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Nathan Boone

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Last semester, Mr. Nathan Boone dropped into our school like a bomb. We had never seen or heard anyone, or anything, like him.

Our previous English teacher was on maternity leave, so we were ‘enjoying’ the attention of an endless series of substitute teachers who tried to keep us in line and engaged in the study of the American Short Story. It was impossible for any of them to see us through a full cycle of in-class reading and discussion of themes, let alone test us to see what we had learned.

We were wasting our time, but none of us were inclined to expend the effort needed to learn much on our own. It was easier to just make fun of the substitutes as they struggled with roll calls, tardy slips, bathroom break requests, and the incessant chatter that increased row by row the farther away students sat from the teacher’s desk.

We even developed a scale for grading the relative worth of each of our new ‘classroom attendants.’ The “Give-a-Shit-o-Meter” measured each substitute teacher’s level of organization, overall temperament, and communication skills. We also had a fourth category that rated them on their concern for our education and wellbeing - thus, the meter’s name.

When he showed up, Mr. Nathan Boone completely ‘blew the curve’ for all the rest. But not immediately. First, we had to adjust.

“Ding, ding, ding! I think we have a winner!” he shouted gleefully about five minutes after he entered the classroom. We all sat there in stunned silence. All the rows.

He had started class by asking for a show of hands of those who had read the assignment “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin. Stevie, the shyest kid in the class, was the only one who raised a hand. Mr. Boone got so excited that he yelled and clapped his hands. Then taking advantage of our shocked attention, he asked us all to pull out our books, and he started reading the first paragraph.

“I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn’t believe it, and I read it again.’ Can you see it, students? Can you hear it? Put yourself in that subway car.

“You, in the back row with the backwards ballcap, tell me your name, please. Jeff? Excellent! Jeff, ever been on a subway? No? Young lady, you, in the next row, laughing. Your name please? Lauren, how about you - have you taken the subway? Fabulous! And I assume you carry your phone with you. Wonderful!

“Now everyone, close your eyes and imagine yourself sitting in a subway car, looking at your phone, flipping through Instagram or TikTok maybe, reading a headline about a drug bust in your neighborhood, and you see your brother’s name listed there. Someone you know and love has been arrested. How do you feel? Embarrassed, angry, shocked, numb, guilty? What is Baldwin showing us as this older brother, the narrator, is reading about the arrest of his younger brother in the first couple pages of this short story?

“Your homework, for tonight, is to read this story. See it. Feel it. Read it aloud and hear the words that Baldwin uses to create powerful images and moving characters. Warning - there is a lot of darkness in this work - drugs and death - but there is also light and music. Tomorrow, we will discuss it. One question to ask yourself as you read this story: Who do you think is the main character, the protagonist, of the story? Is it Sonny or his brother? I am very interested to hear your

thoughts on that tomorrow. Class dismissed.”

Mr. Boone was true to his word. He showed up the next day, and we dutifully discussed “Sonny’s Blues” with an interest that surprised us all.

Mr. Boone almost screamed “Eureka!” when Leticia answered a question and shared her feelings about the story. He shouted, “By George, I think he’s got it!” using a terrible British accent when Tony gave an example of a simile found in the story. Then Mr. Boone was almost operatic as he sang out “Éccola, éccola!” (“Behold, behold” in Italian, apparently) when Jonathan found and read a passage in the story about the old folks gathered after their Sunday dinner.

Every class with Mr. Boone was the same. He got excited when a student connected with a story we were reading. We got excited waiting for him to yell “Shazam!”, “Holy Moly!” or some other crazy thing at the student who did. During the spring semester, he must have run out of new material, because he started reusing interjections we’d already heard, but no one minded. Some of his earliest exclamations were now our favorites.

One day in March, Mr. Boone wasn’t in class when we arrived, and there was no substitute for him. Ten minutes into the hour, as we were discussing whether to go to the office and ask about him, Mr. Boone arrived without a word. He shambled up an aisle, head bowed, and slumped down in his chair behind the desk.

“Everyone in your seats, please,” he said without looking up. “Turn to page 317 and let’s read the first part of William Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily.’ Hailey, would you please read the first paragraph and then Ahmad, will you continue, and so on?”

At this point in the year, we were all comfortable reading aloud these short stories that Mr. Boone helped bring to life. He usually paced the room as we read, jumping in with a “See it!” for well-imagined scenes or “Yes! Read it again, please!” if the writer’s language was especially rich or distinctive. Today, he just leaned over his open book on the desk.

While students read, we noticed he wasn’t following along because he didn’t turn the page when the time came. Those of us who had read the whole thing in advance started to get nervous because the word “Negro” had already appeared several times in the story, and we knew there was another word coming that none of us wanted to read aloud. About the time that Melody read, “‘I have no taxes in Jefferson. Tobel!’ The Negro appeared. ‘Show these gentlemen out,’” Mr. Boone shuddered, rubbed his eyes, and ‘rejoined us’. Then he stopped the reading and stood up.

“Class, William Faulkner wrote ‘A Rose for Emily’ in 1931. He lived most of his life in Oxford, Mississippi and his writings record the decades-long decline of aristocratic, white families following the Civil War. The language he uses has historical realism, as suits this work, but some of his terminology is not appropriate in today’s pluralistic society. We’ll stop here.”

Mr. Boone made this declaration in a flat, monotone voice that we’d never heard from him before. There was none of the energy or music that we’d come to expect. When he finished speaking, he just stood there. Then he sobbed and crumbled to the floor beside his desk and didn’t move.

The principal announced that Mr. Boone was on ‘leave of absence’. That was all they could say due to “HIPAA privacy laws,” but we all knew he had a breakdown. We saw it, we heard it, we were there.

The parade of substitute teachers started again, but this time the class decided to try and teach ourselves. We read, we discussed, we looked up literary resources online and we quizzed each other weekly. Near the end of the semester, we even gave ourselves a final exam. We each took a different short story we'd read during the year and wrote our own stories in the style of the selected author.

The school administration had no idea what to make of us. Some of us even continued reading and writing during the summer. For shame! Near the end of the summer break, word spread that Mr. Boone was coming back to teach, but our joy at this news was overshadowed by our concern for him.

On his first day back at school, Nathan Boone felt fear, shame, and some hope. He had wanted to make a difference last year, had worked hard to reach the kids, but knew he had failed in the end. His mind and his body chemistry had betrayed him.

The school administration had been more understanding than he expected, so he took them up on the offer to return to the classroom in the fall. He wasn't a quitter, and he'd worked hard over the summer to manage his illness. He knew he just needed to get back in there and start again.

As he entered the building, students were mulling around their lockers, so he kept his gaze low and started down the hallway to his classroom.

"Hi, Mr. Boone. Welcome back!" someone shouted down the hall and he froze.

"Hi, Mr. Boone," on his left.

"It's good to see you again, sir," on his right.

"We missed you, Mr. Boone," said a young lady coming up behind him.

He looked around and saw Leticia wearing a brightly colored t-shirt emblazoned with the exclamation, "Eureka!" As he turned back, he noticed scattered along the hallway were other students from his last year's class wearing similar t-shirts inscribed with some of his other catchphrases: "Shazam!", "Holy Moly", "Yippee Ki Yay" and "Éccola!"

"Thank you, thank you," Mr. Boone whispered, as he wiped his eyes.

"Ding, ding, ding, Mr. Boone!" declared Stevie, "I think we have a winner!"



Eye of the Storm (at right),
Linnea, Sardina

Relationships (at left),
Aleksandra Vali