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Homecoming

Bob Cengr

I am grading expository essays on a crisp autumn afternoon when four girls tumble into my classroom. Their voices ring out somewhere between giggly and brassy, first asking, then demanding to know why the middle school they used to know so well looks “totally different” now that they have been high school freshmen for three whole months. Before I can answer, they spot four markers, each one a different color.

“Ohmygodcanwewriteontheboard?” they ask. These girls live in houses that cost more money than I will earn in 20 years. They have cell phones that take pictures and cameras that play movies. But drawing on the dry erase board normally reserved for homework assignments and Student Council announcements is still one hell of a treat.

It is hard to look at these girls—each one a former student of mine—at their bony knees peeking out of ripped jeans, at their pale flesh spilling out of their tank tops, at the way they are hungry for boys to be hungry for them. Yet for all their fourteen-year-old bravado, the things they write on the board make my heart ache.

“McArthur Jr. High is the best!”

“Enjoy it while you can!”

“Mr. Roberts, we miss you!”

A girl named Renee turns away from the other marker-writers and looks at me. “I miss the smell of your classroom,” she says, inhaling deeply. *What smell is that?* I wonder. *The knock-off aftershave I splashed on over eight hours ago? The leftover pepperoni pizza I ate for lunch at my desk during 5th period study hall? The post-P.E. sweatiness of my afternoon classes?* I smile because in the final analysis it does not matter. Last year Renee played Sandy in our school’s production of *Grease*. When she wore a slinky red dress to school, I half-kiddingly asked her to marry me. Half-kiddingly, she said yes.

Following Renee’s lead, the girls spin away from the group, one at a time.

“Mr. Roberts,” one of them says breathlessly. “You’ll never guess what Haney did at Homecoming!” Haney is one of the girl’s classmates who has not come back to visit.

“Wait, I probably shouldn’t tell you,” she says. Blushing happily, she goes back to the board.

“Mr. Roberts,” the next girl says, “did you hear about the party at Kim’s house last weekend?” I shake my head no.

“Well, it was pretty crazy,” she says, wanting to go into specifics but not sure exactly how to proceed.

Next come the junior high memories.

“Remember the time Stewart tried to drink 10 chocolate milks at lunch and threw up all over the table?”

“Remember when Jonathan started that fire in the science lab?”

“Remember the time we saw you buying shampoo at Walgreens?”

Without warning a mom arrives, interrupting the conversational flow and filling the doorway with bulky fatigue. She looks at me with narrowed eyes, then turns her attention to her daughter.

“Sally, you said 5 minutes—it’s been almost a half an hour!” she snaps. “I’ve got to get your brother to football practice!” The girls scurry to return my markers, embarrassed and excited. They shout goodbyes over their shoulders, leaving in much the same chaotic way that they entered.

For a few seconds I bask in the afterglow, one of those sappy moments that is almost enough to make up for the long hours, low salary, lack of respect, and the Teachers Lounge grousing about all of the above. I am caught unaware when Renee pops her head back through the door.

“I need one more smell,” she says, inhaling again like she means it. Then she smiles and backs out of the room, and I listen to her sneakered footfalls padding down the hallway toward the rest of her life.