

THE LOOK

Jeremy couldn't deny the facts. Sam should have known better. A life-long teacher like Sam should know enough to avoid too much contact with students. But that's what he was doing – not in a grossly obvious way, but in a way that was bound to get worse. And Jeremy, as department chair and assistant headmaster, would be expected to say something. After all, he was the boss. The trouble was he didn't feel like the boss. Tough New Yorkers like Sam didn't really have bosses.

Before coming to St. Michael's two months ago, Sam had taught for twenty-two years at an accelerated New York public high school. He taught smart kids during the day and dangerous kids after school. In the summer he worked in the juvenile detention center in Queens. He had counseled wards of the state and refereed midnight basketball games in the projects. He was active in the Union and been arrested for illegal parking.

Jeremy had read his application, so he knew all about Sam before he interviewed him for the job. As he expected, Sam had turned out to be dark and intense. He had a thick voice, piercing eyes, and broad gestures. He was calm and confident. But he was not overbearing and certainly not bullying. Within minutes, he convinced Jeremy that St. Michael's would be just the place for him. He wasn't burned out. He wasn't escaping. If anything, he had more energy than ever. Sure these kids are privileged, but so what? They're still kids. It's especially important that they get a well-rounded education “since they'll be running things.”

That had sat in Jeremy's office surrounded by books. Sunlight and spring air streamed in through the fingers of ivy that covered the windows. At one point, Sam had leaned towards Jeremy and grabbed his forearm. “I want to concentrate on teaching –

pure and simple. No distractions. I know I can be happy here. I like your old brick buildings, the rolling land, the woods, the smell of the earth. I like teachers living in cottages and being called Masters. I like the horses, and the chapel.”

“You like the chapel?” Jeremy was surprised.

“I love the chapel.”

“You’re religious then?”

“No, but I like religious people – like you.”

“Actually,” Jeremy said, “I’m not very religious, even though I’ve been here forever.”

Well,” Sam said, “Then you must love the place. It must be your religion.”

“I’m happy here if that’s what you mean. It’s been a good place for me.” This was especially true now that he was both a teacher and an administrator.

The subject returned to Sam, who explained that as a bachelor, he could afford to live on a private school salary. He might even do some writing. Who knows? This might be the beginning of a great writing career. He fully expected to stay in Virginia for the rest of his teaching life. He could pop up to the Big Apple if he needed to, but this secluded little Episcopal school would suit him just fine.

The headmaster at St. Michael’s, the Reverend Edward Murray, had advertised the opening in the *Times*. It was no secret he had been seeking a radical city person to fill the opening in the history department. He figured this little exclusive Christian academy in the middle of Virginia horse country needed a dash of New York liberalism. “We could really use a Jew.”

When Jeremy showed the headmaster Sam's application, he was ecstatic. "This is the man for us, Jeremy. Pity he's not Jewish, but he'll certainly do."

Some people thought it was totally out of character for the headmaster to take such a liberal position. Others thought it was one more sign that the old boy was slipping further into senility. A few even saw this as the real Edward Murray, who now as he approached retirement, could speak his mind. How wonderful to discover that the little jolly fellow with the black suit and incomprehensible sermons was actually a radical in disguise.

Jeremy had no opinion about the headmaster's motives, but he took his not so subtle urgings seriously. He had no desire to clash with the man in charge. Only if Sam were totally unqualified would he think about turning him down. But he was – in fact – ridiculously qualified. Jeremy liked what he had heard at the interview and liked even more what he had read in the recommendations, which spoke of a sensitive and forceful teacher who cared deeply about his students. Sam was, according to his principal, "the real deal."

The year began well with Sam teaching AP U.S. History and three other social studies classes. He took over as assistant soccer coach and helped out with the literary magazine. He arranged to take his students to New York in the spring to find out what city schools were like. He attended chapel, where he boomed out the hymns in a rich baritone voice. Next month he would deliver a guest sermon. "Not bad for a Catholic," more than one teacher had joked to Jeremy.

Best of all, Sam had proved to be a good guy. He joked with the other teachers, almost all of who were younger. He worked hard but didn't try to show anyone up. He

asked good questions and listened to the answers. At the same time he was clearly a city guy – an outsider in this safe terrain.

Now Jeremy could really relax. Last year, because of Marvin Evans, he couldn't relax. Evans was a first year history teacher who could not teach. He did not know his material. He did not like kids. His classes were out of control. Jeremy almost let him go at the end of the first semester, but gave the belligerent Evans one more chance. He shouldn't have kept him. By spring, he was meeting daily with disgruntled students. His voice mail and e-mail messages were crowded with furious messages from parents. The experience had been so awful for Jeremy that he and his wife, who taught French at St. Michaels, considered early retirement. In the end they decided to stay on, but it wasn't until Sam came along that he could relax. Now he could sleep a little later and read the paper and attend conferences in Philadelphia. His wife could go ahead and plan that trip to Paris. Thank goodness for Sam.

The headmaster visited one of Sam's classes and announced the next day at a staff meeting that St. Michael's had moved into the modern world. After that, as he had for the last few years, the good reverend disappeared into his cottage to read mysteries and nap. From time to time he would pop out for an occasional sermon. And on the first Sunday of the month seniors would stop by for a tea. But that was it. Usually the old guy was not around. And that meant that Jeremy and the other department chairs could run the show.

One evening in October Jeremy was strolling back to his cottage. He had spent the day teaching his only two classes, grading a few papers, and negotiating with Butch, a local handyman who was going to patch up the fence around the tennis courts. How good it felt not to have to hurry. He didn't have a stack of papers waiting for him. He didn't

have outraged parents to call. He could sit and read and listen to music with Helen. Maybe he would even watch Monday Night Football. He was crossing the Commons past the statue of Osgood Pruitt, one of the founders of the school, when he saw two figures striding up the sidewalk. Because his eyes were not great and because it was getting dark, he could not see perfectly but he could make out a stocky, swarthy person and a younger boy. The swarthy one turned out to be Sam. Walking right next to him carrying his blue blazer on his shoulder was student named Roger Hastings. Of course there was nothing wrong with their walking together. After all, Roger was one of Sam's AP students. But they were a little too close and smiling more than necessary and their laughter seemed too loose and somehow a little dirty. When they passed, they nodded but didn't stop to chat. They were in their own world. Jeremy wasn't positive that they really saw him.

Roger, whose father was a graduate of St. Michaels, had been at the school for seven years. Jeremy had taught him as a sophomore. He was clever. He did most of his work well enough to earn a B, but Jeremy never quite liked him – probably because he never seemed to have much respect for Jeremy. He would sit in the back of the classroom muttering and yawning.

He was a handsome young man with straight blond hair and sharp features. It was hard to imagine anyone looking more like a prep schooler. Indeed, he was one of the three boys on the cover of this years St. Michael's brochure. In the picture, the three of them – with Roger in the middle and the chapel in the background – were standing together on the lawn in their blue blazers. Each was smiling in a restrained, patrician way, although Jeremy was sure Roger was about to smirk.

Jeremy went home that night and sat by the fire and worried. He said nothing to Helen, who would accuse him of making something out of nothing. He decided instead to watch Sam carefully. Two days later, at a soccer match against Brayson Prep, Jeremy spotted Sam and Roger standing together. Towards the end of the game with the action building, he moved behind them to get a better look and saw Sam grab Roger's hand. Just for a second. A small second. Then he released it.

The next day, he saw them sitting together in chapel. And two days after that, Roger was wearing Sam's Yankee jacket while he and his friends played Frisbee down by the stables. Sam lived in a cottage right near Roger's dorm. It would be the easiest thing in the world for them to get together at night in the woods. And what if that were to happen? And what if people found out? The next week Jeremy saw them together several more times. It would only be a matter of time until others started to notice.

That night Jeremy took a long walk and ended up at Tina's Inn, a little place near the campus. Tina's had been a favorite of St. Michael students for generations. It was plain and unpretentious – a place the prep school kids liked to remember. The yearbook signature page usually included references to “those great talks we had at Tina's.”

He ordered a ham sandwich and an iced tea and thought about Sam and Roger and all the reasons why he should forget the whole thing. For starters, there was nothing wrong with the two of them walking together – even at night and even if they were a little too close to each other. So what? Maybe it was odd that Sam had grabbed Roger's hand at the game, but there could be an explanation. Maybe there was some kind of running joke. Who cares? And why shouldn't they sit together in chapel?

The evidence was sketchy at best and his own motives made the case seem even weaker. It was no lie he disliked Roger. How can you like someone who mutters in class when you turn your back and smirks when you address him? And the fact that he's a millionaire makes him even harder to like. And, if the truth were known, Jeremy didn't feel especially comfortable around Sam. Sam was too aggressive for his taste. Too dark and too threatening. He acted restrained, but Jeremy could imagine what he would be like angry.

And maybe Jeremy was jealous of Sam. Maybe he was looking for an opportunity to move up in the school. Maybe he wanted to act decisively with this issue. Most people agreed that last year he had waited too long to deal with the incompetent Evans.

Yes, Jeremy was within his rights to forget the whole thing. He could forget spying and return to work. He had classes to teach, field trips to plan, letters of recommendation to write. He and Helen had to decide about next year and the years that followed. Married late and childless, they needed to travel.

But then he thought again of the look and he knew he had to do something. The look was finally what mattered.

A few days ago, after chapel, Jeremy found himself in a group of students and teachers walking slowly up to the dining hall. The service that day had featured a particularly incoherent sermon from the headmaster. Ahead of him walked Roger and some of the other seniors. One of the boys appeared to be doing an impersonation of the headmaster. The others roared while the boy flailed his arms and looked up to the sky.

At the top of the hill standing alone by the main hall stood Sam, who had evidently missed chapel that day. His arms were folded across his chest and he was

scowling. All the seniors walked on by him except for Roger who walked over to Sam. The two talked briefly, and then Roger moved on, but he then stopped and looked back. By now Jeremy had caught up, and he had the perfect view of the two of them gazing back at each other. To Jeremy this look – this tender, consuming look – could mean only one thing.

He had to act. Nothing good could come out of this. Something like this could bring down the school. When word got out the story would be told all over because it would be too good a story to forget. He never thought of himself as a die hard St. Michael's person, but the thought of the school ending and all these lives changing was more than he could bear. And, of course, there was the law which said knowing and not telling is a crime.

Sam lived in one of the oldest bungalows on campus. It was small and dark with a porch in front. Inside was nothing more than two rooms and a kitchen. Quite charming and quite chilly according to others who had lived there. Through the years a series of teachers had called this place home but for only as long as necessary. They would move out when a larger and warmer place became available even if the place were not so convenient.

“Not exactly the south Bronx, is it Jeremy?” Sam was sitting in an old leather chair with his leg hanging over the side reading some student papers. A bookcase was next to him along with an open bottle of beer. The room smelled of cigarette smoke.”What’s up, Chief?” He nodded for Jeremy to sit down on an old couch by the window.

“We need to talk, Sam.”

“Before we get started, I should let you know that I’m really impressed with the way the kids here write. They know how to assert themselves and back up what they say. I like that. It’s not that easy to do.”

“That’s good to hear. The last thing we want is for our boys to write mindless reports. But I want to talk about something else.”

“Let me guess,” he smiled, “Some of the tight assed parents are complaining about me, and school might be losing its nerve.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a political guy. I talk about social justice. I’m going to take them to the big city to see how other people live. People say they like me. You like me. I know that Reverend likes it, but I’m guessing that some parents are starting to suspect me.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“Don’t be so sure. You’ve got a lot of conservative people out there paying heaps of old money to keep this place going. Do they really like some city guy like me influencing their kids?”

“Your teaching is first rate. Everyone is pleased. We wanted someone with your experience. Give our parents some credit.”

“Then what is it?” And for the first time, he looked a little worried.

Jeremy knew he was nervous because he could hear the sound of his voice. “It’s you and Roger. Some of us think you’re seeing too much of each other. Sam, it doesn’t look good. I’m doing this for your sake.”

Sam reached down for the bottle of beer. He took a long swig and put it back down on the faded rug. “Are lots of people saying this? The headmaster? The kids? Your

wife? The other teachers? Have I become the talk of the school? Sam the pedophile?” He was getting angry now. His words were feeding off of each other. And he soon could be on his feet.

Before coming here for the showdown, Jeremy had rehearsed all this in his mind and had an answer prepared. “I’ve come because people are not talking – yet. I’ve mentioned this to no one, but I’ve noticed things over and over. I’m not a suspicious sort of person, but you two are always together.”

“You’ve made a study?”

“I can’t deny what my eyes have seen.”

“You’re afraid of my politics. You’re a little weenie prep school master and I scare the shit out of you and this is a good way to get rid of me.”

Jeremy tried to say more, but Sam interrupted him. By now he was standing up and bouncing his finger on Jeremy’s sweaty forehead. “Do you realize what I could do to this school? I could sue you scum bags and you would pay through the nose. I have done nothing with Roger. You have accused me of things I have not done. I could go to the police or get a lawyer and you – my wimpy friend – would be in deep shit.” Jeremy could feel his hands sweat and his heart pounded. He had a weird pain under his scalp. His throat was tight and his back itched. All the while Sam glared and shook his head with a rueful smile on his face. “Now get the fuck out of here. I’ll pretend you never stopped in.”

Jeremy stood outside and stared back at Sam’s cottage. Never in his life had he been shouted at like this. The man had tried to humiliate him. As he started walking back, he realized he had left his coat on the couch. Better to leave it there he decided.

Helen was grading papers by the fireplace when Jeremy got back to their cottage.
“Are you OK? You look worried and frazzled.”

“I’m just tired. I might be getting that cold that everyone seems to have.”

“Well, get some rest. We don’t want a repeat of last year.”

No repeat of last year.” he said as he dropped down into his chair on the other side of the fireplace. He picked up a *New Yorker*, but instead of reading it, he stared at the cover and thought. Too late to tell Helen now. She would be furious that he hadn’t mentioned Sam and Roger the moment he became suspicious. She would have wanted him to call the headmaster. She would not have liked his snooping. And she would not have let him confront Sam. So now what? He could call Murray, who would support him, but a meeting with Sam would be a repeat of the tirade.

He had no choice but to do nothing and suddenly he felt good. He put the *New Yorker* back on the table and went off to bed where he slept quite comfortably.

Right after lunch the next day, Jeremy walked over to the tennis courts to discuss the repair job with Butch. On the way back, he saw Sam and Roger heading towards Tomkins Hall, where Sam taught his AP class. Jeremy had plenty of time to cut across the lawn and avoid them but instead he kept walking. When they passed he nodded and smiled. They both looked down and kept walking.

That afternoon, Jeremy found a note in his mailbox.

“I’ve returned your coat to the closet in the teachers’ room. Check the pocket.”

That evening he stopped by and picked up the coat. It was his old corduroy sport coat – his favorite coat of all. A letter was in the breast pocket, and there was just enough light for Jeremy to read it.

Jeremy,

Forgive my explosion last night. No one deserves to be yelled at like that. I have decided to leave St. Michael's. I won't thank you for what you did that night, but I will thank you for hiring me. For the rest of the year, I'll be working at a YMCA in Staten Island. After that? Who knows?

He signed it simply "S."

Two days later a retired professor who lived in the area agreed to take over Sam's classes. A week later Roger dropped out of school and moved to New York City. He would finish up at the Stuyvesant School. The faculty learned about the news indirectly. Most felt that Sam simply did not fit in. He tried, but he missed the challenges of the city. Jeremy told no one – not even Helen – about the possible affair with Roger. In chapel the headmaster explained to the students what had happened but no one understood him. Privately he said that the trouble was that Sam was not a Jew.

Later in the year, one of the other teachers received a note from Sam. The note said that he had quit because Jeremy had made unfair charges. He could no longer work with "that man." He had no intention of suing the school, but just wanted people to know whose fault it was that he had quit.

"Is it true?" his wife asked a few days later as they were walking back from the tennis courts.

"Not at all."

"Are you surprised he wrote this?"

"Not really; he had to do something."

"Are you mad?"

"You mean angry?"

“Yes, are you angry?”

“Should I be?”