requested him. He went to meetings. He was a writer himself so he could speak with some authority. But it wasn't quite happening. He wouldn't be ready to teach a certain book. He'd get to exams late. He'd lose papers. He still had long hair from the last decade. He wore dark sport coats and he smoked. He was messy and he no longer wanted to be messy.

He could still be good. He loved sitting down with a kid who'd just started to write a paper. Blake would ask questions in such a way so the kid could see just what the paper could be. The kid would know just what to do and what not to do. This gave Blake real pleasure. And, when he had the energy, he could set up activities in class and the kids could learn right there on the spot. And word would reach the department chair who'd let him know that that was how things should be done: teach the kids to learn on their own. He would be right there setting it up, but then they would learn. It could be the most exciting thing in the world.

But he couldn't keep it up for long. And he was running out of ideas. Booze was getting in the way more and more. Maybe a special project with Ike would be a good thing. If he could get that low-life to learn on his own, he would have done something. Maybe he'd have him do a survey. He could come up with ideas and then ask questions and figure out what the answers meant. He wanted that to happen. He wanted to be that kind of teacher, not some failure like poor old Fletcher.

#### FLETCHER

Fletcher put the phone back, but this time he didn't close the drawer. He stared at the gun. It was black and solid and shiny. This wasn't the first time he had thought about killing people. Maybe that was why it was so easy to think about it now. The first time was after Martha ran off with Randy Spears. Then he had been so devastated that nothing else made sense. He thought of all the reasons not to kill them both, but they weren't convincing.

Had the chance presented itself, he would have killed Randy and maybe Martha too. He improved the chance by buying a gun and learning how to use it. He'd drive to her house at night and park nearby and wait for the chance to take aim. Maybe they would walk out of the house together all smiling and happy and maybe—just maybe—he would be in the middle of one of his rages and then he would point the gun and blow them away. But then the anger finally left and he went back to his mediocre teaching and had to admit to himself that his wife was a bully and he might be better without her.

He could even see why she would have an affair with Randy. They had worked at the same insurance company downtown. They had known each other in college and

might have married, but he went to Vietnam and she moved to Chicago and met Fletcher, who must have seemed steady and stable. Teaching wasn't the world's greatest job, but it was safe. So she married him. But pretty soon, Martha started staying downtown late. The parties at the bars in the city must have been more fun than the teacher parties at the bowling alley. She liked to drink and stay out late and he had to grade papers. Fletcher knew what was happening.

Still, he would have killed the guy. And her too. No doubt about it. He would have ended that man's life. Then the news broke that a caddy from town—a former student of his from years ago—had killed an old man at the club where he worked. He thought he was following orders of another member. It made sense. Murder could make sense. It made more sense than anything. If a caddy could kill somebody, so could he. He could make that choice.

Fletcher closed the desk drawer and thought about writing a note to Miriam. She wasn't a bully like his wife. That's why Fletcher had begun to talk with her at the restaurant. Her husband had died a while ago and she was alone running the place with her son Archie.

When Fletcher ate there, she would come by and sit down with him. How was she doing? He'd want to know. Fine, she'd say. She liked the way Fletcher taught her son. His was the only class Archie talked about. No one had said that to Fletcher—especially a parent. Miriam must have been forty, but she looked young. From a distance she was attractive. He could imagine her relaxed and beautiful. She seemed to enjoy his company. They had agreed to go to some movies and maybe a play or two. She had been an English major at Iowa State, but married young. She respected English teachers.

Then a few weeks ago, something had happened. Something horrible. They had been sitting at a table in the restaurant. It was the middle of the afternoon and no one else was there. They had just finished a cup of coffee and she was telling him about LONESOME DOVE when in walked Ike. Instead of waiting to be seated, he just walked through and took a place at the back table. Miriam jumped up, grabbed a menu from the counter and walked over. But Ike wasn't ordering. They talked for a few minutes and then Ike left. But as he stood up, he touched her on the shoulder and leaned forward to whisper something. Then she walked back and sat down at Fletcher's table.

Fletcher felt himself tighten when she sat back down next to him. "You know who that is, don't you?"

"Ike. He's been one of Archie's classmates forever."

"He sells drugs."

"He's done some bad things, but he's not as bad as he used to be."

"What were you talking about?" Fletcher sat up.

"Nothing. Ike and Archie have gone to school together forever."

"So? Ike's a criminal. He beats up people. He got a girl pregnant. He sells drugs."

"He's had problems, but he's not a bad boy."

"So, why was he here?" Fletcher had to force himself from raising his voice.

"It's about a job. But it's not really any of your business."

"I didn't like the way he touched you." Fletcher felt his heart pounding.

"He's a boy. A child. I've known him forever. What in the world is wrong with you, Fletcher?"

"I didn't like the way he touched you."

She stared and started to laugh. “Do you think we’re lovers? Do you think that this 40-year-old widow is having an affair with this school bully? You think that, don’t you?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“It is what you meant. That’s exactly what you meant. Get out of here. I’m embarrassed for you.”

That night at home he had called to apologize. She said it was OK. Not to worry. He asked when they could get together. She wasn’t sure, but not for a while. He apologized again.

The next day he wrote his brother and said he would take the job. And he moved the pistol to his desk drawer.

## JULIE

Julie couldn’t stop laughing. Armond had just told her about the kid throwing the desk out the window and she couldn’t stop laughing. He had never in his life made anyone laugh as hard as she was laughing now. He had taught English at Forest forever. He was the guy who graded papers everyday in the same desk. He was respected, but he never made anyone laugh the way this young girl was laughing. She was on the floor of the porch of her apartment. He was sitting on the swing.

“You didn’t believe me, but I knew you were funny.” She squinted up at him.

“Did you ever laugh like this when you were a basketball star?” he asked.

She ignored his question. “I just knew that little old bald guy who graded papers must have funny stories to share.”

“I thought jocks were supposed to be thick even if you’re also an English teacher.”

“Thick?”

“Slow. Stupid. Aren’t jocks supposed to be slow and stupid?”

“You should know. You’ve been at this place for more than thirty years. You must have crossed paths with gym teachers and coaches.

BLAKE

Most people steered clear of the west side of the school parking lot. This was where Ike and his friends smoked and conspired. A student walking through might be bumped hard and then challenged. And what’s he supposed to do? Fight one of these goons? And what’s a teacher supposed to do if he walks by and hears some muttering kid telling him to get fucked? Was he going to march over there and tell the grinning moron to go to the principal’s office and fill out a discipline form? No, it just made more sense to stay away from the area.

Blake would walk through here from time to time. He’d even stop to talk with some of the kids who hung out there. Sometimes he’d borrow a smoke. Was he showing off? Probably. Part of him liked the idea of looking comfortable with these kids, who—if the truth be known—weren’t the least bit dangerous. Still he enjoyed looking brave.

Ike was leaning against his green Chevy grinning. Even though it was summer, he was still wearing a leather bomber jacket and long pants. He was stocky with large forearms. A short guy, who looked more like a circus acrobat. A few years ago the gymnastics coaches had both tried to recruit him, but he wasn’t interested.

“You didn’t come out here to talk about the German, did you?” He tilted his head and looked Blake right in the eyes. He had a sharp voice that carried well.

“German? I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Blake walked up and leaned on the hood of the Chevy. It felt hot in the sun.

“I beat up a German exchange student in gym class today. He was making fun of Coach. I threw him down and threatened him.”

“Cool. I bet your boys loved that.”

“Oh yeah. All those assholes were crowding around dying for me to really hurt the kid. Archie was the only one who just stood there. He hates fighting.”

“What about Coach?”

“He ran home. He took one look at what was happening and sprinted across the parking lot and back to his grey-haired lady.”

“How’d you feel?” Blake was actually quite curious.

“Pissed. I wanted to teach that kraut a lesson. But do you know something?”

“What?” Blake moved away from the car and stood facing Ike. From there he could see through the back window into the back seat where a girl was sleeping. she had a ring in her nose.

“The German was strong, really strong. He could have beaten the shit out of me.” They stood in silence for a second until Ike spoke. “So, what’s up with you, Mr. Blake?”

“You know. It’s the incomplete. I thought you’d dropped my course, but you hadn’t. Now we’ve got to do something about it.”

“We?”

“We. If you want to graduate, you’ll have to do something.”

“Like what?”

“A special project. You’ll finish it during summer school and that’s that. You get a grade, earn the credits and be a graduate of Forest High.”

“Special project?”

“You could watch a bunch of films.”

“Or, I could do a research project.”

“You could.”

“Like one of those dumb interview projects they do in some classes. I could interview you and find out what’s really going on with ex hippies.”

“Not much. I can tell you that. You could interview the people out here. Find out why all of these guys like to follow you around.”

“I’ll stick to movies.”

“Come to school tomorrow morning and I’ll have a list for you.”

“I’ve got to be there anyway. Fletcher wants to talk to me. Do you know what’s with that guy?”

“No idea. He’s leaving. As long as I’ve known him, he’s been a sad guy. I know he doesn’t think much of me. He tried to make friends with me once, but I wasn’t interested. But I have no idea what he’d want with you. See you tomorrow.”

Ike nodded to him. He opened up the back door and reached in. Pretty soon the sleeping girl sat up and stretched. Ike reached in a pulled her out. She staggered off without saying anything to anyone. Ike climbed into his car and drove away.

Blake stood there alone. That was taken care of—maybe. Now he had more time to worry. Worry. Blake worried. He was never quite where he should be and that made

him worry. He was losing it. Even Ike could tell. The old hippy stuff just wasn't working. He knew how to talk about books. He liked kids; they liked him, but he could feel whatever he once had slipping away. And, of course, he drank. He'd already had a few today. Booze always made sense at the time. But it killed his concentration. Here he was in his old corduroy coat and his long hair in the middle of the student parking lot in the summer and he had no idea what the fuck he was going to do.

Phyllis wouldn't like it if he stopped over. She'd look up from some thick book she was reading and shake her head teacher style. Lately she had been especially put off by his drinking. "I can smell the booze from last night, Blake. Get some mouth wash." When they first started going out four years ago, she had liked his stories and his taste in movies. Middle class hippies. There were so many of them. She might be from Seattle and he might be from Grosse Point, but it was like they had always known each other. And she knew his habits too well. She knew that he didn't grade all the papers on time, that he forgot appointments. She would not be the least bit surprised by the Ike episode.

Then there was that new teacher—Julie something or other. She was good looking—a coach and an English teacher. Maybe they could shoot some hoops together. He still had that good jump shot. He could still box out and deny the flash.

She lived in one of those bungalows near school. At one time the caddy who killed the old guy lived in one of these. They were odd—not the usual houses in the town.

IKE

Ike figured he could live with Blake's idea. He wasn't a bad guy. No reason to hurt him and he did want to graduate so why not watch some films and write something about them? Nothing to worry about there.

Then there was Fletcher. What did that loser want? Ike eased his car out of the parking lot. It was a big, big car—a muscle car—and he liked the way he must have looked in it—a short stocky person behind the wheel, a cigarette dangling, an arm hanging out the window.

By now the whole school would be yakking about what he had done to the German kid. That Nazi had no business walking up behind the coach and making fun of him. He didn't know shit about the way things worked. So when Ike grabbed the kid and threw him down and told him he'd punch out his eyes, he was doing what he had to do. He was doing what was expected of him. People expected a lot from him.

Coach had run off—probably back to that scary wife of his. Archie just stood there and took it all the way he always did. But the rest of them stood in the circle and yelled for him to turn the foreign kid's face into a hamburger. They hadn't noticed the look on the German's face when he let him up. He wasn't scared at all. Ike liked that.

Ike turned onto the road to town. He passed the bungalows with porches. One of the new teachers—Julie something or other—lived in one of these places. She was this tall leggy coach who started at forest this summer. A few of his friends had her in class and actually liked her. She had balls.

She was sitting on the floor of the porch and looking up at old Armond. The two of them had spent a lot of time together this summer. People probably wondered if the old boy was humping her, but Ike figured it was more complicated than that. Ike kind of

liked Armond, even though he had never taken one of his advanced classes. With him, it seemed like things mattered. With Blake, you never quite knew what you were getting.

Then there was Fletcher. The poor sap was finally going to bolt the place and now he was calling him up—on his private cell number. Someone said his wife had run off with her old boyfriend and that finished him off. People said he'd drive over to the house where his wife had moved in with this guy and sit and glare. Then one day he stopped. He was always at school fixing up his room like it was a movie set or something. Kids made him nervous. He wasn't like this new Julie girl who just had the knack. Actually, Fletcher might be alright in a Canadian resort. Shit, he'd keep the place neat. And he could answer questions. That's what people do in places like that—they answer questions.

Now Fletcher wanted to talk.

Ike thought about Miriam a lot. She'd look at him in a way that told him she understood what he was really like. She knew all the tough guy stuff was bullshit. He liked to talk to her. She listened. There was something sexy about her. One time he even thought about making a pass; it was something about the way she looked at him. Maybe in a few years when he'd be out of school for a while—maybe then he could make some kind of a move.

Ike pulled his car into the back of the garage. Porky would be inside waiting. Porky would be glad to see Ike and Porky always paid him on time.

ARCHIE

“Were you there?” Coach’s wife had a way of staring that made Archie nervous. Maybe it was because she was supposed to be some kind of religious nut. She stood there by the register with her change still in her hand and stared right at him. Her other hand pulled back her straight gray hair. He could see now why she reminded his mother of a pioneer woman. She had eaten there alone tonight. She had come in right after Mr. Fletcher left and sat at that table in the back where she and her husband always sat. But tonight she was alone. She had ordered soup and sat reading the Bible. “Were you there when that bully attacked our exchange student? I hear it had something to do with Willis.”

Archie didn’t like this at all. Normally what he said at the register didn’t matter at all. He could talk about the Cubs or bowling and accept sympathy remarks about his dad—even though the old man had died a year ago. The point was whatever he said didn’t matter to the person who was listening. Normally he could just smile and nod. That would be enough.

But Coach’s wife was going to listen. She didn’t give him much choice. He couldn’t escape to the kitchen with his mom, who had left abruptly a few minutes ago. He couldn’t say he had to help out a waitress because no one was here. The place was empty. They were about to close up. He had no other choice but to answer Coach’s wife.

“This foreign guy was making fun of your husband. He came up behind him and did this funny walk. Ike didn’t like it and told the guy to stop. But the guy didn’t quite understand him and Ike threw him down and threatened to beat him up.”

She gazed back at him without moving. “I know that young man. His name is Hartmut. He’s a special summer exchange student sponsored by our church. It must have

been horrible for him. If he reported this to the school, that Ike could be in real trouble. I understand he's a bad fellow as it is."

"What do you think will happen?"

"Hartmut won't report him. He's too proud. Just like his parents whom I know very well. He's a very proud young man. He's a German." Then she stopped talking and did more staring until she finally spoke again. "Anyway, I thought everyone made fun of Willis, or 'Coach' as I guess you all call him."

"That's not really true," Archie said.

"Not for you, maybe, but don't the others feel that way about Willis?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that."

"Then what would you say, Archie? I'm curious. What would you say?" She moved closer. "Are you going to tell me that all the young people respect my husband and that's why this happened?"

"I like your husband and my brother did too. He's funny and friendly and he likes us. All the rest of the coaches try and act like tough guys and impress us, but your husband doesn't need to do that."

"He doesn't need to impress people. People just recognize right away that he's impressive. Is that it?"

"Look." Archie raised his voice just a little. "Your husband is a real guy. Do you understand? He's a real guy and we respect him for that."

"A real guy who needs protecting." Finally she was starting to leave. She shoved the change into her jacket pocket and started for the door, but then she stopped again.

“He’s a real guy who needs protecting. Is that it? How sad.” She left in a hurry without waiting for Archie’s answer.

Now what? Archie stood wondering. Then he walked to the door and locked it and turned down the lights. How sad, she had said, and she was probably right. Or at least that’s how it must have looked to her. How can you tell someone that her husband is a mascot?

Summer school would be over soon and then that would be it. But she would keep coming and so would other people. Maybe he should go and talk to Coach. He’d wear his Blues t-shirt. And he had to go say good-bye to Mr. Fletcher.

BLAKE

“Do you mind if I join you guys? I could hear you laughing from the street.” Blake climbed the steps to Julie’s porch and entered the small lighted area. Julie was rocking on the swing and smiling down at Armond, who was sitting on the floor with his legs almost in the lotus position. Julie gestured for Blake to pull over a porch chair. He sat and looked around. It was actually a nice porch. It was what he imagined a southern porch must be like: shady and private but with a view out into the world. This would be a good place to read or write—and drink. Maybe he should get one of these places some time.

“So what’s so funny? Teachers aren’t supposed to laugh.” Blake rarely saw Armond outside of the school. He was without a doubt the most respected teacher at Forest—the one you wanted your kid to have. He set ridiculously high standards and kept them.

But now here was the old fella in shorts and a red golf shirt on the porch of a house rented by a young teacher. “What the hell is going on? You’re not stoned, are you?”

Now Julie really laughed. For a newcomer she seemed totally at ease in this school world. “Nope, sorry. Armond’s been telling me funny stories.”

“Funny stories? Armond?”

“You don’t think I’m a funny guy?” Armond looked at him in mock horror. “Can’t a 60-year-old bachelor who frets over dangling modifiers and split infinitives be a funny guy?” Then they all laughed and Blake could see what was happening.

Julie kept talking. “I know about the boy who threw the desk out the window and the girl who copied a story word for word from Sherwood Anderson and the other girl who thought that Veteran’s Day was Veterinarian’s Day.”

“No shit?” Blake was fascinated.

“The first time I met this guy I could tell he was funny, and I was right.”

“You call Armond a ‘guy’!”

“Why not?” Armond said. “I’ve never been funny before.”

This was amazing, Blake thought. “I hope you didn’t tell any funny stories about me.”

“Not yet, but maybe I’ll think of something.”

“You could tell her about me borrowing money from students and almost getting fired. Don’t forget the time I passed out in my car or the time my old college friends visited me during the final exams.”

“No,” Armond said, “you didn’t make the cut. I do remember you reading poetry at the End Game a few summers ago. That wasn’t funny; it was good stuff.”

“You were there.”

“Most of the school was there.”

“That was fun.”

“It looked like it was fun. Have you been back?”

“I’ve been busy.” Blake did not like where this was heading. “I’m writing more prose now.” He lit up a cigarette. Amazingly, there was an ashtray on the table near him.

“You don’t drink, do you?” Julie asked abruptly. That must be her coach’s voice.

“When I feel like it.”

“How often is that?” Had it been his father talking, Blake would have lied and said every so often, but tonight on the porch with these two people he really didn’t know too well, it came out easily and honestly: “I feel like it all the time.”

“You’re a drinking guy and I’m a funny guy,” said Armond.

“Just a couple of regular guys.”

There was a pause and then Blake spoke up. “Actually, I can be a funny guy too. Let me tell you a story about Ike.”

## FLETCHER

Fletcher would miss this walk home—especially in the summer. He had to admit that he didn’t mind this town at all. It was big enough to have a few things going on and small enough to feel comfortable. The city was close by but not there.

He left by the front door and crossed the lawn right past the signs that said “Forest High School—Home of the Fighting Panthers.” A few days ago he had passed Armond and the new teacher sitting there and laughing. They said hello, of course, but they kept on laughing. Strange. They all envied Armond because he was so absorbed in teaching English. Fletcher wondered what the others were thinking about him on the lawn with this young girl laughing.

Fletcher headed down Vine Street toward his apartment. He walked by the bungalow of the new teacher and there they were again—Armond and Julie—laughing hard about something. What could be funny enough to laugh like that? What could be so funny?

Blake was up there with them too. Fletcher once overheard the department head refer to Blake as the “YFU”—Young Fuck Up. Once Fletcher tried to talk with him, but Blake didn’t seem interested in chatting with an older guy who wasn’t all that comfortable with kids. Fletcher had heard that Ike had taken Blake’s summer class last semester. He wondered how that had gone. Ike might like this guy’s easy going old fashioned happiness or he might see right through it. Ike would certainly know that Blake drank too much—way too much. He was probably downing a few cold ones right now.

Fletcher lived in the same place he had lived when he was married. He knew that the other teachers—if they thought about him at all—probably imagined him sitting home alone there at night. If he couldn’t teach or keep his wife, what kind of a social life could he have? But he actually kept himself busy. He had joined a couple of book clubs and a film club and even had some meetings here. One night people had stayed there all night arguing about “Jules and Jim.” These people, who were all teachers from other schools,

seemed to like him. They enjoyed being with people they did not see during the day. He wondered sometimes if they were failures as teachers. No one talked about teaching, so no one knew. But then one year he never bothered to get the group together and that was it.

He dropped down on his couch and thought about Canada. Was he just kidding himself? Would he be able to forget about his failure? Would he be any better joking with hunters and fishermen than he was with the kids in his class? Maybe so. These would be older people who wouldn't expect him to teach them anything. There wouldn't be a building full of people doing the job that he couldn't do. He was smart and organized. He understood the business. He liked being alone. He would enjoy being with his brother, whose wife had died recently. Yes, it was possible to imagine this might work. And maybe—just maybe—Miriam would come up. She could help run the restaurant. They could go canoeing in the morning and walk into town at night to see some old movie. Miriam had made the whole thing seem possible—until Ike.

## ARCHIE

Coach had given Archie the keys to the building a few months ago. After gym class on day, he had told Archie about this book about Robert Johnson, the great blues man. He got all excited and Archie got excited and wanted to see it right away, but Coach had to go to a funeral in Indiana with his wife and she didn't like to wait. So he just gave Archie the key and he had forgotten to return it, and now here he was at night letting himself into the school. Rocco the janitor wouldn't be around, but even if he were, it wouldn't matter. Rocco and Archie's dad had been on the same bowling team.

Archie figured that Mr. Fletcher would be inside. He would be cleaning out his room and getting ready to leave. Archie just wanted to say good bye. He wanted to tell the guy that he had been a really good teacher. Maybe the other kids didn't pay much attention, but Archie liked the stories and the poems he had them read. He could tell from Mr. Fletcher's voice that he had given up, but Archie still listened. This guy had spent half his life teaching THE GREAT GATSBY and THE SUN ALSO RISES. Why not listen to what he had to say? Mr. Fletcher liked what Archie wrote. He even stopped Archie in the hall one time to tell him that he really was doing a great job. Archie appreciated that and now he wanted to tell the guy that. He also knew that Mr. Fletcher liked his mom. They actually sat and talked about books one night after the store closed. And then he stopped coming around.

The room was stripped bare, but he could remember what it looked like during the year—things everywhere all arranged—posters and books and flowers. Even a rug. He stood by the desk in the front row. This was his spot. He sat down again. He could remember so clearly what it was like to watch Mr. Fletcher try to lead a discussion or maybe deliver a small lecture or explain a test or talk about the papers he was about to return. The man knew what he was doing. He was never late or disorganized like Mr. Blake, but he just didn't look comfortable. Sometimes Archie felt like screaming, "Look, Asshole, just say what you mean. Don't hesitate so much; don't worry so much about those low lives smirking in the back row."

But that wasn't how Fletcher did things. He must have thought he deserved the misery. And that's what Archie hated. How could an adult feel that some smirking deadbeat in the back of the class knew more than he did? At least Coach had found a

place for himself. But not poor Mr. Fletcher. Maybe this job in Canada would be good or maybe it wouldn't.

Archie stood up and walked around the room. This was strange. All those things gone. Empty walls and bookshelves. Then eh went to Mr. Fletcher's desk and sat down. He'd right him a note. He wanted to make sure Fletcher realized that he could do a great job. He pulled open the drawer and looked inside for a pen and some paper.

## COACH

On Sundays, Coach and his wife would sit in their small living room and discuss Reverend Anderson's sermon. Genevieve would ask Willis what he thought, and usually he would tell her. The reverend's messages made simple points. Forgive your enemies. Avoid temptation. Seek spiritual peace. But to make his points he would talk about television shows, African folk tales, recipes, columns from Ann Landers, recent football games. Odd subjects, but Willis could usually figure out the connection. He was a smart man when it came to matters like that—at least she thought so. During the rest of the week, the two would sit in silence in this warm little room as he read and she knitted. At 10:00 they would turn on the black and white TV that Willis had picked up at the church rummage sale and watch the news.

Tonight was Thursday. Genevieve could see her husband was reading an article from a blues magazine that was so old that he had covered it in plastic. Usually he sat in the corner in a soft brown chair next to the bookcase where he kept his other magazines. Tonight his sneakers were off and he was sitting by the window. From there, he could

look out and see the school. That's where they all call him Coach. That's where Ike beat up the German visitor.

Genevieve knew what people said about her and Willis. They lived a peacefully boring life together. He was a meek little person who had a mindless job the school had created for him. She was the one with the backbone. But way too religious.

Maybe so. Maybe she was just a little too religious. But so what? She wasn't about to apologize for her values. Everyone should have them. Her father certainly did. People like him worked and sacrificed and made a good life for their families. Her mother had these values too. When the Lord came to take her on that hot afternoon in August, she was ready to go. These values had worked well for Genevieve.

"Willis." She leaned forward and put her knitting on the floor. "We need to talk."

He looked back just a little bit startled. It was little moments like these, she thought, when he seemed so young. He looked down again briefly at the magazine and then placed it on the window sill. "I suppose you want to talk about Hartmut."

"When you came home today, you were upset. But when you told me there had been a fight, I thought that explained things. I know you hate it when the boys fight. But when I found out that Hartmut was the boy who was beaten up, I was furious. I called him right before dinner. He's adamant about me not telling the school. Any kind of help from me or another adult would be humiliating. He's strong and stubborn. A real German aristocrat. He insisted that I drop it."

Willis nodded as she spoke. When she paused, he kept nodding and added in a low voice, "I wouldn't worry about Hartmut."

“I’m not worried about Hartmut. I’m worried about you. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“You’ve always worried about me. You think I don’t always know what’s the right thing to do. You think that maybe you can help me choose, but you don’t know when or how. So you worry.”

“Today I went to the church and sat alone in a pew and thought about things. I think I know why you were upset. I’ve never seen you with that expression, but I think I understand what it meant.”

“Oh yeah?” Willis kept looking out the window.

“It’s never bothered you that the boys call you Coach and that they make fun of you in a quiet kind of way.”

“We’ve talked about this before. It’s a tradition. The boys are harmless, utterly harmless.”

“Today must have been different. It must have felt different to have Ike beat up Hartmut because of you. Something like that has never happened and it happened because of you. That must be a new feeling.”

“You’re wrong.” He stretched out his legs. Then he reached down and picked up a sneaker, stared at it briefly, and then placed it back down next to the other one. “You’re totally wrong.” He stood up, stretched. “You weren’t even there. How would you know what happened?”

“Are you going back to Forest High next year? Are you going to be Coach for one more year?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” He leaned down and picked up his sneakers, slipped them on and marched out the door.

## IKE

Ike drove slowly back to town. He didn’t want to get stopped with whatever it was Porky wanted him to give to that guy at the office downtown. Porky had quite a business. People who stole things would give them to him and he would find a market for them. And no taxes. Porky would brag to Ike as they sat in the back room of his plumbing store. Sometimes he would transport drugs. That was obvious. And once he had diamonds or jewelry that was worth a lot. Porky was excited about that. Today it was a big satchel with paper. Could it be counterfeit money? Certainly not. Maybe it was phony checks or stock or some shit that businesses worry about and make money from. Ike liked this. He had to admit he liked this. It wasn’t something dangerous like drugs. Porky had figured out that a high school with balls could move this stuff. He never told him so if Ike were caught he could be honest. He could play dumb.

## HARTMUT

Hartmut watched Archie come out of the school. He looked scared—not at all the way he had looked when he walked in there a few minutes ago. Hartmut had been following him for the past few hours and he might as well keep at it. He used to play games like this when he was growing up in Hamburg, and besides there was nothing else to do in this stupid town. Maybe Archie would notice him and they could talk. Archie was the only person—as far as he could tell—who had any character. When Hartmut was

lying on the field with Ike about to hit him, all the kids—except Archie—crowded around. Archie stood over to the side looking horrified.

Why had he ever let his family convince him to come to summer school in America anyway? Most exchange students came during the year, but he couldn't and now he was living in this horrible place. Next year he would be in a university. Uncle Heine had come to Chicago when he was a boy and the whole family seemed to think it made him a better person. So they all decided Hartmut should come to America to see how the Americans did things. And his mother knew those Lutheran church people and now here he was in this stupid town with people he had no respect for at all.

Was he a snob? Of course. Was he a German snob? Most likely. He had read enough history to know that some people mattered more than others. Great changes came from a few people. He had been taught to despise Hitler, but that man proved how one person could make huge changes. But now here he was in this place where people like Ike were in charge and where the kids didn't seem to care at all about school.

The family where he stayed was nice enough. They were good Christians who showed him respect. They tried to make him feel important. Every time he looked up they were taking him into Chicago to go to a museum or drive through a neighborhood. That was good. But he still hated this place—especially after what Ike had done to him. Could those morons imagine what he felt like after Ike threw him down and taunted him? Taunted him! All Hartmut had tried to do was joke around with that teacher they called “Coach.” All the other kids did that but when he did, Ike practically killed him. Well, Ike had better be careful. That little stupid person had better be really careful.

Hartmut didn't want Archie to see him, but he wanted to keep him in sight. He really felt like talking with him. He had heard that Archie worked at his mother's restaurant. Maybe that was why he seemed like more of a man. Maybe he would like hearing about Germany. Maybe he would like hearing what America seemed like to Hartmut.

He planned to shout out to Archie. He would tell him he had been going for a walk and happened to see him. Maybe Archie would want to take a walk with him. Maybe they could go to Archie's mom's place and have a coke. But Archie was going into a wooded area and it looked like he was reaching into his pocket for something.

## MIRIAM

Miriam sat in the soft chair in the living room. Down below Felipe and Juan were cleaning up the restaurant and getting ready to close down. Burt had always been with them—right up until he died. She could hear him coughing. Burt trusted them, but he didn't really trust them. But they understood that. He paid them well. People joked with them. So what if some gringo suspected they might steal from him.

In her lap lay the picture of the graduating class. Ike and Archie were both there, even though they wouldn't graduate until August. Ike was off to the left in the front row with the other short kids. His arms were folded across his chest and he was staring back at the camera. He was wearing a red shirt and a leather vest and boots. On his forearm was a tattoo of a scarecrow. But she could see a little smile. Others saw it as a smirk. A

screw you, school, kind of smile. I ain't playing your game kind of smile. This is the smile the school bully is supposed to wear, isn't it?

That Saturday evening he had been sitting at the counter. He enjoyed sitting with some of the working people. Then the others left and they were there alone. He said he liked being there away from the people he hung out with. He was sick of all the suck up weaklings following him around. Laughing and swearing at just the right times. He was sick of them. The only one who wasn't that way was Archie. She asked him if in some ways he liked the power. And of course he did, but not that much. She said Archie's brother had been a tough guy at Forest. One time he beat up an off duty cop. But he was a jock and a student and had a responsible girlfriend. Back then her husband was strong and could push him in certain directions. Ike wondered if that was why Archie was much more of his own man, but still liked to hang around.

She wondered about Archie. But she didn't worry about him. He would be fine. She said that being a widow was a strange thing to be. Even the word—widow—seemed odd. How would people treat her now?

Ike didn't give phony nods or frowns. He was truly interested in what the world seemed like to her at the moment. He was this kid who had beaten up people and stolen things and been to jail, but he understood what she was saying. Could they ever be lovers? What a strange thought. Not yet. But maybe later.

She missed Fletcher a little. She liked talking about books.

ARMOND

“Still have a few papers to grade,” Armond announced as he stood up and stretched. He felt invigorated after telling two long stories.

Blake stood up. “I’ve got to leave too.” He nodded down at Julie who was still sitting on the floor. Thanks for the evening. I needed something like this. And now I know Armond’s secret.”

Julie looked past him and right at Armond. “See you Monday. Meet me in the teachers’ room after classes. I’d like you to look at some of the papers my kids are writing. I think they’re not bad.”

Armond knew that Blake must be astonished that this young girl had taken over his life so effortlessly. No one could tell Armond where to go and when to be there. But here was this new teacher—this new young female teacher—calmly telling him what he’d be doing tomorrow. That wasn’t how things were done. But now they were—at least this summer. Now he had a buddy, a 30-year-old English teacher who coached and who discovered that he could tell funny stories. It was incredible that he could keep meeting her after school and in the evening and let her encourage him to be funny. It wouldn’t bother him a bit that other teachers—and even Rocco—were exchanging dirty looks. Dirty looks. He actually might like them. And, next year, with his classes, he might tell funny stories. Why couldn’t a 62-year-old guy turn into a bit of a comedian?

He and Blake walked down the porch stairs together and out to the sidewalk. At the corner, they stopped and shook hands. “You look beat, my friend,” Armond said. “Get some sleep.” Blake grinned and shrugged and walked off alone. Armond had always liked the guy. He was the closest thing Forest had to a hippy. As a young teacher, he was the right mixture of cool and smart. The kids adored him. And he was a poet and read at

open mics all over the city. He might have been a little sloppy about school rules, but everyone figured he would eventually get his act together and become more serious and responsible—a “Total Teacher” as the book said. But that wasn’t happening and now the poor guy was well into his thirties. He drank too much, and always looked unhappy. No wonder the department chairman, who never swore, called him a fuck up.

Maybe after tonight, Armond would be able to talk to him. Someone certainly should. But tonight Armond had someone else to talk to. When he saw Fletcher walk by earlier, it occurred to him that he owed him a formal good-bye. The man deserved that. God knows Fletcher had tried to be a good teacher.

Armond could see light behind the curtains at Fletcher’s. Years ago, right after his divorce, he had a Christmas party. Armond left early, but he heard that everyone got a little drunk and that Fletcher showed some old movies. People had a good time, but he never invited them back.

That was the only time Armond had been here. Now he stood at the door and pushed on the button, and in a few seconds Fletcher, wearing shorts and an old Forest High sweatshirt, opened the door. “Armond, what are you doing here? Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s just fine. I’ve had a great night. I was walking home and saw your light and thought I’d stop in.” Armond looked past him into a room full of boxes.

“It’s good to see you, Armond—even though you’re out of uniform.” He led the way to the kitchen table with two chairs facing each other. “So what do you think about summer school? This is your first time doing it, isn’t it?” He reached behind to the refrigerator and pulled out two cans of diet coke and handed one to Armond.

Armond nodded a thanks for the drink. “In some ways summer school’s easy.” He had been thinking about this. “I teach juniors who flunked out of American Lit second semester.”

“A lot of them are my former students.”

“I try to keep them busy. They need to write some papers and read some stories and show up everyday. Classes are long so they can do the work in class.” Actually it hadn’t been that easy or satisfying, but he felt so good tonight that everything he described sounded good.

“And you can keep them quiet.”

“Oh yeah. Summer’s actually a good time to teach. It’s relaxing. The building has a nice empty feel about it.” He paused and half-smiled. “You know, Fletcher, if you...”

He was about to go on, but Fletcher was suddenly leaning toward him. His eyes were bulging; his hand squeezed the can. “Let me finish for you, Armond. You were going to say that if I had taught in summer school, maybe I would have learned how to teach. Maybe I wouldn’t be leaving now in disgrace.”

“You’re not leaving in disgrace.”

“That’s exactly what it is and you all know it. I try. I’m not like Blake who just bags it. I try and I can’t do it. Now here you are taking my old bored kids and making students out of them. I bet they love you.” His voice grew louder and angrier. By the end it was practically a hiss.

Armond felt helpless. Fletcher was right. He was going to say something like that and he wouldn’t have except he felt so good tonight—so good and relaxed. The words were just coming out. Of course, Fletcher would be insulted, but Armond really meant to

compliment him. He wanted him to see that he could have been a great teacher and it might be true and it was really a compliment of sorts because he wanted Fletcher to see that he could still be a good teacher.

“Maybe—” Fletcher was now using a high mimicking voice—“Maybe I would still be here and be one of the respected teachers like you. Is it that simple? Is that why you came here? To tell me after all these years what I should have done. I would have done a better job. You might be right, but who knows. Maybe if I had taught only girls or maybe if I had taught only smart kids or maybe I if had taught in a sport shirt or maybe them I wouldn’t have been such a shitty teacher. There are lots of maybes in my life, Armond. But the bottom line is that I was a shitty teacher.” He drained his coke and flipped the can into the sink.

“That’s not true,” Armond heard himself say. “You’re the hardest working teacher I’ve ever met.”

“Thanks, you prick.”

“I didn’t come here to fight.” Armond’s voice was thin and old. He didn’t feel like a comedian anymore.

“You came here to say good-bye. I know that, Armond. I’m sorry, I guess.” Fletcher leaned back and looked past Armond out into the living room with all of the boxes. And then he looked back at Fletcher. He hadn’t shaved for a few days. The half beard made him look surprisingly rugged. Maybe this would be his look up there in Manitoba. He was big enough to wear a beard. He could even have been an athlete. Certainly he was not a bad looking fellow—actually quite youthful looking for his age and for all the unpleasantness he’d faced.

“When did you decide to pack it in?” This was not a question Armond had expected to be asking. Now he was curious.

“For the last three years. Up until then I would get off to a good start and keep moving forward until the first marking period in November, and then kind of gave out. By Christmas, the kids would be on to me and the administration would be sending me notes.”

“Your room always looked great.”

Fletcher ignored him. “Then a few years ago, I never even had a good start. By then I was alone. My wife left you know. I struggled the whole year. So this year I said to myself that if things didn’t get better, that I’d leave and I did and I can’t believe it took me this long. You can’t hide when you teach.”

“Maybe you’ll come back after a few years in the North.”

“Nope. This is it. I want to make this work. I might even be happy up there. Who knows? But no more kids. No more days with the little bastards smirking at my failures. They knew how much I prepared and they would never give me a chance to pull it off.” Fletcher’s eyes were glistening.

“Take it easy,” Armond said softly. “This won’t help.”

“And besides, I might not be going north. I’m not really sure what’s going to happen, if you want to know the truth. Now get out of here. You must have papers to grade.” He was crying.

JULIE

Julie wasn't sure how to feel. As she dumped out Blake's ashtray and got ready for bed, she kept thinking about what she had done to Armond. It was incredible. Six weeks ago she had started teaching at Forest on a fluke. She was going to go back to Ohio, but she found this teaching and coaching job. She could start in the summer and that was good. She needed the money. After the divorce, Ben had sent her checks, but she told him to forget it. He didn't have much. He owed everyone he knew money. That was part of the problem. So she was back on her own again and this place looked good. Thirty two years old and starting over.

The day she had signed on for summer school, the assistant principal had said she had a "rare opportunity" with Armond teaching summer school to "learn from the master." That first day she went right up to his table—how was she to know that no one ever approached the guy? But he talked to her. He was old and shy and cute. He certainly seemed curious about what she was doing—even her coaching. He liked her confidence. People always did. She could walk into a place and take over. She got this from her dad, the Big Coach and as of last year the Big Dead Coach. He had really been something—her dad.

They talked and Armond said something that made her laugh. He had looked at her class list and saw a name he recognized. "I knew her sister. One time in class, out of the blue, she said that she thought it was great that there was a holiday for people who took care of sick animals. She thought Veterans' Day was Veterinarians' Day." Armond and Julie both had a good laugh. She was pleased that he would notice something like this and want to share it. And it was also just a little bit mean, but that didn't seem to bother him. She decided then and there that Armond was a funny guy.

She had this odd feeling that, even though she had just met Armond, she knew him better than people who had taught with him for thirty years. “I bet you have lots of funny stories. Lots of them.” He had smiled at her and then with a shrug told several more. They were all about teaching. Usually they were about things going wrong. They were little, stupid mistakes. But they were funny. One was about a time he mixed up two stories, another time when he kept forgetting someone’s name. He told a wonderful story about an all school assembly where one of the candidates started swearing and the football coach ran on the stage and dragged the kid of kicking and screaming. He even stood up to tell this one.

Was she in love with him? Not really. But she loved these moments. They would meet after school and have a cup of coffee at the Java Express. Then they would go back to the school and sit on the lawn or they would go to her place and sit on the porch. He would tell her stories and she would listen and laugh. She might even tell a few. He found out about her teaching in Europe. She told him a little bit about Ben (“He wasn’t the least bit funny”).

She asked Armond if she should write this all down. Maybe there was a book here, but he didn’t think so. “Maybe later,” he had said, “not now.”

Did people notice? Maybe. Maybe not. It was summer and no one was around. Only a few teachers and students there either because they were hopelessly behind or hopelessly motivated. Derelicts or nerds—that’s who went to summer school.

But after tonight, she had to wonder. How could she not keep wondering? Where was this going to end? Somehow having Blake here made it easier to finally think this way. He was pleasant and responsive. She heard he was quite talented, but troubled. He

drank and probably did drugs. He wrote poetry. He could never quite get his act together. She could sense how astonished he was to see her with Armond carrying on so comfortably.

Now what? The summer would end. They would start in the fall. She had five classes plus tennis to coach. Then in winter she would have basketball. Maybe she'd get involved in the literary club. She didn't see how she could keep hanging around with Armond. It just wasn't going to work and that would be tough for both of them. But there was still a little time left. She wanted it to end well.

She had just lain down when the phone rang.

"It's me, Armond."

"Are you OK?"

"I'm not sure. I just did something horrible."

"What are you talking about?" She was on her feet.

"After I left your house, I stopped by Fletcher's apartment."

"He's the guy who's leaving."

"That guy. I stopped by to say good-bye. I was in a great mood after telling those stories. I made him mad a hurt his feelings. I never realized how much the guy hates me."

"Are you going to be alright?"

"I'll be a lot better after I see him one more time. I want to apologize. I want to say good-bye the right way."

"And you want me to come along."

"Yeah, I do. I'd like you there, Julie. I'll come by your house tomorrow a little before noon. He'll be over at the school. He's packing up to leave."

## ARCHIE

After Archie tamped down the dirt and spread some leaves, he hurried out to the sidewalk and began trotting. Eh had to talk to Fletcher now. He was leaving in a few days, and this might be the time he was going to do something. If Mr. Fletcher had a gun at work, he might have another one at home. The man was defeated and destroyed. He must have a list of people he hated. Plus, he liked Archie's mom, and Archie didn't want some angry nut with a gun storming around the restaurant.

When he got to Mr. Fletcher's apartment, old Armond Cobb was leaving. He was wearing shorts and a golf shirt, the outfit he'd been wearing this summer. During the regular year he wore a coat and tie always. He had been at Forest forever. Archie's brother had worshipped the guy.

Archie didn't think Mr. Cobb looked too good as he stood there in the sidewalk blocking the way to Mr. Fletcher's apartment. His hands were shaking and he was blinking. "Archie," he said in a voice louder than necessary. "Archie, you're not going in there, are you? It wouldn't be such a good idea. If you want to say good-bye to Mr. Fletcher, stop by his room tomorrow. He'll be there packing up his stuff. But tonight wouldn't be a good time. Believe me. This would not be a good time to say good-bye to Mr. Fletcher."

"He hasn't been drinking, has he?"

"No, it's not alcohol. He just feels pretty bad and I know he wants to be alone now. One visit was enough for him." He started walking away and Archie followed along. "He was your teacher, wasn't he?"

“For two years actually. For American Lit in my junior year and then World Lit this year. I liked the guy. He tried.”

“Did he know?” The older man’s voice was intense. He obviously wanted to hear the answer. “Did he know you felt that way?”

“I think he did, but I wanted to tell him again.”

“Did you ever try to make things better for him?”

“Once I told those assholes in the back row to give the guy a chance, but they just laughed at me. That’s not the point, is it? Either you respect the guy or you don’t. What’s the point in having people pretend to respect him?” Archie picked up the pace a little as he neared the restaurant. He muttered a goodbye and turned in. He felt terrible.

## FLETCHER

Fletcher picked up the phone. He was sure Armond was calling back to apologize one more time. He had even considered calling Armond, but not right now. He felt better. But he had to get out of this place. And he still had this business with Ike.

“Mr. Fletcher, this is Archie. Sorry to call you at home. I was going to stop in, but I decided it was too late.” Then he stopped talking.

Fletcher looked at the piles of boxes. He could see the one that had copies of the recent student papers. Why he decided to keep those he had no idea. Armond would say that it was because he wanted to teach again, but he knew otherwise. “That’s all right, Archie. I hoped to get a chance to say good-bye.” His voice sounded forceful enough—no indication that he had been crying a few minutes before.

Archie continued. "I did want to say good-bye. Things were hectic at the end of school, and even though we're both at summer school, I never see you. So anyway, good luck and all that. You're a good teacher. I know that."

"Not many would agree."

"Don't worry about them. They don't appreciate anything. I mean it."

Fletcher sat down on one of the boxes and stretched out his legs. He was stiff from all the packing. "You're nice to say it, Archie. I knew you liked the class because you always listened, but I wasn't good and you know it."

"You looked sad the last few weeks."

"That's how I felt. But now I feel better and your calling makes a difference. But believe me, getting out of this place is the right move."

Fletcher expected Archie to say good-bye now, but he didn't. "I was in your classroom at school tonight. Coach gave me some keys and I stopped in to see you one last time."

"We must have just missed each other. I was there packing up."

"I have the keys to your desk too."

"Oh?"

"I opened it up to look for a piece of paper and a pen."

"You wanted to write me a note."

"I saw the gun."

"Stupid place for it, wasn't it?"

"Why didn't you bring it home?"

"I didn't want to be alone with it."

There was a long pause. Fletcher figured Archie was calling from the restaurant—maybe from the phone on the counter, the one Miriam let everyone use. Archie spoke again. “Were you afraid you’d shoot yourself?”

“Not really. And I wasn’t going to use it. I just wanted to scare someone.”

“Well, I took it. I didn’t think anyone who feels the way you do should have a gun.”

“Where is it now?”

“In a place where you’ll never find it.”

“Good. Thanks, Archie. I’m going now. Maybe I’ll send you a card from Canada.”

“Are you going to stop by to talk to my mom?”

“Probably not. Thanks for calling, Archie. You’re a real man.” He hung up and walked to the door and went outside. He had stood right there when his wife left for good. She had a bounce in her step that night. He had gone back in the house and planned to get drunk, but he didn’t know how to do it. Tonight he felt better. Without the gun, he didn’t have to worry anymore. Now he could leave.

## BLAKE

After shaking hands with Armond, Blake had walked all the way back to his apartment but instead of downing more beer, he had grabbed some of his poetry and driven into the city. On the way down, he wondered what was happening. Did Armond’s funny stories somehow stir him up? Did he want to perform too? He hoped it was more complicated than that, but he couldn’t be sure. All he knew was what he wanted to do. He

was never sure about himself. Maybe he'd chicken out once he got down there and that would be OK.

To get into the End Game, you had to pass through a tiny coffee shop and then walk downstairs into a large dark room with low ceilings, a bar, couches and a stage at the far end where the poets read or the musicians played. The whole place reeked of smoke.

As far as Blake was concerned, the End Game was a good place to eat or to listen to poetry or to read poetry. A few years ago, he read regularly at the Open Mic. He was even featured one night with other local "Poet/Teachers." There had been an announcement in the daily bulletin at Forest, and teachers and students had driven into the city to hear him read. The poem he read that night was published in a small local magazine. He was on his way people had said, but, of course, he wasn't on his way at all. He remembered actually saying that someday soon he would have to choose between being a full time writer and teacher—as if he really had that choice. But that night it felt so right; he was so glad to have people overhearing him say that. How cool he felt!

A short girl with a ring in her nose, a pierced eyebrow and purple hair broke free from a small group of people and walked over to him. She gave him a big hug. "Blake, you look like shit."

"Thanks, Babs. You look great yourself. How's life in the land of Temps?"

"Not bad." Babs reached over into Blake's breast pocket, pulled out a pack of Marlboros and tapped one out. "I make enough to live down here in a shitty apartment. I still have my dog. Betty and I are still an item. I'm taking classes at night and I've sent

my scripts to every agent in the Western fucking hemisphere. Are you still teaching?"

She lit up the Marlboro and took a deep drag.

"Barely." There was a pause so he fake-coughed.

"I thought you were Mister Teacher out there."

"I've slipped a little. I guess I'm lazier than I thought I was." He wasn't going to tell her about Ike.

"You still like teaching, don't you?"

"I suppose."

"Are you drinking?" Babs always got to the point.

"Only when I'm awake."

"What about that teacher Phyllis. The bossy one. She never liked your drinking."

"That's about over."

"Anyone new?"

"We've got a new teacher I kind of like. She's a coach too."

"Be careful, Blake. You don't need a coach. Are you going read tonight?"

"I'm going to tell a story. It's about this old guy at our school. You'll like it."

## IKE

Ike wasn't planning on getting together with Miriam that night, but when he saw the light on in the restaurant he thought, why not? He parked the car in back and walked around to the front and tapped the glass. She was wearing a gray Forest High School sweat shirt and jeans and looked really tired. They sat at a table near the counter.

She said she was worried about Archie. He had come home earlier that night looking upset. He wouldn't tell her why. Then he had made a phone call—she thought maybe to Fletcher—and gone upstairs. That wasn't like him. He would always tell her what was bothering him. "Maybe he's scared about the future," she said. "And he should be. We don't have much money. He's got a lot of responsibility with the restaurant. He won't be going off to college like the others."

"Most of the others." Ike smiled.

"Yes, but you're different. You don't need college."

He was expecting her to cry, and if she did, he would put his arms around her and comfort her the way people do. But she didn't cry and they sat silently for a long time. He could hear the hum from the freezer and the soft cracking sound from the neon sign. Restaurants are such odd places with the lights out.

Finally he spoke. "I have \$5,000." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the envelope.

"Not from drugs I hope," she said sarcastically and pushed her hair back and sat up straight.

"No," Ike said, "not from drugs." Then he added, "That would have been last year. Now I'm into bigger and safer things."

"Ooooo," she said. "You're getting to be a big boy. You didn't have to kill anyone, did you?"

"You don't need to know how I got it, but no one got hurt."

"Then why do I need to know that you have it?"

"I might give it to you." He tapped the envelope on the table.

“Don’t act like a fool.”

“It’s for a vacation—you know, a trip to someplace fancy where you could relax. You should be able to take trips. Everyone else around here does.”

“I travel. I go to see my son and his family. I take other trips.” She got up and walked to the counter and grabbed a pack of cigarettes.

“You know what I mean—a real trip.”

“Ike, I can’t. That’s sweet, but I can’t.” She reached over and patted him on the hand. “Did your family take trips? Did they ever have that kind of money?”

“It never occurred to them.” There had been talk about a camping trip once, but nothing happened. There was an aunt in Aurora they went to visit occasionally, but that was it.

“I remember when your mom died. That finished your dad, didn’t it?”

“Not really. They didn’t like each other very much. It just meant he was gone even more.” It also meant Ike could do just about anything he wanted. He was on his own.

“Does he drink? People like that often do. He never comes to the restaurant, but I see him around town a little. He doesn’t look happy. I always figure he must be sad about all the trouble you’ve been in.”

“He’s just depressing. We never talk. When I get in trouble, he just shrugs and asks me why I bother to do stupid things. He says pretty soon I’ll be out there working and what happens now won’t matter much. He’s just waiting for it all to blow over.”

“What’s he like?”

“Vietnam vet. Bitter. Shitty job selling office supplies. But he’s honest. At least he doesn’t pretend to care about me.” He didn’t want her to start feeling sorry for him. He was sick of people asking about his family and nodding knowingly when they found out how he lived. He didn’t need that shit.

“So you were going to buy me a trip, was that it? Where would I have gone? Hawaii? Spain? New Orleans for Mardi Gras?” She was beaming. “That’s cute, Ike. I mean it. That’s really wonderful.”

“I’m just a cute fellah.”

“Fletcher doesn’t think you’re cute.” Her voice was more severe.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Remember that day you stopped in when I was sitting with him over there?” She gestured to a table next to the far wall. “He figured out we had been together.”

“How?”

“He just did.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him the truth. I also told him it wasn’t what it seemed to be—whatever I meant by that.”

Ike looked right into her eyes. “He called me earlier today. He wants to meet tomorrow at noon about something important.”

“Where?”

“On the lawn at school—right by the parking lot. He says it’s a meeting I wouldn’t want to miss.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Maybe it’s about something else.”

“Fletcher’s an angry guy. He probably wants to tell you what he thinks of you.”

“Should I listen to him?”

“It won’t hurt you. It will make him feel better. But I want to be there too.” She stood up and walked past the counter to the front door. “What time are you meeting him?”

“Noon.”

“Pick me up at 11:45.”

“People don’t give me orders.”

“Pick me up at 11:45.”

## COACH

Coach hurried down the sidewalk away from his house—away from his wife. He passed Mrs. Edgar and her collie and didn’t even stop to say hello. He didn’t wave to Fletcher walking by slowly on the other side of the street. Coach had never walked out on Genevieve before. This was never one of his choices. He might choose to put down his book on Roman history and pick up his earphones and listen to a Leadbelly tape or to grab an American heritage magazine. He might choose to take a nap or maybe—rarely—start up a conversation. He might decide to look out the window at the school and recall what had happened today or dream about what he was going to do. He had lots of choices.

But walk out? Never.

But tonight he had to. His wife was about to ask questions he really did not want to answer. When she found him alone in the kitchen shaking, she knew something sinful had happened on the soccer field. She knew it had hurt him permanently. Did she know how permanently or how deeply? Probably not. But she knew it was bad. He was close enough to the hideous memory without having her bring him even closer.

When he got to the school, he walked through the parking lot right past Ike's space. From there, he could see where the building had been added onto many times. He could even see the window of the classroom where he used to teach.

He had tried to be a teacher and he couldn't do it. It was not in his make up to gain a young person's respect. Some people like Armond and Blake could do it; others like Coach and Fletcher could not. Once his students realized he couldn't make them shut up—and it didn't take them long—that was it. His strategy was to pretend nothing bad was happening, that he was actually teaching them something. One day, he had pretended not to notice when a little blond girl named Chloe had actually smoked a joint in the back of the classroom. Twice he had looked the other way so as not to catch cheating in the back of the room. The day he was relieved of his duties, he stood by the window. To people passing by he must have looked sad. It was the happiest day of his life.

Now, instead of a classroom full of animals, he was outside with kids who harmlessly teased, but so what? People couldn't imagine how he would let himself be teased and used by the boys. But he knew what was happening so it didn't matter. It made him feel comfortable to occupy a place in the lives of the boys. At some interesting level, he mattered to them. He mattered to the school. He would be part of their memories.

And he had his private life. Private life. He loved that expression. Now he could pick up his books and listen to his records and not be distracted by those memories of kids running all over him. He had a private life. How many people could claim that?

Genevieve understood. She knew he was too weak to teach. People wondered why they ended up together, but he knew why. Nothing really mattered to her but her religion, and Coach would not get in the way of this devotion. They shared the silence together and that was enough. There was the gardening and the school and the insurance company, but they didn't really matter. What mattered were the silent moments together—he with his books and she with Jesus.

Running home in itself was not odd. That's what he would usually do if the boys fought. The head of the PE department once said, "Breaking up fights is not your job, Coach. Stick to equipment." But today after he ran home, he sat in his own kitchen with a cup of tea and thought about it. Something truly horrible had happened. A bully had humiliated an exchange student. He had thrown him down and hit him and threatened him. He had spit in his face and taunted him. He had made fun of his culture. The boys had crowded around, grinning and hooting, "beat the Kraut silly, Ike! Beat the shit out of him. Come on, do it!"

The true horror was—as he had realized in the kitchen that afternoon and as he could see even more clearly now as he sat on the lawn near where it had happened—that he had been totally responsible. He had made it happen. He had let himself be the boys' mascot and this is what it led to. How could he ever deny that? Would it ever be possible to sit in that room alone with Genevieve and squeeze out this memory?

And now? He could stay away until summer school was over and then come back next year. That was possible. The school would let him do that. But it would not feel the same. It would be different. The boys might treat him the same way. The new seniors would be allowed to tease him a little, but they wouldn't do it the same way because they hadn't been there. It would never be the same.

He looked up and saw Hartmut walking toward him.

Coach stood up. "Hartmut, what a surprise."

"The German boy stared at his feet and then looked up. "I feel like talking to someone. This has been a lonely day for me."

"Let's go get something to drink. You can tell me what you've been doing."

"I would like that." They walked together across the lawn and through the parking lot and headed toward McDonald's. Coach paid for two cokes, and they moved to a seat in the back. On the wall near them was a photograph of Ronald McDonald with a local little league team.

They talked about the cultural experiences Hartmut had been sharing with the other exchange students from the area. They had gone to the art institute, the Planetarium, and several other museums. They had dinner at the Berghoff with the German consul to Chicago. Coach had actually planned several of these trips with other committee members from the church.

Finally they talked about the fight. Hartmut was glad no one had done anything. The teacher officially in charge didn't want to bother with punishing Ike. The year was practically over anyway.

He was still upset. Coach could see that. He had no idea what the boy was really like, but he could tell that he was still furious. Genevieve kept reminding Coach that he was a German—a proud German who would not want to be humiliated. Coach had no idea if that was why or if there was something else going on. Actually, who wouldn't be traumatized by what had happened?

“I hope you don't think we're all like Ike.” It was the obvious thing to say, but he felt that he would get an answer he could work with. When he taught, that was what he liked working one on one with kids.

“No,” the German said slowly, “but you people are weak I think. It's funny how bullies like Ike make you all act weak. Isn't that supposed to be something we Germans understand? Wasn't Hitler a bully we were afraid to stand up to?”

“Maybe so, but Ike is different, believe me. We've always had a few bad kids at Forest, but he is especially bad, or people believe he is. You had some bad luck and we all feel terrible about it. We hope you can still have a good experience here in the States.” This was Coach, the church committee member talking.

“Ike doesn't know me at all. He sees me as a silly German. I wonder what he would say if he saw me with my father and his friends hunting wild boar in the forest. I wonder if he could keep up with me when I climb mountains. He is a little person, a weak little person. In my country he would be nothing. You make him big because you all are so little.”

Coach had never felt so uncomfortable with a student. He started to talk, but Hartmut went on. “I am taking this English class from Mr. Blake. He's supposed to be such a great teacher. The Dean said he was a poet. He said he was like an old hippy who

would teach me to love poetry. The man is a mess. He's never prepared. He smells of beer." He paused and drank the rest of his coke and looked disgustedly at the picture of Ronald and the kids. "Where I live, something like this would not have happened. If it did, something bad would happen to the bully."

Finally Coach spoke. "Hartmut, why did you come here? This has to be a horrible experience for you."

"Do you really want to know?"

"Of course."

"I'm sick."

"How sick?"

"My doctors think I'm dying. It's a blood disease that has killed off several others in my family.

"That makes it seem even dumber for you to come."

"It does, but my family wanted me to come. It's the church. You Americans still go to church. My people thought it would be good I guess for me to be around religious people."

"It makes sense I guess."

IKE

Ike pulled his car into the lot and parked in the usual spot. He flipped his cigarette out the window and touched Miriam on the knee. Fletcher was sitting by himself in the middle of the lawn. Next to him were the cardboard boxes—probably stuff he had packed up from his classroom. He was wearing a faded blue sweatshirt and his hair was messed

up. Ike was glad they would be talking here outside the building. Classrooms always made Ike feel claustrophobic. In the summer a classroom would be really dreary—especially with all the stuff taken out. He looked over at Miriam. “You sure you want to do this?”

She opened the car door and stepped out. “He wants to find out about us. I should tell him. I want to be here. Why not do the right thing?” She started off by herself across the lawn.

Ike caught up with her. “You think I need protection?”

Miriam didn’t answer.

Fletcher half stood up as they approached. He looked tired, but oddly not as surprised as Ike thought he would be to see Miriam with Ike. They all mumbled something and then sat down and before anyone said anything—even a hello—Miriam reached over and grabbed a box labeled “AMERICAN LIT” and pulled it next to her, and began taking out books and reading titles aloud. “*BILLY BUDD*,” “*DEATH OF A SALESMAN*,” “*HUCK FINN*,” “*BEST AMERICAN STORIES*.” She carefully removed a poster and unfolded it. It was orange and had a picture of James Baldwin. “You’ve got a lot of stuff, don’t you, Fletcher?”

“Too much.” He looked down at his hands.

“You’re going to keep it, aren’t you? You’re not going to throw it away?”

“No, I’ll store these boxes with the rest of my things. But I doubt if I’ll use them again. Why would I?” He stopped talking and looked over at Ike. His eyes were bloodshot. And his hands were shaking. “So why did you bring her along? I thought we were going to meet alone.”

“Her idea.” Ike felt them both staring at him. This was not a feeling he was used to.

“Fletcher,” Miriam started to speak. “We know why you wanted to see Ike. It would be wrong for me to let him come here by himself.”

Fletcher cleared his throat and began putting the books back in the box. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Well I am here and you should know this, Fletcher. Ike and I were never lovers—in spite of what you suspected. We were never lovers.”

“I saw that look on your face when you were talking with him in the restaurant. I saw the way you touched him.”

“We never did anything, Fletcher. Believe me, Ike is a boy. He’s a friend of Archie’s.”

“But you thought about it. If you had a chance, you would have gone off in the back room and let that little creep screw you.”

“Is that all that matters? That I thought about it?”

“You wanted to fuck this kid. And you probably will someday.”

Ike spoke. “Don’t talk to her that way, asshole.” He felt like smashing his fist into Fletcher’s mouth to stop the words coming out. “Stop fucking talking that way!”

“Are you standing up for your woman, Ike? Is that what you’re going to do? Well, let me tell you something. I have a gun. I was going to terrify you with it. I was going to put images in your mind that would last forever. I was going to stick the gun in your ear and tell you what I thought about you and Miriam and that I would love to blow away that little pea brain of yours. You can’t imagine how much I thought about that.”

“Fletcher, for God’s sake,” Miriam pleaded. “Just be quiet. It’s over. You’re about to leave. Let’s just drop it. Nothing happened.”

Ike looked up and into the parking lot pulled Blake. Then he remembered: the special project. Blake’s probably had a beer or two; he’ll just barge in and try to take care of matters as fast as he can. He won’t bother to see that other things are going on. And sure enough, Blake was walking straight toward them. He was smoking, of course, and wearing that vacant look.

## ARCHIE

Archie walked out of the building and looked across the school lawn. A few minutes before, he had found Mr. Fletcher’s room cleared out, and he figured he’d missed him again, but now there he was sitting on the lawn. Ike was with him and so was Archie’s mom. What a weird threesome! He knew that she and Fletcher had seemed to like each other. They used to talk about books at the restaurant. Of course, she’d want to say good-bye too. Maybe everyone wanted to say good-bye to Mr. Fletcher. Even Ike.

Archie wanted to say good bye too. Last night’s phone call wasn’t enough. He wanted to tell the man to his face that he liked his teaching. He shouldn’t have let Mr. Cobb talk him out of going into the apartment last night. If Fletcher didn’t want him to come in, that was fine, but he should have found out for himself.

Halfway across the lawn, he saw some more people all heading for Fletcher’s group. There was Mr. Blake, looking out of it as usual. Why would he want to say good-bye? Behind him were Mr. Cobb and that new teacher. They had come from across the field—probably from her bungalow. He wondered if the old man realized how odd it

must look for him to be hanging around with that girl all summer. He was good guy and great teacher, but still...

Archie reached the group about the same time as Armond, Julie, and Blake did. Then, as if the whole thing were planned, they sat down.

#### FLETCHER

Fletcher felt numb. He just told Ike what he thought of him and it didn't matter. His words hadn't changed anything. Maybe the gun would have made a difference. Last night Fletcher had let Armond have it, but here he was in those stupid shorts and golf shirt. And that new teacher—the tall girl—was tagging along. What did she have to do with anything?

At least Archie was there.

#### ARMOND

Armond knew he should be the one to talk. He was the oldest. People respected him. He should be able to say what they all felt. After seeing Fletcher last night, he knew how important this was for all of them. "Fletcher, I know I'm not alone in saying that we wish you the best of luck." He stopped and stared off at the school buses in the far parking lot. He could do better than that. "We can't stop you from feeling the way you do, but still. I'll always think of you as the man who took his work seriously. This is the truth, Fletcher. People respected you for the right reason." That was better.

Just when Armond was going to say more, Archie broke in, and he actually stood up. "Mr. Fletcher, you were OK. You knew how to talk about this stuff. You just had kids

that wouldn't listen. That wasn't your fault. Others listened too. They just didn't want to admit it. When you're up there in Canada, try to remember that. All right? Try to remember that." That was OK Armond thought. Maybe Fletcher would remember it.

Finally Ike stood up. My God, was he going to speak too? Armond had always wondered about kids like Ike. What would happen to him? Did people like him just disappear? Why would he possibly want to talk now?

#### HARTMUT

Hartmut stood in the little wooded area next to the school and raised the binoculars to his eyes. They were all together in a group—Fletcher and the rest of the teachers. Only Coach wasn't there, but that stupid little bully was. And now he was standing up. A good target. Hartmut raised Fletcher's revolver and took careful aim.