



# The Lesson Plan

G.J. Prager

## Chapter 1

It was seven p.m. when I finally turned off the freeway at Lincoln Boulevard. The blonde I'd been tailing for almost an hour was still in my sights. I'd been up since five in the morning and was bone-tired from working two jobs: teaching school by day and playing private detective at night. But babysitting teenagers was only temporary, I reasoned. It would pay my rent till I learned how to snoop full time. I wanted the outdoors and the feel of the chase, not some stultifying classroom teaching prepositions to thirty brats at my throat. I was determined to make this P.I. gig work sooner than later.

The off-ramp was bumper to bumper, a line of circus elephants waiting for their cue. I kept my foot glued to the brake, the road had a grade in it and I didn't want to roll into the guy behind me, especially if he was having a bad day. I checked the dash for the time; it read ten after seven in good old-fashioned analog.

My mind wandered as it usually did in traffic. I kept thinking about all the money gathered around me, corporate hacks in luxury sedans on their way home to Brentwood. It didn't seem fair sitting lock-jawed in my cramped jalopy while they got massaged in their do-it-all powered leather seats. I thought about that oil change I'd been meaning to get to. And the Mexican beside me in his battered pickup; he was too close for comfort with his rickety old ladder hanging over the side.

I peered up at a sunless sky, solid gray with no cracks in the lining. That June gloom wasn't leaving town yet. News bulletins were streaming out of my door speakers, something about terrorists on the border and severe weather up north. It got me thinking the world was coming to an end. I was feeling a lot like that lately, like the sky was falling. All the talk about the new millennium was making me nervous, so I kept looking up, just to make sure.

I switched off the news and put on a jazz station. I was singing along to pass the time when a cop finally appeared and began directing traffic. He was all business, waving his hands and pointing in different directions, and in no time cars were moving again. I stepped on the clutch, put down some gas, and rolled up a few feet, only to stop again behind the late model BMW I'd been tailing. The blonde up front didn't look much older than twenty-four. I wondered where she got her dough, something I wonder about a lot around here. These kids with their Beemers, me and my ancient Honda, there's gotta be a better way.

The Beemer was moving staccato-like, it heaved and jerked like some lesser car would and I attributed that to its owner. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but admire the demeanor of all that steel in front of me. I fixated on it for a few moments until it jerked out into the intersection and made a left turn. I was finally at the head of the line, and all my frustration went out the window; it went up to sock heaven or something. I made a left turn and proceeded to follow the blonde.

She didn't know I was tailing her, and wasn't much of a driver, either. Her left turn signal was still blinking but she wasn't turning, and she kept feinting right but wasn't switching lanes. For a moment I thought she might be on to my doings, but something told me she

was just another air-head taking up space around here - not a far-fetched notion in this burg. A few more blocks of overwrought driving told me I was right. A turn on Bay and a left on seventh, and she slid right into an underground garage and out of sight. I had my tail's destination and my afternoon's work was almost finished. All I had to do now was find out which unit she was heading for and proceed home for dinner and a little rest and relaxation watching the tube. A poor man's night on the town indeed.

I watched her exit the garage and climb a short stairway that led to a second floor balcony. She looked great: tall and thin with hair that was straight and golden and fell softly over her shoulders. I wondered where they cut the mold for girls like that. They're all over this town, just waiting to be scooped up by Hollywood or wherever else beauty is bought and sold around here.

My attention was suddenly diverted by a classic rock song; it put me in a sentimental mood but caused me to miss seeing her walk through the door. I had no choice but to start doing some old-fashioned gumshoeing. I was giddy about getting started in this new career and the idea of playing Sam Spade had me all pumped up. But I had to be careful, I didn't want her catching on. I just needed to beg a few pardons till I found the right door.

They were pretty-looking condos, three units in all. Through the large bay windows, you could see the polished oak staircases descend from an upstairs bedroom to a ground floor den. They were officially known around here as town homes; they looked a lot more like overpriced apartments to me.

I knocked on the first door, just to try out my new chops. "Yes?" The voice went up instead of down, not atypical for this neck of the woods. He wasn't opening the door, either, so I spoke up loud and clear:

"Sorry to disturb you. I live across the street and I'm looking for my cat. A gray cat. Have you seen one roaming around the neighborhood lately?" I figured he'd warm up to cats.

He opened the door and greeted me with a big smile. "I'm sorry about your cat. I don't think I've seen a gray one around lately." He was short and muscular with perfectly straight teeth. His hair was thick in front with a buzz cut on the side and a diamond stud was embedded in his ear. He wore a yellow and green Hawaiian shirt that hung loosely over a pair of tight fitting shorts. He looked happy to see me.

I spoke quickly. "I'm just checking. I'm sure I'll find him somewhere."

"Why don't you put up a poster with his picture," he offered, showing off his teeth. "That usually helps." I was trying to steal a look around him, but the guy took up a lot of space in the doorway.

"Good idea. I'll get to work on that right away.. How about the lady of the house? Maybe she's seen my cat?" I had to make sure.

"No, I live alone. But if I see your cat wandering around who should I call?"

I had to think fast. "Well if you do find him just you know, hang on to him and I'll get back to you. And thanks anyway."

He'd caught on to my nervous meanderings and politely let me off the hook, still smiling as he closed the door.

I moved on to the next apartment; one down and two to go. I rang the doorbell instead of knocking; it's more polite that way. A couple of excitable hounds started barking.

"Who's there?" A sharp, husky voice responded.

"U.S. Census Bureau. Do you live alone or is this a multiple family unit?"

"Get lost."

"Sure." I couldn't argue with that.

Only one unit remained, so I figured it was the blonde's and didn't bother knocking. I had all the information I needed and didn't blow my cover, either. I was quite proud of myself and was all set to head home. But as I turned to leave I noticed her door was slightly ajar, which seemed odd. I stuck my head inside for the hell of it. Like I said, they were pretty- looking condos.

There were no lights on, but something caught my eye a short way down the foyer. A set of shapely legs stuck out from an opened doorway; they seemed rigid and lifeless in the darkness. I slipped in quietly and tiptoed across the polished oak floor. When I reached the doorway I saw the blonde lying on the floor, but before I could blink an eye I felt a sharp sting at the back of my head. It was the last thing I remembered.

When I came to, the place was pitch black and eerily quiet. I fumbled around till I found a doorknob; I held on to it and clawed my way up along a wall, groggy and unsteady. The back of my head was throbbing furiously. I turned on a light switch by the side of the door and scanned the room. The floor was stained with blood and so were the walls, but the blonde was gone. I got the hell out as fast as I could.

## Chapter 2

Home was a bachelor's unit with no kitchen, save for a small stove and a half-sized refrigerator. It sat high on a cabinet and kept me from calling a chiropractor each time I reached for a beer. The only windows in the place were two that met at the corner by my bed and a smaller one in the bathroom. That one had a pretty view, so I kept the bathroom door opened at all times to keep things in perspective.

The bed also gave me an impressive perch to view from. I was on the second floor of an eight unit building that looked like a Motel Six from a certain distance. It was situated on a hill overlooking the rest of the block which was the best part of living there.

During the day I could see through the branches of the trees and view all the other houses along the street. The sky lit up like an overhead floodlight and gave the place a desert sheen even in winter. I could watch the cars and the people and their pets go by like I was watching a big screen movie, imagining myself above everyone else like I was master of the estate and they all worked for me. I'm not delusional; I just like a little fantasy now and then. It gets me out of bed on my worst days.

An old, worn out, polyester carpet runner that had followed me around various addresses stretched out across the room from the door entrance. A Tiffany style chandelier with one cracked pane and antique aspirations hung above the door at the entrance. It wasn't worth much, but it certainly added a little class to the place. There was some old stereo equipment stacked up against the wall along with a TV set I purchased with a loan from an old girlfriend, which I never paid back. We broke up before I had the opportunity, but I saw it as just compensation.

Most of my belongings were old. I hadn't been much of a consumer for quite a while, and it was beginning to bother me. I had a long list of items I wanted to buy just to keep up with everyone else. It gets to the point that you fall too far behind and start feeling like you're in a parallel, Third World universe. It gets pretty hard on your self-esteem.

Homer was standing in the middle of the room, wagging his tail and slowly retreating towards the other end of the apartment. He had a guilty look on his snout, and I had a tendency to lose it at the sight of his mistakes like a well-meaning but angry father.

But at the moment my head felt like it was squeezed in a vice, so I made nice just to prevent the blood from coagulating. I even apologized to the bare walls for not coming home earlier and walking him at his proper hour. Homer seemed grateful and his sulking ended when I stroked his thick yellow mane and patted him on the head. Nevertheless, I still had to clean up his mess.

I was hungrier than I thought, so I decided on a steak, which I threw in the oven along with a large potato. I got out a can of peas for my salad and opened a bottle of beer, which I quickly guzzled down in turn. I was low on bourbon, so I poured what was left in a glass and ran it down, too. I was a nervous wreck and my head was still pounding, so I reached in the fridge for another beer. I started knocking that back too, but I went easy this time, savoring it like some expensive champagne.

I stared down at my arm, it was scratched up and I had what looked like a bite mark on my neck, too. I must've run into Dracula back at the apartment. It seemed like someone tried playing a practical joke, but that blonde sure looked dead to me.

I settled back on a small couch and slipped into a kind of meditation. I fixated on a tree branch just outside the window and started counting the pine bristles scratching up against the glass. I got up to ten when the phone rang, scaring the hell out of me.

"Hello?" I said hesitantly, pressing the phone to my ear.

"Did you get the address?" The gravelly voice sounded rushed.

"Hi, Cal." It was my mentor, the old gumshoe, calling for an update on the blonde, no doubt.

"Well, did you get it?"

"Got it, no problem." I wasn't yet sure if I should report what I just went through, I couldn't believe it myself.

"You watched her walk in the door?"

"Not exactly."

"Wadaya mean? Either you saw her or you didn't."

"I didn't see her walk in the door, but I saw her inside the unit. I know where she lives, Cal. I got all the info." He stayed silent. "What's next? I'm hungry for more action."

"What?" He roared back. "You didn't see her walk in the door, but you saw her inside her condo? What the fuck are you talking about?"

I was trembling as I tried to put voice to my words. "I think she's dead, Cal," I blurted out. "I saw her lying on the floor in her apartment. She wasn't moving. Then I got knocked out before I could identify her."

"Are you shittin' me, Klayman?"

"Why would I shit you, Cal?"

"How'd you get in?"

"The door was open."

"She's dead, huh?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't check?"

"She wasn't there when I came to."

"She just disappeared on you, is that it?"

"I know it sounds crazy, Cal, but that's it in a nutshell."

“Just forget it. You never saw her.”

“She might be dead. Shouldn't we go to the authorities?”

“Hold your horses, Klayman. Who told you to go in there in the first place. You know the saying, ‘curiosity killed the cat?’”

“I couldn't help myself.”

“You better learn to if you want to live another day in this business.”

“What are we going to do now?”

“I've run up against this before. Her buddies caught you snooping and wanted to give you a run for it. They were trying to scare you off. She's probably having dinner right now at some fancy restaurant. Don't sweat it.”

“You're sure?”

“Yeah. Just forget it.”

“I wish I could forget this headache. Boy, they really gave it to me, Cal.”

“If you want to be in this business you better get used to it.”

“Does this happen often?”

“Of course not,” he roared again. “As long as you listen to me. I'm gonna make sure of that.”

“That suits me, Cal. I feel like I'm in way over my head already.”

“This business is unpredictable. You could be chasing down an errant husband one day and then find his wife in some other guy's bed the next.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Take it easy, kid. You're just getting started. I got some more work in store for you. Just don't go snooping where you shouldn't. Call me back tomorrow and we'll talk about it. I've got a list of things for you to do before you earn your stripes.”

“I figure I earned some tonight.”

“Just keep your shirt on, Klayman. You're not ready to take on a client. Figure out how to tail someone before you move on to the next step. You just work with me a while and you'll learn something.”

“Sure, Cal. But I don't like gofer work.”

“Gofer work! Now you just hear me out if you know what's good for you. This is a dangerous business; you better know what the fuck you're doing before you go out there tailing someone.”

His voice had that Godfather edge to it, which sounded awfully phony. But everyone thinks they're in the movies around here.

“Okay, you’re right,” I confessed. “But Cal, I’m not prepared for these situations. Say I come across some lug who doesn’t like my face and wants to start in, or some prank like they played on me tonight.”

“Just keep your distance. You’ll be all right. And don’t go sticking your nose where it don’t belong. You’re not packin’ heat, are ya?”

“I’m wondering it might be a good idea for insurance, for peace of mind. You know what I mean?”

“You’re going around with a gun?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Get rid of it, for crissake. You don’t need it, not now. You don’t know what the fuck you’re doing yet. Listen to me, Klayman. Get rid of it.”

“I told you I’m not carrying. Didn’t you hear me the first time?”

“Get rid of it.”

“But Cal, what if some guy wants to plug me for following him around with some broad? Life’s cheap around here. There are monsters on the street. People get killed in this town every day.”

“Put your gun in your drawer and keep it there, for crying out loud. Nobody’s gonna kill you if you keep your distance.”

“There was blood all over her floor, Cal! And I saw it on the walls, too. That girl might be dead.”

“Boy, are you easily fooled. It’s tough, kid, I know. You’ll get used to it. Just put the gun away for now.”

“I’ll do that, Cal. I will. I’m just imagining things.”

“Relax, you had a rough day. You’ve seen a lot. Most people never go through what you just experienced. You’re doing fine, otherwise. I’ll talk with you tomorrow. Goodnight.”

“Yeah, Cal, we’ll talk again tomor... .” He hung up. The guy sure had no manners.

I sat there holding an empty can of beer while I fingered the bump that was still growing at the back of my head. I got up and poured another drink out of a half empty vodka bottle that was sitting on the fridge, then considered the advice Cal had given me.

My gut feeling told me he was absolutely right. I had better be careful around this town. These Hollywood clients paid extremely well to tame their insecurities. They want to know what the wife is up to during business hours when they’re raking in the dough, who she’s screwing while they toil away at some production meeting. And they want to know what their shady business associate is up to behind their backs, or whether some hit man is trailing them. They pay very well for this sort of information. One small mistake and I might end up at the bottom of a trashcan the next time out.



The early morning wakeup call from the district's sub desk seemed like a distant memory to me now. I fell on the bed like a log, ready for a good night's sleep. A full moon beamed brightly through the blinds; you could use a pair of visors around here, even at midnight. I thought about ditching the gun my next time out. It's not too wise to be walking around such a litigious town like this with a piece of hardware in your pants. If the cops don't get you, the lawyers will.

It was past ten. I needed to get some sleep for another early morning wake-up, but I kept thinking about the strange sequence of events: the young blonde in her Beemer, her shapely legs sticking out the bedroom, the blood stained floor and walls, Cal's dismissive explanation, and the phone that was going to ring at six in the morning.

There was a hell of a lot on my mind, including a long day of substitute teaching ahead. That job was a real albatross, but there was no way around it. I was lucky this town had school in session all year long. It worked well with my game plan and kept those eviction notices happily off my door.

I rolled over and finally slipped off to sleep; this time it was easy as turning a dial. But the acrid smell of burned meat suddenly came streaming up my nose, jarring me out of my brief repose. I shot out of bed and pulled the charred steak out of the oven, brushing my hand against the hot grill while I was at it. The steak was black on the outside, but a poke with a fork to inspect below the surface gave me some hope of eating it one day.

I wrapped it in aluminum foil and shoved it in the fridge along with a half-baked potato, then slid my hand under the faucet and ran cold water over it. I got back in bed in worse shape, but dreamland beckoned and I fell right to sleep.

## Chapter 9

Homer wanted to go out, so we walked over to one of the dog parks scattered about Santa Monica, empty grassless spaces spread out with wood chips and dog feces and a eucalyptus tree or two which give much needed shade during the sun-filled days. These were once people parks that had recently been converted to serve the local canines. You could hear the tumult almost a block away: yelps, growls and howls, and the chitter-chatter between the dog owners, who liked being there almost as much as their dogs. It wasn't even noon and I'd already made love twice and gone limp on a girl. I needed a break.

Homer didn't waste any time as he came crashing through the front gate. He made a beeline for a cocker spaniel half his size and almost bit the little cutie's head off. I ran as fast as I could down the hill, caught hold of Homer's tail, and pulled him off the poor dog, just in time to catch hell from the owner, an elderly lady who thought Homer shouldn't be coming to the park in the first place. She might have been justified in her wrath, but the thought of stepping into the park and getting the third degree from some old bag before I could even park my tired body on a bench was the last straw for me. I gave Homer a good scolding, leashed him back up, and got out of there in a hurry. What was left of the day couldn't end soon enough.

I got back, grabbed a can of beer from the fridge and started boiling water for a pasta meal. I cut up half an onion and two tomatoes, dressed it up with corn oil and white vinegar, put on the news, and plopped on the sofa, savoring the beer to the last drop. It was a magic moment when I'm not in my car on some deadlocked, choking freeway, and I can safely watch the world unfold before me inside a thirteen-inch Sony color TV. Life wasn't so bad after all.

The phone rang. It was Sheila. Right off the bat she sounded agitated which led me to expect the worst. I was like a guy ready to parachute out of a plane as I sat on the edge of the sofa and coursed through her every word.

For a minute or so nothing made sense, but I soon realized it wasn't me but some other guy who was causing her grief. The more she spoke, the more I realized how sad she was. I never would have guessed that it was part of her life in a million years.

It seems that her ex-husband, the father of her eleven year-old boy, Joe, stole him away four years ago on a quiet Santa Monica street as he was coming home from school. The bum ran off with Joe and his new wife to Montana or Idaho, I didn't quite get it all, and that she hadn't seen her kid since. She was in tears when she finished telling me her story, and almost had me crying too.

She was telling me all this because I'd mentioned that I was a private detective, and was calling to offer me an opportunity to do something about her sad situation. She wasn't giving details, but I figured it would be nothing less than some daring rescue operation that could put me behind bars for a long time, or get me killed in the wilds of some barren Montana wheat field or whatever they grow out there.

On the other hand, I felt honored in a way that I never did as a teacher. The idea of getting paid for doing a hero's job gave me confidence in myself once again. All that bitterness and discontentment flies right out the window when someone sees your true potential in this world.

I wanted to tell her that I'd do it right away and hang any misgivings I might have about it, but I thought I'd better cool my heels before making any promises. I told her it was an interesting proposition but I'd have to check a few things out before I could give her an answer. We said our goodbyes, and as I hung up the phone I went back to work on my meal, rinsing the noodles and setting the plate on the little oak table I procured at a yard sale years ago. I started on the salad first, and began eating in complete satisfaction at the way things were starting to turn out.

## Chapter 10

The fates must have been looking out for me because the voice on the line that rustled me out of bed the next morning offered a whole week's worth of paydays teaching at a high school not too far from my cave. I quickly accepted, jotted down the pertinent information, and sat back on the sofa to gather my thoughts.

I considered the proposition Sheila laid out to me the day before; the more I thought about it the more ridiculous it seemed. I thanked heaven and hell I hadn't accepted her invitation to mayhem, closed my eyes, and tried retrieving some of the delicious slumber that had enveloped me just minutes before. But instead of snoozing, I began to consider the conditions I'd make plain before going through with her offer.

Money hadn't been discussed in our conversation, though I expected a considerable fee for my troubles. I still wasn't sure what she had in mind, but being somewhat of a risk taker and without much to lose, I was ready to do anything to kick-start this private detective business. I needed a few references as well as some sort of a resume to get things going. Besides, I'd never been to Montana.

By the time I got through all that consternating, I had to make haste to get to my new gig. I washed up and threw on a pair of blue jeans, tennis shoes and a black polo shirt; it was all I needed to look presentable for the environment I was about to enter.

After walking Homer a little longer than usual, I arrived at Jackson High fifteen minutes late. I got a dirty look from the secretary, an ancient sight with short white hair, spectacles, and wrinkles that folded up in layers on her face, like one of those funny-looking Chinese dogs. She was on the phone, and I assumed from her bitter disposition that she'd been trying to get another substitute to replace me. I apologized profusely for the trouble I may have caused, which toned down her mood and softened the folds on her face. But not enough, it seemed.

"You need to get here by seven thirty-five from now on, Mr. Klayman."

"I'll be here on time tomorrow, no problem," I assured her.

"I know. But I have to dock you fifteen minutes."

I fell silent, seething inside. But I didn't grumble about it.

"Here are the keys and bell schedule. Return them to me at the end of the day," she said, stiffly. I took the items and walked away in haste.

I checked the teacher's mailbox for material. It was empty except for the homeroom folder, the Holy of Holies around here. I picked up a free newspaper that was lying in a stack on a side table and proceeded directly to my duties, passing the main desk on the way and catching a another sneer from that menopausal secretary.

"Why the hell don't they ever smile?" I muttered to myself.

When I got to the classroom I found stacks of worksheets and homework papers laid out on the teacher's desk, as well as a blackboard full of instructions and review questions. There wasn't a lot for me to do except read the teacher's lesson plans, return their graded homework, and hand out worksheets.

I took care of that business immediately after offering up a short introduction, and within fifteen minutes everyone was settled into a social studies assignment. I sat back in a comfortable and sturdy oak swivel chair and tried relaxing for a few moments, knowing that my next month's rent would now be paid and food would be on the table. I also had a week to decide whether to go to Montana and risk life and limb for little Joe. My eyes started to close as I began to snooze off.

I was asleep for what seemed like a few seconds, but when I opened my eyes a young lady was standing over me with a mischievous smile on her face. The students were giggling and whispering to each other. I was currently the center of their attention. Luckily for me these were high school seniors and they took my little nap in stride. It clearly didn't warrant the breakout of pandemonium that would likely have occurred if it were a younger group I was babysitting. That would have brought the attention of an assistant principal or two to sort out the ruckus and presumably end my weeklong assignment. Nevertheless, I felt embarrassed and sat there bug-eyed for a long moment, staring back at all the looks I was getting.

"You fell asleep," I heard the young vixen say. She was dressed in a low-cut blouse that coddled her large fleshy breasts and showed off a firm but slightly flabby midriff. Her long legs stretched out from cutoff jeans, which seemed to fray just below her crotch.

"Couldn't be."

"You did," came a chorus of howls from the classroom.

"Just for a minute or two," I protested. "Don't get carried away."

"Ten minutes! We were watching you, mister," came a clear and confident voice from somewhere across the room.

"All right, forget it. It won't happen again."

The young lady smiled at me once more and sauntered back to her seat methodically, keeping all eyes perched on her till she finally sat down at her desk. She had long dark hair with platinum highlights, black lipstick that outlined her lips, and mascara you could see a mile away. Despite the tacky makeup, she exuded quite a bit of sex appeal. This girl knew how to market herself very well.

I couldn't stop looking, either. After a minute of that I realized I was breaking every school code in the book. A couple of guys were looking at me curiously and I caught a little smirk settling on their faces, so I picked up the newspaper and started reading the front page again.

The next thing I knew I was walking around the room to keep from falling back to sleep, and more often than not my gaze would fall back on the young vixen. I couldn't help

myself. She had her antennae out too, it seemed, and returned my gaping with her own curious looks.

“What’s your name?” I asked to my own surprise as I sat back down. A nervous feeling rolled around my gut. I knew I wasn’t supposed to be doing this.

“Maria Castro,” she replied. That smile was still pasted on her face.

I quickly scanned the roll book till I got to her name and birth date, then swiftly calculated her age. A tingle ran down my spine when I realized she was legal. It suddenly dawned on me how dangerous things could easily get.

The bell rang and everyone filed out of the room in no apparent haste, particularly Maria, who was the last one to leave. It was a sudden opportunity to chat her up, and I felt sure her intentions were like-minded. I was feeling some kind of perverted entitlement as her teacher, even though every damn alarm bell in my head was going off.

Just as she was about to leave the room, she turned around and locked on to my gaze. I lost control and moved through the aisles ready to give her a compliment regarding her hairdo. I had all the words lined up and ready to go, but when I reached the back of the room she turned and slipped out the door.

“What the hell was I thinking? Thank God she had enough sense,” I muttered. It was going to be a tough week ahead, I realized. And with everything else on my plate, I had to get teenage girls off my mind pronto.

At lunchtime I found my way to the cafeteria and got on a long line that stretched all the way back to the entrance. Everyone seemed to know each other, which made me feel left out. I scoured the room like a hawk from his perch, looking for someone to sit with. I noticed a teacher I’d worked with before. He was chowing down on a sandwich in the corner. That lonely feeling fell away; I could hardly wait to get to his table and start up a conversation.

With only ten minutes left for lunch, I finally made it to him with my chicken nuggets and side of cabbage, an apple, and a small orange drink. But I wasn’t feeling all that conversational anymore.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” he chirped.

“I’m starting to get steady work,” I said, feigning enthusiasm. I took a seat next to him. “I’m sorry but I forgot your name.”

“Steven Brewer, and I forgot yours.”

“Bob Klayman.” He stuck out his hand and I shook it. “You get a lot of work here, Steve?”

“I’m practically a regular.”

“It seems like a good school. Relatively speaking, of course.”

“There are a few bad apples, but it’s better than most schools. I’m glad to hear you’re getting more work.”

“More than I can handle,” I fibbed.

“Good. Just keep taking anything they give you. That’s the way to get on their A list.”

“Yeah,” I replied, not thinking. I doubled back. “A list? What’s that?”

“That’s the list of teachers they call first each morning who get the better assignments. If you’re not on that list you end up going to more than your share of troubled schools. You get the bottom of the barrel. It really pays to be on it,” he said quite casually.

“How much worse than this could it be?”

“Much worse, believe me.”

I was feeling some kind of pressure from this guy. My mind was wandering now. I watched some of the other teachers as they finished their lunch and got up to go back to their classrooms. I couldn’t fathom myself in their shoes, suffering through the same rigmarole day-in and day-out for twenty or thirty years. It seemed unfair with such a short human life span. I started to feel a little nauseous.

He got up to leave. “It was good seeing you again. Maybe we’ll have lunch again tomorrow.” I was just starting on my chicken nuggets.

“Yeah, I’ll look for you,” I replied.

He suddenly sat back down. “Let me give you some advice. I’ve been taking credentialing classes in the evenings at Daedalus University. Not too expensive, and they break early. You never have to stay late. I’ll be done next semester and I’ll probably start looking for a position here. It really beats day-to-day subbing. It’s less stressful working in one place, knowing where you’re going every day, and it pays better, too.”

“I guess so.”

“Well, just the same, I thought I’d tell you.”

“Congratulations. I’m sure there’ll be lots of positions waiting for you at this school,” I said through a mouthful of chicken nuggets.

“Are you interested in getting credentialed?”

“No. Not really.” I didn’t want another sermon from this guy.

“It’ll get you on the salary schedule and you could move up from there. You’re stuck in a box when you sub. You can’t make more than a first year teacher’s salary. Might as well get a real job and go full-time the way I see it. Unless you have another career you’re working on.” He was sounding like a Jehovah’s Witness, and I could sense he needed reinforcement for his own goals. Some people start telling you what’s best for you when they’re really trying to shore up their own doubts.

“I have another gig,” I said tersely.

“What’s that?”

“I’m a private detective.”

His face became slightly contorted. “When do you find time to do that?”

“In the evenings.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Sometimes,” I said quite casually.

“It sounds exciting.”

“That’s why I do it.”

“Where did you learn the skills to take on that kind of work?”

“There’s no credential involved,” I quipped. “It’s just a knack you pick up. Takes time, though.”

“Well...the best of luck to you.” He smiled politely and got up. This time he walked away.

I wanted to say something but I held back. Whatever it was, it quickly got lost in the shuffle. I had a lot on my mind now. Steady paychecks, pension plans, health benefits, vacations, real estate - all of that came rushing down on me like water from a crumbling dam.

That self-righteous upstart had gotten to me, and I started raging at all the conformity he was promoting. I stuffed my mouth with the last of my chicken nuggets and looked around the room in disgust. My heart was pounding like a bass drum on parade; I felt light-headed and dizzy, and my feet didn’t want to move. I had two minutes to get back to the classroom and I was having a god-damn panic attack. I tried but I couldn’t shake it off. Something was telling me I’d better get to a doctor or just get the hell out of the damn place. But as I made for the exit the panic suddenly lifted, and I settled down just enough to get back to class, feeling the worse for it, but I stayed till the last bell.

By mid-week things began to simmer down between the vixen and me. We must’ve realized we’d gone too far that first day, and by Wednesday all those sparks were damped down quite a bit. For one thing, she had on a new wardrobe with a lot less southern exposure, though her top hung low enough for me to glean over every now and then and still get a cheap thrill. Anything more than that was off the table, as I knew it should be. Sheila had called the night before and set up a dinner date at her home to discuss her business proposition in more detail. It seemed a lot more sensible to be around older women, period.

My lunch break was spent again with Mr. Brewer, but I steered him away from any talk about his teaching credential. When I mentioned in passing the little story of my snoozing and the hot little vixen that interrupted me, he gave me a juicy piece of business regarding her tryst with a physical education teacher that occurred the year before.



It seems that the young lady was caught in a compromising position in the weight-lifting room with this guy who took his job a little too literally. But his luck ran out when a hardworking janitor interrupted his little fling right after school let out one day. The janitor, like the good Catholic he was, reported the incident to the higher authorities at the school. And though the teacher should be in jail right now for committing fellatio with a minor, he's currently teaching at another school in the district and our vixen is finishing up her studies here. I took it all in with relish, feeling like a saint next to someone like that, though not a little bit of lust flowed through my veins for the rest of the afternoon. Mr. Brewer also informed me that a number of female teachers at the school were quite hot to trot for available men. I looked at him like he was some sort of mental case.

"Look around and tell me who you would go to bed with in this cafeteria right now," I demanded.

"Well," he looked about with a grimace, "It's hard to say. No one here right now. But I've seen a few. In fact I'm—"

"You're what?" I challenged.

"You're right. There's nothing here but scraps, I suppose."

"You're damn right, old boy," I said in my best Gatsby manner, "you're damn right. This environment is detrimental to a lady's disposition. It eats away at her, and before she knows it she's a hag and a scold and an old bag, to boot."

"Well, I better get going," he said abruptly. "My class is way across campus."

"Yeah, you better get going. Concentrate on your credential, old boy, and don't get any crazy notions in your head." I broke into a smile as he turned and walked away, but some kind of anger was welling up inside me and I was sure glad to see him go.

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