

## Old Age

I'm not really a fan of walking, but it wasn't so bad that my last class before lunch was at one end of the building, my office at the other, the cafeteria back up by my classroom and the Lounge near my office. If I were more coordinated I could carry my briefcase and books in one hand and my lunch tray in the other and weave my way upstream without spilling my soup on myself or on some poor sophomore.

But I'm not that coordinated and the exercise does me good, I suppose. Besides the halls are much emptier on my second round trip and I'm less of a hazard to others.

I opened the door to the Lounge with one hand and balanced my tray in the other. I was surprised that someone had closed the door at all. Only Gene Phillips and Carol Martin were there.

"Where is everybody?"

Gene got up from his seat. "New semester. Looks like no one's here this lunch period. And I'm late, I gotta go."

He squeezed past me and left the room.

"Just you and me, huh Carol?"

"Pretty dead in here."

"Thanks and same to you."

"Nothing personal."

Betty Temple and one of the media aides came in and sat down together. I picked through the pile of *Plain Dealers* looking for the comics. Nine automobile sections and five classifieds. No comics. Lots of want ads, but no Calvin, no Hobbes. Lunch was beige again, grilled cheese, pears and oatmeal cookies, and the conversation was going nowhere.

The door banged open and high-pitched voices chased away the quiet. Carol looked up and I turned to tell the kids they weren't allowed in the Faculty Lounge. They weren't kids but they were half as old as me.

They were young, energetic and perky. I have my young days and my energy level is usually pretty good, but I don't do perky. One of the reasons I married my wife is because she isn't perky.

Suzie Kosko pushed the papers out of the way and set her tray down across from me. "We'll sit here," she called and flashed me a John Elway mouth of white teeth.

Kate Strong was behind her. She carried a plastic drug store bag as well as her tray.

"What's in the bag, Katie?"

"Walking shoes. As soon as we finish eating, we're going to get our exercise."

"It's January," I said, "it's 12 degrees outside."

"We know," Suzie said, sounding like she had omitted 'silly' at the last instant in deference to my age. "We're going to walk around the halls. It's a tenth of a mile, you know."

"It's actually less than that, it's eleven laps to a mile," I said.

"Whatever!" She smiled and flicked oatmeal crumbs from her blouse.

"We've got those winter blahs, you know?" Kate said. "We just feel so blobby."

"I know what you mean," Carol said. "I don't know if it's the weather, the lack of sun or what, but I feel so old lately."

"I know just what you mean," Suzie said excitedly. "I was just realizing that I'm going to be 24 this summer." She put her arm on Kate's. "24!"

I coughed. My grilled cheese was lodged somewhere in my throat. Carol looked at me.

"I'm all right," I said, "really." I drank some milk.

Suzie and Kate smiled at me with concern. "Are you sure?"

"At least I'm not quite twice as old as you two. And I can't say I've been teaching since before you were born."

"That's something," said Carol.

"But it would be nice if someone in here was at least in the same decade of life as I am."

"Do you want to walk with us?" one of them said.

"Come on, it'll be fun!" the other one said.

"No, thanks a lot, but no, I've got some Medicare paperwork to fill out."

"Really?"

"Thanks for the offer."

"Maybe another time."

"Right."

They bopped out of the Lounge. Quiet returned.

"I'm older than you are," Betty said.

"Me, too," said the aide.

"Thanks, I needed that."

I might have gotten real depressed, but Bob McCauley stuck his head in the door. "Hey, did you see those babes marching through the halls?" He came into the Lounge and sat next to me.

"Arms pumping?"

"Arms pumping."

"Anatomical parts wiggling?"

"In flux," he said, "in a serious state of flux." He slapped the tabletop. "I gotta tell ya!"

His words became pictures in our minds.

"How the hell did we get so old?" I said.

"Beats me. Seems like we just started."

"Did we ever look like that?"

"We were never, I don't know, `perky.' You maybe, but I was never perky."

"But their faces don't have any lines. Their skin is so smooth."

"And hair, lots of serious hair."

"They look like they're always in a good mood."

"You never looked like you were in a good mood."

"You neither," I said, "at least when you were in the classroom."

"And when I was the head coach. That was hard."

"Pressure."

"Idiot parents," Bob said. "Didn't know a thing about basketball."

"They knew enough to make it tough on you."

"See this wrinkle? Old man Yates gave me this one." He pointed at the corner of his eye. "Bitched and moaned about playing time for his kid. His kid, his kid. Like there weren't ten other kids on the team."

"Seven of them better players."

"At least seven, maybe eight or nine."

"So that's why you look so bad," I said. "What about me?"

"You? Hell, you're just old!"

"Thank you!"

Carol laughed, "I thought you guys were friends!"

"Bob doesn't mean it."

"Yeah, I'm like this to everybody."

"That's why everybody is your friend."

"True, true. Say, you know what? You know how you can tell Radburn's no longer around?"

"Our old buddy Mel? Let me think. The sun came up this morning?"

"No, those girls, those new teachers, Suzie and what's-her-name?"

"What is he talking about?" Carol asked.

"Mel had a theory," Bob said. "You mark my words, he might have been right. He said he would

never hire a cute young female teacher.”

"Now I'm lost," I said. "What **are** you talking about?"

Bob sat forward, his forearms resting on the table. "He said that good-looking young women caused problems among the faculty and in the community. So he never hired any."

Carol exploded. "He hired teachers based on their appearance?"

"He never would have hired Suzie or Karen."

"Katie."

"Whoever. He said they were too noticeable. The boys in class would fantasize."

"And the faculty?"

"Them, too."

"That's discriminatory! That's reverse discrimination!"

"Be calm, Carol. He's gone now. We all know he was a jerk."

"But that's so wrong, so stupid! So- so-!"

"Did he really do that?" I asked.

"I bet if we looked in old yearbooks we could tell. There were some ugly ones here years ago. Remember?"

"Sandy Mehalo?"

Bob sputtered. "Right, and Toni?"

"Two-ton Toni?"

He punched my arm and I tried to say something else, but couldn't catch my breath.

"This is awful!" Carol Martin yelled. "You guys should know better!"

"We didn't do it, Mel did!"

"What a minute, what about Sharon, had an Slavic last name?"

"Something with a 'ski' on the end?"

"Yeah, she was cute!"

"Got pregnant during the year and left."

"Right, she was one of those Home Ec babes that taught a year and got pregnant. Five straight years."

"Hey, maybe your theory isn't right. She was pretty hot."

"I don't know," Bob said as he pushed away from the table. "It would be like him to do that. I'm going out to the halls to do some more research."

"The key to education," I said as he left.

I turned to Carol. "That was pretty obnoxious."

"So was your reaction," she said.

"That's what I meant," I said. "But how the teacher is perceived is a legitimate issue. The image she--"

"--or he."

"Right, or he, projects is part of it. Maybe that's not fair, but it's part of the package."

"But to hire someone not as good because the better one is cute? That's garbage!"

"I agree." The rest of the Lounge was quiet now, Betty and the aide looking at something in the paper. "Nancy's husband is an administrator, and according to her, it is a factor in hiring."

"If that really happens," Carol said, "it's disgusting."

"Nancy says it's only a factor when the two candidates are equal."

"Two people are never exactly equal. It's a cop-out."

"But the good news is, Carol, you're here and you're not ugly."

"Thank you very much!"

"Don't mention it," I said. "But really, they won't discriminate against the cute ones here in the Stradford City Schools any more."

"You mean with the new superintendent and the new principal?"

"Sure. They go out of their way to hire cute ones now, because of the public relations value. They look better in the community."

"But that's the same thing!" Carol's dark brown eyes fixed me with a stare. "It's still discrimination!"

"A cute teacher makes for happy kids. Happy kids make for happy schools. Happy communities love to vote levy money for their happy kids. See?"

"That's even worse."

"How can it be worse if everything looks better?"

Carol sputtered and I decided it was time to retreat. Fortunately that's when Suzie and Katie returned, their faces little flushed, a glisten on their cheeks.

"I feel great!" Suzie announced.

"Me, too!" trilled Katie.

"You both roook maaarbellous, simply maaarbellous!"

Carol glowered at her lunch tray.

I stood up and dumped my trash into the wastebasket. As I left the Lounge, Suzie said, "Oh, that's like that guy from **Saturday Night Live!**"

"I didn't think old people watched that," Katie said.

I heard Carol laugh with them, and I had to smile to myself as I kicked the top of a Bic pen down the hallway. It was time to go back to class anyway.

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