

When the teacher manhandled him, we all wanted to run away, but instead we stared and felt shamed. Robert, Adele, Yolanda shamed; Danny, Alfonso, Brenda shamed; Nash, Margie, Rocha shamed. We all watched him flop about as Mr. Koligian shook and grew red from anger. We knew his house and, for some, it was the same one to walk home to: The broken mother, the indifferent walls, the refrigerator's glare which fed the people no one wanted.

Summer School

The summer before I entered sixth grade I decided to go to summer school. I had never gone, and it was either school or mope around the house with a tumbler of Kool-Aid and watch TV, flipping the channels from exercise programs to soap operas to game shows until something looked right.

My sister decided to go to summer school too, so the two of us hopped onto our bikes and rode off to Heaton Elementary, which was three miles away, and asked around until we were pointed to the right rooms. I ran off without saying good-bye to Debra.

These were the home rooms where the teachers would check roll, announce bulletins, and read us a story before we dashed off to other classes. That morning I came in breathing hard, smiling a set of teeth that were fit for an adult, and took a seat behind a fat kid named Yodelman so I couldn't be seen.

The teacher, whose name is forgotten, told us that summer school classes were all electives—that we could choose anything we wanted. She had written them on the blackboard, and from her list I chose science, history, German, and square dancing.

Little John, a friend from our street, sat across the room. I had not seen him at first, which miffed him because he thought I was playing stuck-up for some reason,

and so he threw an acorn at me that bounced harmlessly off Yodelman's shoulder. Yodelman turned his head slowly, turtle-like, blinked his small dull eyes, and then turned his head back to the teacher who was telling us that we had to fill out cards. She had two monitors pass out pencils, and we hovered and strained over the card: Date of birth, address, grade, career goals. At the last one I thought for the longest time, pencil poised and somewhat worried, before I raised my hand to ask the teacher how to spell paleontology. Surprised, as if someone had presented her flowers, she opened her mouth, searched the ceiling with her eyes, and gave it a stab: p-a-y-e-n-t-o-l-o-g-y. I wrote it in uneven capitals and then wrote "bone collector" in the margin.

Little John glared at me, made a fist, and wet his lips. When class was dismissed he punched me softly in the arm and together the two of us walked out of class talking loudly, happy that we were together.

While Little John went to typing I went to science class. The teacher stood before us in a white shirt, yardstick in hand, surrounded by jars of animal parts floating in clear liquids. This scared me, as did a replica of a skeleton hanging like a frayed coat in the corner. On the first day we looked carefully at leaves in groups of threes, after which the teacher asked us to describe the differences.

"This one is dried up and this one is not so dried up," one kid offered, a leaf in each hand.

The teacher, who was kind, said that that was a start. He raised his yardstick and pointed to someone else.

From there I went to history, a class I enjoyed immensely because it was the first one ever in which I would earn an A. This resulted from reading thirty books—pamphlets to be more exact. I was a page turner, and my index finger touched each paragraph before the thumb peeled a new page, as I became familiar with Edison, Carnegie, MacArthur, Eli Whitney . . . At the end of the

five-week summer school, the teacher would call me to the front of the class to tell about the books I had read. He stood behind the lectern, looking down at his watch now and then, and beamed at me like a flashlight.

"Who was Pike?"

"Oh, he was the guy that liked to go around in the mountains."

"Who was Genghis Khan?"

"He was a real good fighter. In China."

With each answer the teacher smiled and nodded his head at me. He smiled at the class and some of the students turned their heads away, mad that I knew so much. Little John made a fist and wet his lips.

From history we were released to the playground where we played softball, sucked on popsicles, and fooled around on the monkey bars. We returned to our classes sweating like the popsicles we had sucked to a rugged stick. I went to German where, for five weeks, we sang songs we didn't understand, though we loved them and loved our teacher who paraded around the room and closed his eyes on the high notes. On the best days he rolled up his sleeves, undid his tie, and sweated profusely as he belted out songs so loudly that we heard people pounding on the wall for quiet from the adjoining classroom. Still, he went on with great vigor:

Mein Hut der hat drei Ecken

Drei Ecken hat mein Hut

Und wenn er das nicht hatte

Dan war's auch nicht mein Hut

And we joined in every time, faces pink from a wonderful beauty that rose effortlessly from the heart.

I left, humming, for square dancing. Debra was in that class with me, fresh from science class where, she told me, she and a girlfriend had rolled balls of mercury in their palms to shine nickels, rings, earrings, before they got

bored and hurled them at the boys. The mercury flashed on their shoulders, and they pretended to be shot as they staggered and went down to their knees.

Even though Debra didn't want to do it, we paired off the first day. We made ugly faces at each other as we clicked our heels, swished for a few steps, and clicked again.

It was in that class that I fell in love with my corner gal who looked like Haley Mills, except she was not as boyish. I was primed to fall in love because of the afternoon movies I watched on television, most of which were stories about women and men coming together, parting with harsh feelings, and embracing in the end to marry and drive big cars.

Day after day we'd pass through do-si-does, form Texas stars, spin, click heels, and bounce about the room, released from our rigid school children lives to let our bodies find their rhythm. As we danced I longed openly for her, smiling like a lantern and wanting very badly for her eyes to lock onto mine and think deep feelings. She swung around my arm, happy as the music, and hooked onto the next kid, oblivious to my yearning.

When I became sick and missed school for three days, my desire for her didn't sputter out. In bed with a comic book, I became dreamy as a cat and closed my eyes to the image of her allemanding left to *The Red River Valley*, a favorite of the class's, her long hair flipping about on her precious shoulders. By Friday I was well, but instead of going to school I stayed home to play "jump and die" with the neighbor kids—a game in which we'd repeatedly climb a tree and jump until someone went home crying from a hurt leg or arm. We played way into the dark.

On Monday I was back at school, stiff as new rope, but once again excited by science, history, the guttural sounds of German, and square dancing! By Sunday I had almost forgotten my gal, so when I walked into class my heart

was sputtering its usual tiny, blue flame. It picked up, however, when I saw the girls come in, pink from the afternoon heat, and line up against the wall. When the teacher clapped her hands, announced something or another, and asked us to pair off, my heart was roaring like a well-stoked fire as I approached a girl that *looked* like my girlfriend. I searched her face, but it wasn't her. I looked around as we galloped about the room but I couldn't spot her. Where is she? Is that her? I asked myself. No, no, my girlfriend has a cute nose. Well, then, is that her? I wondered girl after girl and, for a moment in the dizziness of spinning, I even thought my sister was my girlfriend. So it was. All afternoon I searched for *her* by staring openly into the faces of girls with long hair, and when class was dismissed I walked away bewildered that I had forgotten what the love of my life looked like. The next day I was desperate and stared even more boldly, until the teacher pulled me aside to shake a finger and told me to knock it off.

But I recovered from lost love as quickly as I recovered from jumping from trees, especially when it was announced, in the fourth week of classes, that there would be a talent show—that everyone was welcome to join in. I approached Little John to ask if he'd be willing to sing with me—*Michael Row the Boat Ashore*, *If I Had a Hammer*, or *Sugar Shack*—anything that would bring applause and momentary fame.

"C'mon, I know they'll like it," I whined at him as he stood in center field. He told me to leave him alone, and when a fly ball sailed in his direction he raced for it but missed by several feet. Two runs scored, and he turned angrily at me: "See what you did!"

I thought of square dancing with Debra, but I had the feeling that she would screw up her face into an ugly knot if I should ask. She would tell her friends and they would

ride their bikes talking about me. So I decided that I'd just watch the show with my arms crossed.

The talent show was held on the lawn, and we were herded grade by grade into an outline of a horseshoe: The first and second grades sat Indian-style, the third and fourth graders squatted on their haunches, and the fifth and sixth graders stood with their arms across their chests. The first act was two girls—sisters I guessed—singing a song about weather: Their fingers made the shape of falling rain, their arching arms made rainbows, and finally their hands cupped around smiling faces made sunshine. We applauded like rain while some of the kids whistled like wind from a mountain pass.

This was followed with a skit about personal hygiene—bathing and brushing one's teeth. Then there was a juggling act, another singing duo, and then a jazz tap dancer who, because he was performing on the grass, appeared to be stamping mud off his shoes. After each act my eyes drifted to a long table of typewriters. What could they possibly be for? I asked myself. They were such commanding machines, big as boulders lugged from rivers. Finally, just as the tap routine was coming to an end, kids began to show up behind them to fit clean sheets of paper into the rollers. They adjusted their chairs as they looked at one another, whispering. A teacher called our attention to the typewriters and we whistled like mountain wind again.

"All summer we have practiced learning how to type," the teacher said in a clear, deliberate speech. "Not only have we learned to type letters, but also to sing with the typewriters. If you listen carefully, I am sure that you will hear songs that you are familiar with." She turned to the kids, whose hands rested like crabs on the keys, raised a pencil, and then began waving it around. Click—clickclick—click—click—click, and I recognized *The Star Spangled Banner*—and recognized Little John straining over his

keyboard. Damn him, I thought, jealous that everyone was looking at him. They then played *Waltzing Matilda*, and this made me even angrier because it sounded beautiful and because Little John was enjoying himself. Click-click-click, and they were playing *Michael Row the Boat Ashore*, and this made me even more mad. I edged my way in front of Little John and, when he looked up, I made a fist and wet my lips. Smiling, he wet his own lips and shaped a cuss word, which meant we would have a fight afterward, when the music was gone and there were no typewriters to hide behind.