

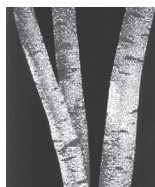
# *First Year*

## SAMPLE FIRST CHAPTERS

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# *First Year*

A NOVEL BY  
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Birch  
Grove  
Publishing

# august

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*Robert Baker*

"You're still making up your mind," Alan Anderson, Blue Lake School District's new Superintendent of Schools, said with more interest than impatience. He slid a pad of paper with a key on top of it across his desk to the young man he'd just finished interviewing. "Visit the room. See if it feels like home. Write down your yeas and nays on that pad. That's a test I always give myself before I make up my mind about a job."

Robert Baker picked up the pad and key. "That sounds good to me," he said to the administrator, who had been his father's college roommate years ago.

The superintendent smiled. "Robert, there are very few outstanding teacher candidates available in August. You're unique, and I'm blessed. Your credentials are impeccable. I hope you'll choose to join our faculty. I don't want to pressure you, but I'll sure like it if you say yes to our offer. Oh, and don't let the room number throw you," he laughed.

Robert left the office and ascended the flight of stairs that led to the room. He was impressed by the gleam of the hall floors and the lockers lining them. This massive school building was old, but it was cared for with a respect bordering on reverence. The empty hallway echoed his footsteps as he strode toward the classroom that would be his if he accepted the position he'd just been offered. He liked the feel of ownership that evoked. Room 313 was his for the taking. It was up to him.

As Robert inserted the key he noticed a slight trembling in his hand. It was a sign of nervousness as well as a by-product of the six hundred miles he'd just driven. Well, why wouldn't he be nervous? This was a big deal. For months he'd been preparing himself for his first year of graduate school. Now he had minutes, not hours or days, to decide if this would be his first year of teaching instead.

He withdrew the key, turned the silver knob, and opened the door. The room, like the hallways and stairwells, gleamed. It smelled as fresh and clean as a northern breeze. The student desks were arranged into six perfectly straight rows. He walked to the nearest row and ran his hand across the remarkably smooth and unmarred surfaces of several desk tops. The gray metal teacher's desk in the front of the room looked newly painted as did the cushioned office chair behind it. The lectern next to the desk had been sanded and shellacked to a fine finish. Even the metal filing cabinet showed little wear. The custodial staff must be superb.

He strolled across the room, laid t

he notepad on a student desk, and proceeded to the bank of windows

that overlooked the manicured green lawn four floors below. People took care of this place, inside and out. Education mattered in Blue Lake.

What he was seeing intrigued him as much as what he'd been told about this teaching job. In many ways it was a perfect fit. He'd be teaching American Literature, which he loved, to six eleventh grade classes, meaning he'd have one preparation. He'd had three as a student teacher at the Merymin College Lab School.

Still he'd felt compelled to tell the superintendent, "I was ninety percent sure I'd be attending graduate school. My folks and I agreed that unless something special came along, I'd pursue college teaching. This looked special to us. It's the timing that's caught me off guard."

He shifted his focus beyond the rooftops of houses to the street that led from the school to downtown Blue Lake. Three blocks down the road was the apartment that could be his home. It had been the last stop on the tour of the town Alan Anderson had given him. "I know this little apartment isn't much," the superintendent had apologized. "The first floor used to be a mom-and-pop grocery. The boarded-up storefront sure lacks curb appeal, but as you can see, this apartment is fully furnished. I can assure you the rent is reasonable. It's close to school. And it's available. Housing is at a premium in college towns by mid-August."

Raised in the similar community of Forest City, Robert knew that was true. "It would be fine. Well . . . adequate," he'd added with a grin.

Had he and Nancy Morgan married after graduation as planned, that apartment would be far too tiny. However, Nancy hadn't been thrilled when talk of graduate school became intertwined with thoughts of marriage. She'd informed him that though she loved him, she had no intention of putting her own dreams on hold while he pursued his. Instead she'd made the decision to pursue her goal of becoming a registered nurse. So Nancy was not a factor in this decision. That seemed pretty ironic at this moment.

Enough of that. It was time to sort this thing out.

He retrieved the note pad, took a pen out of his coat pocket and settled into the third student desk in the window row. He wrote, "I've been a student all my life."

That was the truth. His parents had prepared him to be a student from birth. They were reading to him long before he could toss his favorite rattle over the crib rail. Besides books, the presents he was given, from Tinker Toys to unassembled bikes, were designed to challenge his hands, head, and determination. His parents assisted him when asked, but the longer that request was in coming, the greater the praise he received. They'd prepared him perfectly for school. Reading was the basis for everything. When you faced challenges such as he did in subjects like algebra, geometry, and the sciences, or participated in extra-curricular activities, determination was an invaluable asset.

His traits and training earned him an academic scholarship at nearby Merymin College, where his father was the business manager. Robert worked in the student union, as a teacher assistant, and as a dorm counselor so that he could live on campus. His years there were capped with an excellent student teaching experience at the Merymin Lab School and admission to graduate school at the U.

That was part of the problem. He'd lived his entire life within his comfort zone. Attending graduate school full-time would offer more of the same. Did that make sense? There were alternatives. Alan Anderson had concluded part of his pitch by saying, "So how's this for a clincher, Robert? You can earn your Master's Degree here at Blue Lake State. It isn't a huge university, but it is a great and growing school."

"So, why should I take this job?" he wrote, then added "My Parents? Those Kids? That Trio of Teachers?"

He knew his parents would be thrilled if he was hired by the Blue Lake School District. Relieved, too. The extended economic burden graduate school would inflict on them, as well as him, would be eliminated. 'Merymin College Business Manager' was an impressive title on the office door, but its prestige wasn't mirrored in his father's paychecks. His dad was undoubtedly emphasizing that fact when he left the monthly bank statement on the kitchen table the morning Robert drove off to Blue Lake.

Robert slid out of the desk, ambled to the lectern, and stood behind it.

Then there were the kids. The first reason that he might want to say yes to teaching was the experience he'd had with those eager eighth, tenth, and eleventh grade students he'd taught at Merymin Lab School. He filled the desks in front of him with the faces and forms of those students, their eyes eager, their hands shooting into the air almost before you finished a question. Every day with them had been exhilarating. No wonder people went into teaching if it made you feel that good!

The "trio" were the three high school English teachers who initially sparked his interest in becoming a teacher. His sophomore instructor, Mrs. Vam, might stand behind the lectern where he stood now, but only to take attendance. She conducted her classes sitting in a student chair placed as close to her students as she could get. She was all about caring, encouraging, and honoring ideas. Mrs. Macauley would stand behind the lectern beaming and clapping her hands with glee after opening her textbook to yet another selection she loved. The mercurial Mr. Prizinski would use the lectern as a prop for his dramatic lectures, a leaning post for listening, or a launching pad that sent him zooming around the classroom. The trio's personalities and techniques were wildly different, but they shared an intense love for what they were teaching and those they taught. If he could inspire students the way those teachers did . . .

"Times up," Robert Baker announced to himself. He picked up the pad,

pocketed the pen, and left the room.

"Still undecided?" Alan Anderson asked as Robert reentered the office.

"No, sir," the young man said. "I accept your offer."

"Terrific!" the superintendent enthused. "I'm delighted. I must tell you that the Blue Lake School District is considered a prime plum to pick in this state's education orchard. So we've achieved the perfect union. Great applicant. Great system." He patted the contract lying on his desk and handed it to Robert. "I had Mrs. Mosmund prepare this in case I got lucky. Look it over and see if it's satisfactory."

He watched Robert scan and sign the document. "I think you'll be very happy with your decision, Robert. I know I was elated to sign on here." He rose, reached across the desk and firmly grasped his new hire's hand. "I believe we rookies both have a truly enjoyable year ahead of us," he said.

# september

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## *Patty Light*

Patty Light was late for class. She hated that. The fight with her mother caused it. She wasn't sure why they'd fought this morning. She'd just come from the bathroom into the kitchen after doing her makeup and hair. A last glance in the mirror had told her she looked fine. Pretty, even.

Her mother wasn't though. She sat at the kitchen table staring out the window. Her gray-brown hair was frizzled, and her lean face was pale and tight. Her lips looked thin as pencil lead. Just as gray and lifeless, too.

But they sprang back to life as soon as she saw Patty. Why was Patty so slow? Was the bathroom a mess as usual? Why did she get up so late?

"It's only seven o'clock," Patty protested softly.

Her mother's eyes glared red and angry. She'd been losing weight again and her green bathrobe hung as loose on her body as though it was her husband's robe—if she had a husband, that is. The room around her was unlit, dark and formless like the bathrobe, like her mother's personality had become.

Her mother barked on. Patty tried to avoid listening, knowing she'd hear nothing new. That never helped, but she always tried. The words, the voice, the tone, like a fork being dragged back and forth, back and forth across the face of a plate. She wanted to explode, but if she did, she was sure her words would gush out in vicious spurts that would taste like blood in her mouth. She'd rage and scream and nothing would be changed anyway except her teeth would all be pointed and red saliva would pour out of each corner of her mouth. She no longer felt pretty. She didn't say anything, just choked down a piece of toast with cheap margarine on it. "I gotta go," she flung over her shoulder as she hurried into the front room, grabbed her windbreaker and ran out of the house, her mother's voice trailing her. "Sure. Gotta go. Gotta go. Can't wait to get out of here. Hey, pick up your dishes . . ."

God! Oh God!

She realized she was standing alone in front of her locker staring into it. The hall was empty. The bell had rung. She had heard it but not heard it. She'd heard, but not heard, the kids clicking their lockers shut and shuffling away down the hall, their voices fading. It was like only her home was real, and school—and the rest of her life—was a dream. Or home was the nightmare you couldn't awaken from and escape.

Anyway, she was late again. This had been going on for several years. But for her first class on the first day of school! She hated that. Her mother had screamed at her for nothing! Nothing! Nothing! When Patty arrived at school, she had had to scurry into the first girls' rest room she saw to wash

away the stains of mascara from her face, for if she had learned not to talk, she hadn't been able to harden herself enough not to cry.

Gotta stop this, she scolded herself, or I'll start again. She willed her mother out of her mind and headed for her first class, Creative Writing. As she hurried down the hall, she again realized how much she loved this place. The halls were shiny and clean. The classrooms would smell of chalk and books. School was her haven, her sanctuary. Her mood swing moistened her eyes. She reminded herself that she was late to leaven her happiness so that a new set of tears, this time of joy, wouldn't streak her cheeks.

She glanced at her watch. 8:18. "God!" she muttered. She was relieved to see that the door to room 212 was open. As she slipped in, she looked at Mr. Hunter standing in front of the room, his eyes cast down at the lectern.

She slipped into an empty seat near the front of the room, thankful he still hadn't looked up. When he called her name in his deep voice, she raised her hand. When he repeated her name, she heard his irritation. He looked up and his hazel eyes swept the room. The little knot of fear that always lurked in her chest unraveled and spread and her heart quickened. But his eyes softened a little when she tried to explain her lack of oral response and softened still further, almost to sadness, as he tried to explain his bad mood. Her fear reduced into that small, eternal knot.

### *Kyle Hunter*

"Patty Light . . ."

For sixteen years this gnawing nervousness had bitten into Kyle Hunter's stomach and perspired his hands. He disliked the first day of school—the first week even. He ought to be over that by now. But he wasn't. He sighed, glowered and growled, "Patty Light . . ."

"My hand was up, Mr. Hunter. I'm sorry. I got here late. I didn't know we were supposed to answer you out loud."

He glanced up. Beautiful eyes, he noted. Windows of the soul. Been crying though. Wind blown hair. "You are," he said, "both late and correct." He shook his head, scolding himself for sounding so impatient. He saw embarrassment and hurt in those eyes and felt instantly guilty. "I'm sorry Patty. I'm always like this on the first day. Ask anyone. It can't help but get better, right?" Her answering smile was tentative but genuine. Her brown eyes danced self-consciously. "I'm sorry. I'm not always going to be a jerk. Really."

"Get 'em in line or they'll get you" was a truism he'd heard from a veteran teacher the first year of his teaching. He'd tried to follow it and thought he'd done pretty well. But there was always a tinge of doubt. This girl, for instance. She wasn't being a smart aleck or even unpleasant. He felt the touch of guilt he often felt when disciplining students. They all had their stories, their lives, and their reasons for who and how they were.

"Mr. Hunter," a short boy with glasses and eager eyes said, "aren't you going to call any more names?"

"I'm sorry, son. It's opening day," he answered, as though that was supposed to explain everything. "Frank Martin . . . er . . . Marin."

"Yup," came the answer, deep and flat as though muffled by water. Kyle spotted the source seated in the last desk in the fifth row. The boy looked like a refugee from some "Happy Days" reunion except there was nothing happy in his demeanor. His hair had so much spray on it, it looked like a helmet; he wore a leather jacket like bikers do with the back of the collar half flipped up. He was sprawled in the desk, his left leg extended into the aisle. The rapid drumming of his right knee betrayed his tension. The late James Dean, Kyle thought. Or with that black hair, more accurately the late Elvis Presley.

He continued to take roll, the vague irritations of opening day like fingernails scraping the inside of his skin. Thirty-two students were assigned to his elective Creative Writing class. Dumped, in a few cases. Thirty-two and he knew there'd be a few more added from the list of juniors and seniors who were enrolling in Blue Lake High School for the first time today. They'd hear about his plans for the class and read his syllabus, but they wouldn't believe it could possibly be that tough until the first serious assignment was given. Some would realize they really didn't want to work that hard. Then would come the drop slips accompanied by accusing eyes or red-faced apologies, and he'd end up with thirty or so students. That was too many, but writing classes offered so many surprises and unexpected delights that he always ended up stopping himself on the way to the counselors' office and never insisted they trim his roster.

"Okay," he said when he'd finished, "if I have to take roll every day, it'll shoot half the period. Alphabetical order folks. It's faster and easier for yours truly." Students always groaned and muttered after that announcement. Some things never changed. "So you'll get to hear me say your name one more time. Aren't you thrilled?"

"Aw, geez, Mr. Hunter, can't we sit with our friends?"

"I get sick when I don't sit near a window. Ask my mother."

"That means I'll have to sit behind him in every class . . ."

In spite of himself, Kyle had to smile.

### *Frank Marin*

Frank Marin sat in the back seat in the fourth row. He always took the back seat when he could. No one bothered him there. Sometimes he wished they would, but he was glad they didn't. Occasionally he pondered that paradox, but he couldn't come up with anything.

The dark brown jacket, almost the same color as his wet-slick hair, was

too hot. It was totally uncomfortable, but he couldn't bring himself to take it off. Its upturned collar rubbed against the back of his neck. That was irritating, so he dropped his head forward. He thought he must look like a turtle sticking its head out of its shell now. So he lifted his head a little and glared out under his dark, prominent eyebrows.

In truth he knew the jacket was a shell. Frank Marin was not unintelligent. He knew the jacket covered and protected him and projected an image. He thought he looked good in it. It fit with his heavy hair, his eyebrows, and his prominent lips. It got him a little attention without his having to make any effort. The attention was silent and distant and had been ever since his family moved into town the previous April. But it was there.

Frank had bought the jacket a week before the move. He'd put it on the same day he fell into the unsmiling silence he still maintained. His burly, balding father often told his straight-laced, graying and quiet mother that two things were true of Frank these days: he never talked, and he always wore his jacket. He knew his father couldn't stand either of these truths.

His father wouldn't be too hot about a third truth either. If he wasn't so thick, he'd know.

When Hunter called his name, Frank surfaced from his thoughts like a diver deprived of air. "Yup," he forced out of his throat. He felt soaked on the outside, dry on the inside. Weird.

He felt a familiar wash of self-consciousness, as though people were shining bright flashlights at him. He dropped his eyes and stared rigidly at the desktop. He felt Hunter's hard gaze on the top of his head like it was a laser burning a hole through his hair. Weird. Man, that's a weird idea, he thought. He'd noticed he had a lot of weird ideas. People would think he was nuts. Maybe this Creative Writing class was the right place to be. Almost everyone here was a nut in one way or another, and he'd heard from someone sometime during the summer that Hunter would go crazy over the nuttiest pieces of writing! Maybe he'd fit in here a little bit.

Still his head burned. It felt like his face was about to go up in flames, and his mind's eye could visualize smoke rolling off his wet hair, not to mention his damp forehead and hands. He was caught between the desire to laugh at the pictures in his head and the feeling he was being pinned to the wall by his staring classmates. The mix resulted in the irritation that seemed to be his most comfortable emotion. Go on, Hunter, call the next name. The teacher did, but that did not stop the perspiration rolling down Frank's sides from his armpits. He needed to leave, but the thought of all those flashlight eyes trained on him again and the thought of Hunter shouting his name if he did, nailed him to his chair. God, what he needed was a joint to settle him down a little bit. Then it wouldn't matter for a while and his damned head would shut up.

*Gail Hunter*

Gail Hunter wheeled the old Volvo out of the dirt driveway onto the highway. She loved this countryside. The sweet damp pine smell rode the western breeze in through the open driver's side window. She felt exhilarated by the fragrant coolness of the early autumn day.

She headed the car down the tar road toward town. She'd planned to take Kyle to school earlier, but he'd wanted to ride his bicycle the five miles because, he'd said, "It might settle my first-day nerves, at least a little."

"Sixteen years and you've still got first-day nerves. How can you stand it?"

"I can't. It's parts of the other 189 days that make up for it."

She'd accompanied him outside into the chill of the very early morning, loving the sight of the four tall pines that shielded their house from the highway, but wondering how he'd avoid freezing wearing only his light blue windbreaker.

"No sweat . . . for sure!" he'd smiled. He'd given her his usual brief kiss and mounted his ten-speed LeTour. She'd watched him pedal down the driveway. Near the end of it, he'd half turned to wave and wobbled his beloved bike so precariously she thought he was going butt over teakettle for sure. But he'd regained his balance quickly. She heard him shout something about "a new trick I learned," as he glided down the road.

It made her smile. Mostly she loved the man. But there were things she had to do for herself to assure the continuance of that emotion. Now. Before it was too late instead of just late, before she was too afraid, too set, too rusted over.

She glanced in the rear view mirror. Her blonde hair was a bit loose. She brushed a strand from her forehead. "Well, it looks carefree," she told herself, "and it makes me look younger." She'd have to fix it before the interview. Right now the wind felt good in her hair, and on her face.

The thought of the interview sent a spasm of nervousness through her. "You're smart. You're a hard worker. You'll be fine," she told herself, speaking aloud as she'd become accustomed to doing in her empty house during the day. It seemed to create an instant companion for her and saved her the trouble of running around the countryside seeking a social life. "They'll love you," she said, and lapsed into silence as she approached the city limits of Blue Lake. Conversing with yourself on the open road is one thing. Tooling through town yakking away with no one beside you can earn you a reputation. Pretty soon all the pretty young things around town would be pitying Kyle for being married to a loony and would resume talk about those "poet's eyes," whatever that meant, and how they had "just loved his classes" when they were in school.

She glanced at her watch. Nine-thirty. The interview with Kerns Clothing

was at ten-thirty. She decided to drive past the school. She liked the connection with Kyle's separate life that doing that gave her. He was likely to bring his job home with him in the form of reams of papers and piles of journals and the books, but he wasn't likely to talk much about any of it. So this pause seemed important.

She eased the accelerator as she passed the yellow school zone sign with its two stick children on it, one wearing square little black pants and one wearing a triangular little black skirt. Actually those two little connivers were skipping school, sneaking off to his place for a little stick love. She smiled. Kyle wasn't the only one who could create instant short stories out of nothing.

She pulled to the curb and shut off the car. She gazed at the old building with its scrolled entrances. A palace once, really. A centerpiece for this town. Now it was overcrowded and aging despite the care given it, and the new addition was only a pile of paper dreams. Kyle's room was 212, squarely in the middle of the second floor of the building.

The green grounds were empty except for a single student, a tallish boy in a leather jacket who had left the sidewalk in front of the school and was striding across the grass toward the main thoroughfare. His head was down and his elbows back like wings since his hands were thrust into his jacket pockets. He can't even feel the breeze in that hot jacket, Gail thought. Must be hot as a firecracker in there. Too bad. Beautiful autumn day like this. There must be something wrong with him. Maybe he's not just skipping, maybe he's sick.

"I love this day!" she said softly, but passionately, dismissing the boy from her thoughts. This blue-sky, white cloud, west-wind day thrilled her. She started the car and headed toward downtown for the interview.

Doubt creased her happiness for a moment. If she got this job, it would involve travel to other towns and to the Cities. It would involve some training, two weeks in the Cities at least, and meetings and shows thereafter. But her part-time minimum wage job at Warrum's Drug Store was neither financially nor emotionally rewarding. She and Kyle would never get to do what they wanted – okay, mostly what she wanted – until she made some real money.

She should have talked this whole thing over with Kyle. But she hadn't because she knew he might try to stop her. He'd even discouraged her from working part time, encouraging her to concentrate on her photography instead. But that well had gone dry, and her present job was dust. She needed something new in her life. She almost threw the word "someone" in there for the daring of it, but stopped herself. It didn't feel funny or entertaining. It felt scary. It was a little too close to how she sometimes thought while knocking around the house. She needed a challenge, a real job, not a man, to fill the empty spaces in her life and psyche.

Spotting a parking space near Kerns' Store, she allowed herself one more oral statement. "They," she muttered into her shoulder as she parallel parked the car, "will love me. I am as beautiful as this day." She loved the feeling the words sifted through her. She felt young and like it was the first day of spring, not autumn.

### *Sam Strand*

Sam Strand had been principal at Blue Lake High School for twenty-two years. Every March for the last six, his friend Stuts Bergman had approached him about selling insurance. "Sam, you know every family in town," Stuts said, "or at least you did until this crazy growth spurt hit. Still, you'd make President's Club in two years. Beat heck out of that chicken scratch they pay you. If you stay in this racket too long, you're gonna start tippin' the balance in favor of your enemies. Folks don't respect teachers like they used to, you know."

Sure, but Sam would miss this day. He'd miss these opening day assemblies, those smiles in the halls. He'd even miss the hassles in the office because every now and then a kid would find himself during or after one of those teeth gnashing conversations with him, and that was rewarding. Sam was positive dollar bills couldn't replace that feeling. Or the satisfaction when some kid came back after a few years in the world and sat in the same straight-back chair kids always had to sit in and said, "Thanks for being firm, Mr. Strand," or "Glad you made me see how I was and what would happen if I didn't change," or, "You were right, sir." Or the former students who just came in to say hello and show him pictures of the wedding or the new baby or talk about college or the new job. All of that fulfilled his life. Why give up fulfillment for sales pitches and a few trips to Florida?

Well, there was one reason now. Still, Sam wasn't ready.

He uncurled his lanky frame from the folding metal chair behind the lectern. Most of the school board members were sitting behind him. So was Superintendent Allan Anderson, the man twenty years his junior whom the board had hired to fire him. Well, maybe "fire" was too strong a word. Let's just say, "Encourage to retire."

Shaking his head, Sam returned his thoughts to the students packed into the auditorium in front of him. Fifty-thousand school assemblies all over the country, pretty much all the same. I do it every year, and I love it. He glanced at Anderson who nodded coolly. Boy Wonder makes good. But why spoil my mood?

Sam shuffled to the microphone. His green sweater felt as comfortable as the whole scene in front of him did. He had about fifteen sweaters and eleven were some shade of green. They were famous in Blue Lake. The lights were dimmed in the auditorium so he saw the faces dimly, but he

could feel the mix of respect and restlessness, energy and boredom that characterized every student crowd. Nevertheless the vibrations today were mostly positive.

He raised his right hand, palm forward and hung it in the air until the noise in the room abated. "I suppose you're wondering why I invited you all to my party today," Sam began. Trite as heck. He loved that line as much as he loved his green sweaters, his slightly scuffed brown loafers, and the thousands of students who had preceded this bunch in front of his eyes today. He felt a wash of love for what he was, who he was and what he was doing, and love for those he could not see who could see him. He loved the friendly derisive laughter and groans that followed his old joke. The sounds settled pleasantly in his ears as he raised his hand again for silence.

At moments like this it did not bother him that a board member had informed him that before Superintendent Anderson was hired, one of the topics raised in his interview had been how he would go about easing older educators, like Sam Strand, on to pastures the color of his sweaters so that younger, less expensive men and women could take their places.

### *Robert Baker*

Robert Baker stood in the back of the auditorium. He was trying to decide what he felt. Excited? Nervous? Scared? Confused? All four emotions seemed to fit. This was his first day of working with kids in his first year of teaching.

Robert Baker was twenty-three years old and looked younger. His sandy brown hair sloped above his blue eyes. He was of average height and had a wiry, slender build. The school secretary had mistaken him for a new student when he walked into the main office for his August interview even though he'd remained in college an extra year to complete his education credits and student teach. He'd loved college. His student teaching experience had helped him determine his final choice. But his stomach was churning as he stood at the back of the auditorium observing the opening assembly.

Thirty-four students had appeared for his third period American Literature class preceding the assembly. The computer printout roster had listed only twenty-seven. Since there were only thirty desks, four of the junior boys had perched on the windowsills. Somehow they had managed to push open all the windows while he tried to figure out the best way to take attendance.

The breeze wasn't unpleasant, but it blew the computer sheet off the lectern while he was writing his name on the blackboard. That brought laughter from the class. "That's a dumb thing to laugh at," he blurted. The chuckles subsided, replaced by a silence that felt hostile. He was sorry he'd

been so churlish. He wanted to say, "I'm just really nervous right now," but he didn't.

The classroom was silent. His stomach clenched. He glanced at the names on the roster, feeling the need to rescue himself from the sudden hostility. "Looks to me like we need more desks in this room. Would someone like to volunteer to go to the office to find out where we can get some chairs?" No hands leapt into the air. He couldn't understand how one remark could charge the atmosphere like this. "Please," he added, trying not to sound like he was pleading.

Finally one of the boys seated on the windowsill said, "I'll go if my buddies can go with me." Robert hesitated. The idea felt like a red flag flapping in the breeze blowing through those opened windows. Still, you needed to show trust for your students, didn't you? He'd heard that in more than one education class.

"Them chairs are awkward to carry, sir," the boy added. "We could each carry one."

The boy had logic on his side. "I guess that makes sense," Robert answered. "Okay, go." He wasn't comforted by the smirks that slid across the four faces, but he couldn't figure out what else to do. The boys sauntered out of the room. The rest of the students watched them, many with similar smirks on their lips. Then they turned back to Robert.

"I'm going to have to call roll since I don't know you." He called Angela Claire's name, but there was no response. He repeated the name, but no one answered. Must be absent. Must actually be thirty-five in this class. But Alan Barbarie didn't respond, nor did Dwight Conger. Could be the boys who went to get the chairs. But when Beverly Dwayne and Sy Fairmont also didn't answer, he stopped.

Only one student seemed apart from the unspoken revolt that had taken place. She looked straight at him, her deep brown eyes moist. She saw his notice of her raised hand. "Is it okay if we answer you orally when you call our names?" she asked.

He'd sensed no sarcasm in the question. He had not, in fact, given them directions to do so. He should have apologized for that, but instead said, "Yes, please say 'here' when I call your name." The students finally did that, or at least provided their own variations of the word. When he was finished with the roster and the slips he'd found on his desk, the only unchecked names were the four boys who had gone in search of furniture.

They had probably been gone ten minutes. Glancing at the bell schedule on the wall, he noticed that the bell was about to ring, the boys were still gone, and an attractive young lady was walking into the room with a slip of paper in her hand. She smiled prettily as she handed it to him. She smiled at the silent class, and then threw a seductive grin and wink over her shoulder at him as she exited the room. He glanced at the paper and saw that it

was an add slip with the name "Frank Marin" on it. He willed himself to say, "Frank Marin. Is Frank Marin here? Frank Marin." No answer. He was either one of the four boys or simply not present.

Just before the bell rang, a custodian appeared with the four chairs on a rolling rack. He pushed it inside the door against the wall to get it out of the way of the students. "Here's your chairs, Mr. Gerney," the man growled.

"I'm not . . . the boys . . ." Robert began.

The man either didn't recognize his misnaming of the instructor or ignored its importance. "Oh, they said you told 'em they could head for the assembly since the bell was about to ring."

"Oh, I, well, the . . ." Robert stammered as the janitor went out the door. A gust of wind burst into the room through the open windows and sent the roster sheet twirling into the air again. It descended rather artfully and skidded to a stop midway down the aisle between the third and fourth row of chairs.

No one picked it up. They sat and stared at Robert Baker. Why are they so hostile? The bell jangled and the class stood up and exited. At least they stepped around the roster instead of on it.

When the room had emptied, he had looked down at his hands clutching the edges of the lectern. His knuckles were white.



He stood in the darkest corner of the auditorium. He hadn't heard a word Principal Strand said so far. Reliving the third period had filled every corner of his mind.

"Mr. Baker? Mr. Baker? Oh, I see him there in the back of the auditorium," he heard Sam Strand's voice say. "Mr. Baker is our new English teacher. He'll be teaching juniors. Let's give him a hand."

Robert stepped forward and raised his hand tentatively. The applause was polite. He heard a short girl in the back row just in front of him exclaim to her friend next to her, "He's cute!" But he couldn't shake the tingling sensation that coursed through his body. It was as though he'd just awakened from a bad dream. Maybe that was what it was, just a dream, an aberration that he was blowing out of proportion. He forced a smile in the direction of the short girl, who was still looking at him, her face wreathed by his response.

### *Ed Warrum*

Ed Warrum shuffled out of the assembly with Shellie Chaine dangling on his arm as always. She was so often with him he scarcely seemed to notice her presence. Listening to Principal Strand was, for him, like listening to the way he wished his father was – firm, but also warm and understanding. He could be tough like his father, but he had a sense of humor. Listening to

Principal Strand was like standing in a warm shower, not the shower of words his father endlessly poured that either scalded you or rained icy chunks all over your nerves. Nope. The feeling you had after listening to Strand was like you felt after a hard football practice when the shower sent a steady stream of relaxation over you in the steamy room filled with your fellow survivors of the football wars.

Football. Yes. That was the crux of the matter. Football. He could get sick of the sound of the word even if he loved the texture of the game so much: the body-rich feel of a strong tackle; the exhilaration of heaving a perfect spiral down the field into the waiting arms of Billy Cloud or Clyde Conners; the togetherness after the game in the locker room.

That was the good stuff. The bad stuff was the unrelenting pressure his father applied. An old-fashioned butt kicking is what it was. The jerk. Well, that's what he was. His face reminded Ed of a clenched fist when the family—himself, his younger sister Jenny and his mother—were seated at the dining room table by his father's fiat, he and his father at opposite ends of the table reviewing the whole game, every game, just about every damn play of every damn game.

They'd started doing this when Ed was in Pop Warner football in sixth grade. Then it had been fun. He could visualize the precipitous downhill slope the conversations had ridden since then. Increasingly his father focused on his faults and Coach Howard's stupidity. Ed Warren, superstar, super shlub. Every move analyzed. The end of football as a team sport.

When he tried to inject his own opinions of the game or defend his coach, his father listened impatiently or cut him off, scowling and drumming his fingers on the table.

"Ah, heck, he means well," Ed muttered, not realizing he was speaking aloud.

"Talking to me?" Kyle Hunter asked as Ed and Shellie passed him just outside the auditorium doors.

"Oh . . . um . . . ah . . . no," the boy responded, embarrassed. Mr. Hunter probably thinks I'm nuts, he thought.

"Nice game last Friday," the teacher added. Blue Lake had drubbed Hudson 37-6. Ed had thrown three touchdown passes and punted for a thirty-seven yard average. His father—businessman, sports genius, and now school board president—Pete Warrum, had informed him during the table "discussion" that his passing was fair, and that Howard had pulled him to the bench too early. Third quarter! How was he going to build the statistics college recruiters love so much sitting on the bench?! College scouts come to see you because of statistics, not because your coach is a nice guy.

"Thanks," Ed answered, forcing a smile. He liked Mr. Hunter. He was like Mr. Gerney had been, a good guy who liked and was liked by kids, but foursquare about what he expected.

The fact was Ed Warrum liked Mr. Hunter, Mr. Gerney, Coach Howard, his girl friend Shellie . . . He liked just about everyone.

Maybe that was why he felt so guilty about hating his father.

### *Billy Cloud*

Billy Cloud sat in the last seat in the middle row of Robert Baker's seventh period American Literature class. Given a choice, he always sat in the last seat in the middle row. He liked to observe people, and this seat offered the perfect vantage point.

Billy Cloud knew the assumptions many teachers made about him. About "his people . . . his kind." They assumed from his skin color, his raven hair, and his handsome, high cheek-boned features that he was an "Indian." That prompted the further assumption that he sat in the back seat because he was shy, taciturn, turned off to school, or maybe hung over. Depended on which myth the instructor preferred. In some ways it was an advantage. When they discovered he was bright, articulate, and funny, they were far too pleased and overly enthused. After all, he knew plenty of Indians who shared those qualities with him. There were plenty of successful Indian attorneys, authors, athletes, business persons. Native Americans supplied the Armed Forces with a higher proportion of warriors than any other group.

Billy and his friend Sally Long Arrow were two of the three dozen or so obviously Indian students who walked the halls of Blue Lake High School. Billy guessed there were a larger number of people living in or near this northern city whose blood included more than a few drops that were Native American.

He liked being Indian. His father, an artist, teacher, peaceful activist, and mostly Lakota, and his mother, a potter, weaver, mathematics professor at Blue Lake State College, and mostly Anishinaabe, had seen to that.

They had moved to Blue Lake for the same reason they had moved to other cities and towns—to experience it. They liked its setting of pines and birch trees and rolling hills to the east, its clean, wide streets, busy downtown shopping area, and the college that nestled near the shores of Blue Lake before expansion pulled much of it away from the water. His father's paintings and carvings and his mother's profession enabled them to live pretty much where they chose. As his mother said, not ironically, "We like to bring the Indian mystique to as many places as possible."

Billy Cloud wasn't smiling now. Hostility was an uncomfortable emotion to observe, and it was all there was to observe in Mr. Baker's seventh hour class. Billy believed that most students were good people, but you'd never know it by this. The noise in the room had been overwhelming. The current silence was deafening, and had been since the teacher snapped at

the class. You could cut the hostility in the air with a knife, and if you did, you'd hear it flopping like a fish on the floor.

New to the school, he was only beginning to understand the genesis of the problem. It had something to do with a Mr. Gerney who had taught in Blue Lake High School last year. It might also have something to do with Robert Baker's youthful appearance and the uncertainty that danced in his eyes.

There were two things Billy Cloud knew for sure by the time the bell rang. For whatever reason, this class had made a mass decision to rebel against the instructor. And Mr. Baker didn't quite know what to do about it.

### *Greg Schwarz*

Red Howard lifted the whistle around his neck as he seated himself at his desk in the coaches' office. He held it in his hand for a moment. Its tarnished metal coolness pleased him. He opened his palm to talk to it. "You," he said aloud to the whistle, "are an historical icon. You are thirty years old today!"

His assistant coach, history teacher Greg Schwarz, ambled into the office and pushed the door shut behind him. He seated himself in the battered wood office chair that contrasted with Red's ancient leather one. He stretched his muscular legs full length in front of him and ran his long, thick fingers through his short black hair. "Good practice. That Billy Cloud's getting to be a better receiver every day. He and Ed have a real rapport going on with those down-and-outers."

"Yeah, looks good," Howard answered absently. He wheeled his chair around and stared at the flaked green paint on the office wall. "Pete Warrum's driving me crazy, Greg."

"Yup," the other man said. "It was bad enough to hear him at the games. Now he's sitting in the bleachers at half the practices."

Howard scratched his bushy gray-red hair, then folded his arms across his chest. "I've been coaching thirty years here, Greg. Thirty years. I've coached winning teams and teams that couldn't beat their grandmothers. I've coached kids with crew cuts and kids with hair down to their shoulders. I've listened to fathers whining, because their sons weren't playing enough. I've seen kids so buzzed on marijuana they hardly knew I was kicking 'em off the team." The coach straightened and wheeled his chair toward his partner. "But I've never been as sick of a human being as I am of Pete Warrum."

"Yeah," Greg agreed, "a real jerk."

"Greg, we've got a good football team. We've got a chance to go unbeaten. Yet he's trying to mobilize the boys at the coffee shop to get me canned the minute we lose a game. We beat a good Hudson team by thirty-one points, and he has his buddies hollering and booing when I pull the

starters." Howard shook his head. "Makes you wonder what keeps you in this racket."

Howard wheeled his chair back to the desk and stared through the big office window into the locker room. "Look at that kid," he said. Ed Warrum was slumped on the bench in front of his locker, his shoulders sagged, twisting a towel in his hands. "That kid may be the best quarterback in this state, and he's miserable. No matter what he does, it isn't enough." Howard whacked his hand on the desktop. "Is it worth it, Greg? I've coached thirty years. I've laughed and cried with thousands of kids. I love these boys, Greg. I love this game." He pushed away from the desk and stood up. He leaned his stocky frame against the filing cabinet. "I love this stuff, and I'm thinking of resigning, Greg."

"Pete Warrum isn't . . ."

"Pete Warrum is. He's the worst, but far from the only. I've seen kids get sick before games from the pressure their parents applied. I've seen 'em punch their lockers even when we won because they'd screwed up a few times and knew they'd hear about it. But I've never seen a kid hung out to dry like Ed is." He rose. "I'm gonna talk to the kid," he said, opening the office door.

### *Kyle Hunter*

Dinner was done. Kyle Hunter leaned back in his chair and stared at his wife. He liked the way her jeans molded to her hips. He also liked the fact that she was home from the two-week training session in the Cities.

He'd even left the stack of papers he had to correct on his cluttered desk at school. He was glad she was home. He'd missed her.

He pushed back from the table and locked his hands behind his head. "I'll wash the dishes," he said.

She turned and smiled. He liked that smile, the full, natural lips, the straight whiteness of her teeth. "You are a pretty, sexy woman," he said, moving to her and circling her wrists with his hands. "I missed you. More than I knew I would." He kissed her lightly on the forehead, released her wrists and plunged his hands into the soapy dishwater. "I'll wash. It's actually because I hate wiping dishes."

"Me, too," Gail answered, pouring herself a cup of coffee. "That's why I leave them in the drainer to dry. I suppose you're too busy to notice."

That stung. It was a sore subject, one of the weapons she had pulled out and pointed at him when she announced her interview, its success, and her new job.



She'd been ecstatic at first. He thought the whole house was glowing when he came home, but it was the brilliance of her smile and the light

dancing in her eyes that truly shined. The smile had faded when instead of congratulating her, he'd said, "I wish you'd talked to me about it."

First she'd answered, "I wasn't sure I'd make it. I didn't want to say anything until I'd been through the interview."

He'd sighed and sat down next to the stack of papers he'd brought home, the introductory essays that would tell him who those people were who were sitting in his classroom staring at him. "What's it involve?" he asked.

She told him she'd be a buyer for four of the clothing lines sold at Kerns Stores in Blue Lake and four other Kerns Stores in the northern part of the state. She'd be specializing in dresses, jeans, and "intimate apparel." She smirked when she said that. He usually liked a bit of innuendo. His only response was a frown as he thumbed through the papers. "I didn't know this town had so many clothing stores."

"It doesn't," she said. "I just told you I'd be a buyer for Kerns Stores in this part of the state. I'll be doing some traveling."

"Overnighters?"

"A few. Sometimes."

"So you'll be doing some one-nighters," he unwisely added, thinking he would sound salaciously funny.

She ignored the wit in his remark. "Fine!" she said, her hands flying to her hips, her blood boiling to her face. "Fine! Yes, and two-nighters and three-nighters, and even weekers. I'll be making trips to the Cities to attend workshops and fashion shows. I might even go to Chicago. Or New York!"

Kyle tried to cut his losses. "I like it when you're home at night," he said, setting the papers beside him on the couch. "I don't want you to keep the job. Working at Warrum's store part time is enough."

"It isn't enough for me!" she exploded. "It pays minimum wage. I can't stand Pete Warrum and his rat mouth, and I could get laid off at any time." The mirthless smile on her face stretched almost to ugliness. "As opposed to 'laid,' according to you!" Her fingers curled into fists on her hips. "It isn't what I want to be doing tomorrow, much less the rest of my life. I didn't try to major in merchandising in college for that! It's not what I want to do!"

"Apparently neither is being a wife," he shot back before he could stop himself, "who would tell her husband what she's thinking about before the decision's made!"

She stamped her feet. Her middle finger flew into the air. "Is the husband you're talking about the one who dives into his endless stack of papers and journals every night and couldn't hear a firecracker explode in his ear when he's reading! The husband who's always taking college courses that require reading, reading, reading and ten page papers! The husband who can hardly manage to say hello when he struggles home from school at six p.m. because he'd rather coach or correct than come home! The husband

who brings home a hundred journals to entertain himself over vacations! The husband who does the p.a. for games so he won't have to stay home on Friday nights! The one who advises the school paper so he has an excuse to go to the school on weekends!"

Both of them could have stopped, but neither one did. He knew he should have congratulated her in the first place. Instead he'd whined like a child coming home to a house that was empty because his mother was working.

But his blood was shooting through his veins even though there was truth in everything she said. It didn't matter. "I'm a teacher," he shouted, "a damn good one! I work at my profession!" And again he charged over the line, knowing even as he said it that there was as much fiction as fact in the statements he was spitting at her. "I do the extra crap for you! We need the money!" He knew how idiotic the statement sounded and how it fed her fire.

"Yes," she spat back, the heat of her rage carrying her until she loomed directly over his crossed knees, "you're a damn good teacher and a damn poor husband! You don't even talk to me anymore. You're so busy with your damn job and your damn preparations you don't even hear me when I talk to you! You know your students far better than you know me. And you don't even care!" Her anger had burst into tears then, and she'd turned and raged out of the room.

He'd sat on the sofa stunned to numbness by the argument. I'm really out of touch with her, he had admitted to himself. I know Patty Light as well as I know Gail Hunter, and I've just barely met her.



"Silence again?" Gail's voice floated through his thoughts and into his ears. He'd absently finished all of the dishes except for the potato kettle.

"Sorry," he replied. "Thinking."

"About school?"

He let it go. "No. About us."

"And."

He dried his soapy hands on the dishtowel, forgetting that was one of the little things he did that irritated her. Did she want a fight? He didn't. "How was the seminar?"

"It was good. I learned a lot. Oh, lots of stuff reminded me of college, except more current. I have a computer seminar next month for three days in the Cities." Her softened voice acknowledged the sadness in his eyes and the slump in his shoulders.

He leaned against the sink, feeling a little lost and afraid.

"In the Cities?"

"Yes," she retorted, the edge creeping back into her tone.

"Listen," he pleaded, "I'm sorry about the way I've been. It was the change. It scares me." The house felt cold and dusty. He saw the papers

he'd left sprawled around the sofa. "School changes all the time. I didn't want that to happen at home too. But I'd do it differently. I'll try to do it differently now. I'll even try to pick up after myself." He smiled warily.

"You'll kiss my lips instead of my cheek when I leave, or you leave?"

"No. I will drag you by your hair under a pine tree and give you the most ferocious goodbye you ever had," he tried.

She laughed. The tension broke, and she was relieved. She didn't want to be forever angry with this man or to distance herself from him further. Distance had been their problem. Her unhappiness and feelings of confinement for the two years they'd lived in the farming community of Samstown in the western part of the state was where it had started. Actually it was a pretty and friendly place. She'd found that out the year they left. It seemed she was always finding out after it was too late. She'd found out how much she wanted children after her first miscarriage. Up until that merciless day, she hadn't been sure at all. She'd just been endlessly sick.

"I wanted them," she said out of her thoughts.

"What . . ." he asked, confused by her drift.

"The babies. Both of them. I wanted the first one as soon as I lost it, Kyle. I wanted the second one every moment of those three months until it was gone." She leaned into him.

"I know," he replied, knowing that the depth of loss that had hit him had been filled by his busyness. Knowing that wasn't true for her, but determined to let her say it for a change, ready to hear it for a change, here and now in this moment that could heal a breach or widen it. His arms encircled her.

"I'm always looking back, always regretting the time I waste being miserable," she said into his shoulder, tracing the tips of her fingers along it. "Poor Kyle. I must be awful to live with. I'm so sorry." She fell silent, stepping back and rubbing the backs of his hands that now rested lightly on her shoulders.

"Anyway . . . it wasn't that way for the second baby. I was so ready. Every day I thought of names. I could see her face. I remember it rained and rained that autumn. The pine needles sparkled. I was so sure. Oh, Kyle, I lost the baby."

He pulled her close again and her cheek rested against his shoulder. She just let the tears flow, let them flow and flow.

Finally she continued. "So . . . I took all that emptiness inside me, and I wanted you to fill it up. Every day."

"And I didn't do it at all. I didn't even recognize it."

Gail shook her head. "No, don't. You couldn't do it. I just kept wanting you to. I didn't want to feel empty and resentful. I just did. I couldn't figure out what to do about it."

The trouble, Kyle realized, is that I didn't even notice.

Gail lifted her head off his shoulder and slid out of his arms. He felt warm-cold like the wind on a late August evening was wrapping itself around his skin. She wiped her tears with the back of her hands.

"Kyle, I didn't really, really know this until I took this job, until after we had that fight, and I was in the Cities."

He could think of nothing to say, so he said, "Yes." Changes were inevitable, and he could learn to live with them or not. Those were his only choices.