

The English Teacher

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*How does it feel? To be on your own... I turn up Fieldstone then onto East Street. Like a complete unknown...like a rolling stone... I pull into the high school's parking lot, and turn off the ignition. Dylan shuts up. So does his harmonica. (Do you know I once listened to that song for two hours straight, man was I stoned. I musta been.) I sit in my car, and prepare myself for the passing through. Each time I open the school doors and step onto the other side, a wave of culture shock hits me. I am a foreigner.*

But pass through I will. I am the English Teacher.

Shit I'm on time for "O Canada" again. First time I sat through it in a classroom I got called down to the office. Naughty. "You aren't setting an example for the students." Damn right I'm not. I'll be no model of hypocrisy. 'The true north strong and free' – right. 'I'll stand on guard for thee'? I will not, I'm pacifist. 'With glowing hearts –' "You don't have to sing it, just stand for it, it is our national anthem." Nationalism is an infantile disease, I footnoted Einstein. (It was Einstein who said that wasn't it? Who said that?) I was dismissed. No detention.

And then the Lord's Prayer. Oh god. I stand and look out the window at the garbage in the wind, so they don't see the derision on my face. Quote for tomorrow's writing exercise: Religion is the opiate of the masses. (Marx?)

Then the announcements come on. I don't put in any announcements. I tried once, at the beginning of the year, but they censored it, can you believe it? It was to start a debating club, the Forum, and it read something like 'Does God exist? Should you burn your draft card? Is capitalism good? Is abortion murder? Should attendance be compulsory? If you're interested in issues like these, come out to Room 304 at 3:05 for the very first meeting of LCI's new club, the Forum.' They read, instead, 'A new club for debating will meet today after school in Room 304.' Too controversial, they said. I mean what the fuck. What about the spirit of education – freedom of – I don't understand.

Morning rituals over, it's time for class. I stare for a few moments at the rows of faces before a vague notion of habit moves me. I go towards the filing cabinet but then stop. Suddenly conscious, I remember my self. The smartass sixteen year old in the fourth row sees my dawning incomprehension and says "What's wrong?" He'd love to see me stoned in class but I never come to class stoned, I call in healthy and don't come to class at all. (Actually that hasn't happened yet, but I can hardly wait, to hear the department head's response.) Shall I be honest and open with my students? Shall I say I don't know what the fuck I'm doing here? I tell him "nothing" and open the drawer. The seizure has passed, Lethe rushes on.

I get the marked essays out of the cabinet. Ah yes, marking. Pick a number, any number, to represent the quality of this piece. I hand them back and allow a few minutes for insults and complaints. One guy comes up and says, "Why did I only get a 64% and

she got 66%?" Right. Account for that 2% difference on a ten page essay read two nights ago after 25 and before 30 others. "You used a semi-colon incorrectly twice and she used it incorrectly only once." He believed me. He went back to his desk. I laughed. My god – I laughed.

I carry on with English class. Vivisection becomes dissection with the instruments of an *a posteriori* black bag. [ mean what writer is conscious of the plot pattern of rising action, climax, and resolution, the four techniques of building suspense, and the three differences between direct and indirect characterization? Is that the essence of the study of literature? Class dismissed. No detentions.

What the fuck am I doing here? I who disdain and mock the public am now its servant. Ah and here comes one of the masters now. Now I'm not against parents. I even called each one, yes each one, in September to introduce myself and open the lines. But when they come in and demand "Susie got 70s last year and she's failing your course this year why?"—I mean, what to say? Well she musta got really dumb over the summer? Or she had an asshole teacher last year who didn't know the difference between the Petrarchan sonnet and the Spenserian sonnet? (I mean I don't know the difference either but what the fuck.) Or having successfully manoeuvred herself through puberty she is no longer interested in dangling participles? Or well she's into drugs now didn't you notice? I tell the mother I don't know and dismiss her. No detention.

Susie by the way isn't the only student who is failing. So are John, Shirley, Mick, Rob, Paul, Marie... The failure rate of my classes last term was 45%. I got called down to the office for that too. Apparently it's supposed to be no higher than 20%. "Justify your figures," he says. Well, I said, twenty-nine of the thirty-six students who failed did not hand in at least ten of the twenty required assignments and tests. As well, all failing students were absent at least fifteen days during the term, that's three weeks of missed school. "Well we can't have a failure of 45%, that's too high." Oh. "Perhaps you could raise all the marks by 15%, would that bring the rate down?" Yes, it would. "Fine then." (What language are you using?) It would also give six students a mark of 105% or better. "Qh no, that's too high. We can't have that. The computers can only handle two digits." Oh. (What language did you say you were using?) I was sent back to my room. Number 304.

I teach wearing my jeans, a shirt, and my hiking boots. (I could tell you what kind of socks too but it might not matter. I'm not sure anymore. What matters.) My attire seems to pose a problem. I was called down to the office, this was in September, and I was told that I'm to "Set an example by dressing properly." What's improper about my clothes? "Well maybe inappropriate is the word." What's inappropriate about my clothes, they don't seem to hinder my ability to teach, I don't suddenly forget the material when I put on my jeans, my evaluation standards don't decline if I have jeans on— "Well there is an accepted convention regarding dress for teachers." Is an Accepted Convention kinda like a Commandment? Or are you saying its mandatory for staff to wear uniforms? Why?

A teacher in this department, they still talk about it, confessed to me the other day that he was very grateful for his suitcoat and tie during his first years of teaching because they gave him the authority and respect he needed to control the class. So that is why. I thought so. I told him every day you wear your suitcoat and tie you're teaching the

students it's what's outside that counts and you thereby discourage them from looking beyond the facades, from reasoning; you perpetuate the mentality of evaluation on the basis of appearance, of 'You are what you look like', of 'judge a book by –' it's funny, my dog acts on much the same basis: response patterned by sensory stimuli. He didn't understand me.

I mean I could wear a suitcoat and tie too but then they'd all wonder if I really was a lesbian, and then I'd have to shave my legs pierce my ears pluck my brows curl my hair paint my face and varnish my nails to prove to than I'm normal, after all.

On hall duty. Someone has spray painted "John sucks Arnie" on the ceiling by the door to the outside smoking area. Every student coming in either tsks or laughs. I don't understand, when I read it I just thought so what. I mean I suck Pat but who the hell cares?

After my last class I got called down to the office again. They sure do show an interest in me, I told them that and added an apology for my inability to return the compliment. They almost dismissed me then, but remembered I was there to account for my truancy during the last two days of the exam schedule, I told him (him, they, synonyms here, see I am too learning) that I was not scheduled for any supervision on either day and as all my exams were graded, marks slated, and the first month of third term prepped, I couldn't justify driving half an hour each way to spend six hours in the smokey staff room picking my nose. He couldn't justify it either but I had violated the Board's rule and that was a no-no, oh dear.

One last check in my mailbox before I leave for the day. Item. The written report of an evaluation by one of my superiors who sat in during one of my classes last week. Could I please sign each copy and return all but one. Observations: The class began at 10:31 a.m. A few students came in late, one as late as 10:37 a.m. Many of the students were sitting towards the rear of the classroom, fourteen of nineteen. Attendance was taken by the teacher. A definite homework assignment was not given. The class was generally well-behaved. Wow. I mean what observation skills! The implications of this man's priorities, his understanding of hat education is all about – Content is irrelevant, I see. We may have been discussing the function of the cilia in two-toed paramecium on rainy days in February. However, we were discussing a story's theme – the desperate extents to which being an alien can drive one. The character in the story, able to understand and be understood by no one, starts talking to dandelions, and then kills himself.