

School Dogs

a short fiction

Regular teachers generally ignore substitutes — kind of a caste thing, almost. Lord knows we all need to feel more important than somebody. So even though several folks sat around the teachers' lounge during "B" lunch period that day, nobody paid much attention to Chad Kineski. And that suited Chad just fine. He was paying very close attention to a fellow substitute.

Chad's attentions at the moment focused on Sheryl Drott, a tall, almost heavy woman of perhaps 35 or 40. Sheryl's red hair shone lush and wild against the violet and green print design of her full skirt and her bulky yellow sweater. At least a dozen silver gypsy bracelets jangled on her wrists. A slight gap between her two front teeth appeared whenever she flashed her big, wide smile. She smiled as Chad rolled up the sleeves of his black rayon shirt, drew his chair just a bit closer and said, "Regular teachers here don't say much to subs, do they?"

"Oh, are you subbing too?" Sheryl turned slightly in her chair, placing her left elbow on her left knee just so, with her hand palm-up. She enunciated as carefully as she sat. If teachers had a fashion magazine, Sheryl's studied propriety would have made her a cover girl. "I saw you in the office this morning when I signed in," she said. "I was dealing with so many things, though... It's my first assignment here in Seattle."

"Takes a while to learn the system, and what they tell you downtown doesn't help much." Chad reached for the quart carton of orange juice on the coffee table — his lunch. "Where're you from?" He took a long drink directly from the carton.

"Denver. And you?"

schooldogs

“Midwest, mostly...” Through the window behind Sheryl, Chad noticed a solitary crow sitting atop the flagpole, and three big dogs chasing each other around the front yard of the house across the street. “I’ve been subbing since early last spring. I held out for a regular teaching job as long as I could.” He didn’t mention the child support judgement that had forced him to take the first work he could get.

“I know how you feel. When I decided to move, subbing was the farthest thing from my mind.” Just for an instant, Sheryl’s gaze softened and lowered. Then she looked sharply at Chad. “The way they’re always screaming for teachers, seems like it’d be easier to get a regular position.”

Chad sensed her bewilderment, her confusion — feelings familiar to him since the divorce. Back home, he had felt excluded, rejected. Couples avoided him. Even his old friends seemed to distance themselves. He couldn’t be sure what he felt was real, how much was his imagination. He left to get away more than to be somewhere else.

His gaze caught several boys and girls scuffling halfheartedly in the schoolyard, just outside the window of the teacher’s lounge. He missed the familiarity that allowed such nonchalant contact. “Folks are wary of strangers these days, especially in schools. Ya see in the news all the time about teachers caught messing around with the kids. Crazy, weird stuff, ya know?”

“Yes, and it’s too bad, not only because of work. I miss the old days when people were open to one another.” She gazed into the space between them and smiled a small, somber-eyed smile. “So we have to substitute, at least to start...” She set the drink down and straightened her back. “But the independence is great.”

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The way she said *independence* made Chad wonder momentarily whether she might be talking about her personal life as well as her teaching. She had the soft look of home life, but the barely-concealed uncertainty of a woman newly on her own. He let it pass.

After a pause she added, "I think they'll eventually offer me a contract."

Chad observed idly as one of the boys outside the window — a thin, sharp-faced blond kid beginning adolescence — showed more aggression than the others, pushing them around a little. A dark-haired girl at the edge of the group eyed the kid.

Chad's glance darted from the kids to the dogs across the street, then back to Sheryl. "Won't you miss the freedom of moving around, a different school every day?"

"I taught in the same school in Denver for..." Sheryl glanced at the dogs, then back to Chad. "A long time. But... freedom at the cost of being an outsider?"

The boys tossed a few rocks at the crow on the flagpole, but the crow sat tight.

"Once ya get used to subbing it's not bad work. When ya leave work for the day, your responsibility ends. No extra stuff to take home." Chad couldn't keep his eyes off the cavorting dogs. "So how ya doin' today? Classes OK?"

"Oh, everything's going fine." She took another bite from her sandwich, and a bite off her carrot. Her eyes followed Chad's gaze out the window as she chewed. The dogs were having a time, chasing one another in the yard across the street. One was mostly black, part Lab. Another looked to be Irish Setter, and the third yellow and white, with a bandana around his neck. All three were pretty good size, the Setter female. "What subjects do you teach?"

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“My certificate’s for social science.” Chad noticed the blond kid lighting a cigarette right there on the school grounds. “But I’m in for an English teacher today.” He sipped more orange juice. The yellow dog and the setter were romping pretty intensely, and the Lab moseyed off. “I’ve got ninth graders. Way too old for their age.”

The crow kept an eye on the kids below, but seemed to be mainly watching the dogs, just like Chad and Sheryl. It fidgeted some, but stayed on the flagpole.

“I usually have all grades. I teach music.” The yellow mutt tried to mount the setter, but she wanted to play some more. Sheryl looked away from the dogs, directly at Chad. “Voice, actually.” Then she glanced back as the yellow got himself pretty well mounted on the setter. “I’ve got girls’ choir, boys’ choir, chorale singing, folk singing and a study hall.”

The crow was making raucous calls and jumping up and down without actually lifting its feet from the flagpole, the way crows do. Sheryl absently took another bite from her sandwich, another from her carrot. The boys passed the cigarette around, then the blond kid offered it to the dark-haired girl. They all watched the dogs, too.

At first the dark-haired girl refused the smoke, then he cajoled her, so she took a drag. She coughed several times, then looked at the blond kid as though for approval. He took it back from her, dragged deeply and spat on the ground.

Chad sipped more juice. He noticed the hot blush on Sheryl’s neck and face. He was feeling a little flushed, too. “That setter’s a really pretty dog, y’know?” The yellow dog was humping into thin air, unable to connect.

Sheryl tore her gaze away from the dogs to the kids, and pretended not to hear. Then she flashed that slightly gap-toothed smile again. “It’s true. She’s pretty.” Sheryl looked back at the dogs, giving up the pretense of non-interest. “I love dogs.”

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The yellow one finally found the spot and got hooked up, and the two began working slow and easy, the setter pushing back and licking the yellow mutt's shoulder. The crow watched quietly, shifting around but not leaving the flagpole. The kids watched and passed the cigarette. The dark-haired girl stood next to the blond kid.

The bell rang, signalling five minutes to the end of "B" lunch. Regular teachers who hadn't already left began filing out the door, into the hall. Chad and Sheryl stared at the dogs. Chad's trousers were binding him a bit, so he stood up and leaned on the windowsill. He reached for Sheryl's hand and helped her up out of the chair, and the two of them stood at the window. The dogs were going to it. Instead of letting go when Sheryl stood up, Chad squeezed her hand. "Jeez, those dogs... So free."

Sheryl made no move to free her hand. "Do you have a dog?"

The yellow dog's front legs hugged the setter's deep chest. Both dogs were panting. The teachers' lounge was empty except for Chad and Sheryl. "Nah. I live in an apartment." Chad answered. "How about you?"

"Same deal. And my place doesn't allow pets either. A little lonely sometimes."

His arm slid around her waist, then he realized he was gently rubbing her belly.

She looked sideways at him. "Should we be doing this?" The setter's hind legs were planted firmly apart, and the yellow dog was humping slow and hard until it looked as though he'd break his back. "I mean, I don't even know you."

Instead of answering, Chad nuzzled her neck.

"We could get in trouble..." She leaned against him.

The crow was raising hell again. The dogs stopped moving and stood still.

They were alone in the lounge. Chad reached under Sheryl's skirt and massaged the damp place in her underwear. "Let's go in the rest room while nobody's here."

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“Mmmm.” As they turned toward the rest room, Chad noticed that the blond kid was staring through the window directly at him, grinning like a wolf. The others were still watching the dogs.

In the tight little bathroom, Chad locked the door while Sheryl put her briefs into her purse and perched on the edge of the sink. “You have to use a condom.”

“I don’t have one. I mean, I usually don’t, ah...”

“Well please don’t think I do this kind of thing. I mean I never have.” She reached into her purse. “But here. I have one.”

It was quick and hot.

“I’m supposed to already be on duty.” Chad stuffed his shirt into his trousers and hastily brushed back his hair.

Sheryl was cleaning herself, giving no sign she heard.

“Will I see you again?” He fumbled with the lock. “Can I call?”

“I need to think about it. This isn’t the kind of thing....”

“Me neither.” His hand gripped the doorknob. “But please, we should...”

“Maybe I’ll call you. Maybe we’ll...” She shrugged, then turned away to pull up her underwear. “Go on, please.”

He turned the doorknob carefully, whispering back over his shoulder, “Just stay put for a moment or two, then leave. Nobody’ll notice.” When he stepped out of the rest room, into the lounge, he couldn’t resist glancing down at his trousers. The wetness he felt wasn’t visible on the outside.

Several women and a man sat by the coffee table, talking and laughing. They paid him no attention at all. Chad hurried down the hall, late.

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Back in the classroom, the kids were getting loud. Chad walked in, his knees still a bit unsteady. The room only quieted a little. He clapped his hands, then raised them in the air. Gradually the noise subsided enough for him to be heard.

“I’m Mr. Kineski, your substitute.” Chad noticed the handsome blond kid from the group that had been loitering outside the lounge window. The kid had his desk out of line, close to that same dark-haired girl. She worked intently on her papers.

A rustle of voices and noise from the class told him that he’d better get something going while he had their attention. The kid kept talking to the girl, but she ignored him.

Chad tried to read the seating chart, but his eyes wouldn’t focus just right. He cleared his throat. “Mrs. Johnson, your regular teacher, left the seating chart with me, so if you’re not in your regular seat, you’d better get there or you’re absent.”

A few kids changed seats. “Mr. Substitute, can we have free study today?”

“No. You all have your assignments, according to what Mrs. Johnson left me. If, ah... if anybody needs help, raise your hand. Otherwise, quiet.” He eased over to the blond kid’s desk and bent over. “I think you’re out of your seat, son. You need to get where you’re supposed to be and leave your friend, here, alone. She’s trying to work.”

The kid replied quiet and mean, “I saw, and I’ll tell. You better leave *me* alone, Mister peachfingers.” He gave Chad a grotesquely sweet smile.

For the next forty minutes, Chad watched the kid work on the girl. She welcomed it at first, then when he went farther and farther she tried to ignore him and study. He kept at it. Chad knew he should stop the kid, but it just might start trouble. She brushed the kid’s hands away from her a few times, but when the bell rang, they left together. Chad wondered what he had just allowed to happen.

schooldogs

The next class came, and Chad handled it all right. He began feeling pretty smug. His last period was open, for planning. He headed for the lounge, hoping Sheryl would be there. She wasn't.

Nobody paid him any attention. Outside the window, drizzle filled the air. No kids, no dogs, not even the damn crow, just grey. He glanced around, then stared, unfocused. The dark-haired girl — she'd seemed so vulnerable.

After too long, the bell rang and school was out. Outside in the parking lot, he thought he glimpsed Sheryl leaving in an older car. In such a big system, they might never again be in the same school on the same day. Had she mentioned her last name? Maybe it would come to him later. Maybe he'd call. Near his car a crow cawed, flying off as he approached. He climbed inside and drove away.

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