

Introduction

I wrote a teaching memoir titled *Inside Job* in 2000. In it, I told the story of how I grew from a traditional English teacher working in Staten Island, New York, into a more radical teacher working all over the place. The title referred to my gradual realization that I was at my best when I encouraged my students to discover their unique strengths and then put those strengths to good use. This was hardly a new idea, but it was new to me and led me to a life devoted to creative writing.

I enjoyed writing *Inside Job*, and teachers in particular

liked reading it. I wanted to keep writing about schools, but I didn't want to be restricted to what had actually happened to me. Instead, I wanted to choose the narrator. I wanted to decide how much the narrator would know. I wanted to shape characters and situations into complete, credible stories. In other words, I wanted to write fiction.

Forest High, a book of nine short stories, was my first book of fiction. It features rookie teachers, seasoned teachers, struggling teachers, misunderstood teachers, irresponsible teachers, and true teachers. It also tells of motivated students, barely motivated students, cruel students, and compassionate students. The stories happen in school, after school, near school, and far from school and usually involve people facing problems—often of their own making—and trying to come up with solutions. Some characters succeed; many do not.

The reviews were positive, especially from teachers, who thought I exposed a side of teaching that only fiction could reveal.

Back to Forest High is more school fiction. Again by using imagination and memory I have tried to create stories that take advantage of fiction's power to explore singular moments.

—Bob Boone



Ruben's Career Move

Her name was Alice. She looked to be in her forties—slim and serious. She looked like she didn't need to smile. She was there at that first meeting in the late summer and nodded politely when Ruben introduced himself to the other English teachers. She listened while he explained to the group that he had tired of life as an editor, but not of

work. He had always wanted to teach, and now he could do it. He was the new fifty-five-year-old kid on the block.

She had looked at him extra hard that first day. The others smiled agreeably, but she had looked hard and frowned. He was sure she was going to ask a question, but she didn't.

That first night there was an English department gathering at O'Reilly's. Ruben was told that Ben, the department chairman, always had these parties. This year Ben gave out T-shirts. On each was printed: "Watch where you dangle your modifier."

Ruben was never alone that night. The teachers asked predictable questions, and he gave the same answers. He had tired of work with the publishing company. He had left under good terms. He entered a graduate program for returning executives. He got good grades. And now here he was, drinking with his new colleagues. Some of these teachers were about his age, but most were a little younger and some a lot younger.

Toward the end of the evening, Ben stood up on the bar and clapped for attention. He looked about forty years old. Young to be the department head. He wore shorts and a Hawaiian shirt and had an earring. He smiled easily and looked totally relaxed in front of his teachers, who hollered

at him in a good-natured, half-drunken way. He could have handled a press conference for a politician. "I am here," he shouted, "to give you the acronym of the year. Are you all ready?" After more guffawing and groaning from the crowd, he waved them quiet. "The word for this year is—ta-da—SWARM. Each letter stands for a key word. A teaching word." More shouting and guffawing. But he pressed on, "*S* stands for savor as much as you can, *W* stands for watch for opportunities, *A* is ask good questions, *R* is for relax when you can, *M* is motivate. You got that? SWARM." More agreeable grumbling and shouting and finally loud applause.

Ben bowed and then leaped to the floor. Ruben stood in the back. He couldn't help smiling. He couldn't decide if the guy was a lovable fool or something more, but he liked him. He definitely liked him. Just then, he felt someone grab his arm. It was Alice, who leaned up and whispered in his ear, "I bet you didn't have guys like that in the publishing world." He nodded and laughed.

Ruben felt great walking home. Lightheaded from the drinks, he took in the excitement of the street—crowded bars, smiling couples, frantic music, and the smells of burgers and cigarettes. He was much older than the others

on the street, but he felt like he was part of this world, even though he knew how silly it was to think that way. He might have most of his hair, his sharp features, and not many wrinkles; he might walk with a bounce; but he was an older guy. No doubt about it.

He spent the weekend planning. He had five classes—all freshmen. Ben had given him the curriculum and a plan to follow. Ruben had read all the stories and poems in the anthology and made up study plans for the first three weeks. He wanted to cover everything—leave nothing to chance.

Ruben lived alone, and had ever since his divorce. As an editor, he had done the serious work right here at his desk, where he would sit at a stool and hover over manuscripts, carefully removing what was not needed and adding what was missing. His specialty was nonfiction. One of his projects, a book of magic, earned a national editing award.

If he needed company, he'd meet the other editors for lunch, go to a ballgame with old college friends, or play poker or drink beer with his neighbors. That had been enough of a social life—usually.

Then one day while he was finishing a gardening book, he felt his concentration slipping away and in its wake

harsh memories of his failed marriage floated by: vicious arguments in bed, vacations cut short, meals in silence, the decision to stay childless, the long drive home alone from the airport, the frowning and smirking lawyers.

Lately, he had been playing around with the idea of teaching, and somehow these memories of Edna made the notion seem more desirable. If nothing else, he would not be so alone. The people at work understood. It made sense for an editor to become an English teacher. He had always been good at explaining difficult concepts. And, the company was downsizing anyway.

Classes started off well. He assigned stories to read, discussed them in class, and gave quizzes and tests. The kids cooperated. Perhaps they knew he was older and deserved respect. He hoped they responded to his quiet confidence. He was pleased and surprised at how well it had gone. He had feared that once in the classroom, things would be different, but he had nothing to fear.

Every day at lunch Ruben sat with the other English teachers at a long table in the back of the cafeteria. "How do you like this shitty food?" they all wanted to know. He said he liked it, and he did. He had no taste in food. Food

was food. Sometimes he sat next to a man named Bernie, the sponsor of the school newspaper. They talked about basketball. Yes, Ruben did plan to go to the high school games. He could see getting into that.

Alice was always there, perched at the end of the table with a novel and a small salad. Every so often, she'd look up from the book to laugh at the jokes—dirty and otherwise. When it came time to make fun of the principal, a former football player from Dallas, she'd join right in with a Texas drawl, "Well, I guess us coachin' guys can tell you faggots what to teach. If you don't like it, join another team. Sheee-it!"

One day she asked Ruben about editing. He told her how much he had loved smoothing out a book. He told her that he had just lost interest and maybe that's why he was here. He didn't mention Edna. The bell rang and they kept on talking. That's when he found out they were both free the next period and that she stayed on in the cafeteria to grade papers. Pretty soon he stayed on.

At first he graded papers, but soon he found he could talk and she would listen and smile and keep right on grading papers. He described how well his classes were going. Just like he'd imagined. "I ask them to read stories like 'To

Build a Fire,' and they read them. We talk about them. Then they write about them. And I read what they write and return it the next day."

"Well, you're an editor." She looked over and squinted at him. "You are what you do."

"It's what I did. I can show them what they need to do to write a more complete paper. I correct their grammar. I try to be positive. It works." She started to say something but then went back to her stack of AP essays.

That's how it usually went. He'd talk about his classes, she'd nod and smile, and then they would go back to work. Once she showed him what she was doing with her AP essays. He was impressed. "Serious stuff. I'm not ready for that yet."

All through the fall he would be there with her. Classes in the morning, lunch with the teachers, cafeteria with Alice, and a few more classes. When he passed an English teacher in the hall, he'd grin and make sure to say "SWARM" and offer a high five. It was okay. When he had decided to make this career change, he had no idea how quickly he would fit in.

They weren't always alone in the cafeteria. Jesse, one of the janitors, often stopped by. He was at the school when

Alice started twenty years ago. He'd stand by the window, smoke a cigar, and complain about the kids ("animals"), the teachers ("losers"), and the administrators ("morons"). He was especially bitter that "that asshole Evans fired my brother." Alice would smile and nod and keep on grading. Clyde Jones from the biology department occasionally appeared. He was a nervous little man who never seemed to have a reason for being there. When she introduced Clyde the first time, she told Ruben that several years ago they had served together on an evaluation committee. Usually he would sit and shuffle through his papers and sneak peeks at Alice. He never said anything to Ruben. When he talked to Alice, he would ask if she'd "read the latest." Another time he handed her a folder. "Make any changes you want. Stick to one-syllable words." But he wasn't there often and that was fine with Ruben.

Ruben knew that people might wonder what was going on with him and Alice. He wondered if any used the ridiculous term "in a relationship" to describe them. They were both single. But, it wasn't like they were sneaking off to make love in a bus. Anyway, the idea of being the subject of gossip appealed to him. He had never, as far as he could tell, been the subject of gossip.

On weekends he'd read papers and watch football. One Saturday evening, three of his former colleagues from the publishing house paid him a surprise visit.

"How about a drink?"

"Why not? I could use the company."

This brought a big laugh because at work, company was the last thing he needed.

They went to O'Reilly's, where they bought him three beers. They told him how his replacement couldn't do shit as an editor. He told them that teaching was just what he hoped. He liked activity. He got along with the kids and the teachers. He did not mention Alice. On the way back, one of the guys threw an arm around Ruben's shoulder, "I was a real prick in high school. Drove my teachers bat-shit. Watch out for students like me."

Right before winter break, Alice asked Ruben if he was going to the faculty party. He thought so.

"I'm not much of a party person," she said, "but this one is fun. All the teachers pack in to this local restaurant. Everyone is excited about heading out of town or at least being away for awhile."

"I know I'll enjoy it," he said.