

Today is Friday and Peter is happy. He is happy because every Friday is Spirit Day and most of his teaching colleagues will come to work dressed in McArthur Junior High School apparel. Most will also wear jeans. Partly because jeans are comfortable, but mostly because the teachers union will raise holy hell if the browbeaten principal is foolish enough to suggest that they cannot. Peter himself will not wear jeans on Fridays because his parents are Czech immigrants, his father a delivery truck driver-turned warehouse manager, his mother a stern-fisted, scrub-brushed protector of the kitchen. Every day after school, on the drive from school to his one-bedroom bachelor apartment, Peter stops off at his parents' house for dinner. If he were to come to the table wearing jeans his mother would narrow her eyes and fling angry spoonfuls of mashed potatoes onto his plate and his father would slam his meaty palm onto the dinner table, demanding to know What on earth did I ever do wrong so that my only son goes to work dressed like a rock and roll musician?

Peter's father knows pretty much everything about bills of lading, but he knows nothing at all about Ana. Ana is real the reason that Peter is happy. Ana is 27 years and 11 days old, and she teaches 7th grade language arts in the classroom next to Peter's. Every so often she knocks on the door with the

daintiest little bird hand imaginable and walks into Peter's classroom. I hate to bother you, she always begins, but do you know when we're going to have that Honors Assembly? Bother me? Peter thinks to himself You could empty a bucket of hornets onto the top of my head in the middle of a lecture on adverbs and I would not consider myself bothered. Talking to you is the highlight of my day - as far away from "bothered" as you could get. Next he says something lame-brained like I think the assembly is next week, at least that's what they said on the announcements this morning. Invariably this causes Ana to smack herself in the forehead and say something like Oh, yeah, that's right ... I'm such a ditz! Like all the other teachers besides Peter, Ana wears jeans on Fridays - jeans that are a deep blue, streaked with the faintest strands of white that suggest the dress she wore last summer on the day she married a man who was not Peter. Plastered on the back pockets are curlicues of silver appliqué, the kind that make Peter ache with the desire to cup Ana's bottom with both hands, wondering if her cheeks would feel like two mini-loaves of dark rye bread just pulled out of the oven, the kind that would show thumb-shaped dimples if both of his hands squeezed gently. It is at this point that Peter

becomes embarrassed because what kind of man is aroused by the thought of the aroma of freshly-baked bread?

On this particular Friday Ana does her little bird hand knock and walks into Peter's classroom. I hate to bother you, she says, but are you doing anything special after work today? Peter is stunned, frozen in time because he can think of only one reason why she would ask him this question, and he cannot believe that God would be so generous as to send Ana into Peter's room for this purpose. He shakes his head slowly. Good, Ana says. Katie and I are going to McGann's for drinks. Do you want to go with us? Peter does not speak, choosing instead to grin in a way that later he will be sure made him look like a big dope. Sure, he says. Yay! she replies, clapping her little bird hands together softly in a way that would seem ridiculous for any other grown-up but in this case makes Peter want to put Ana in his chest pocket and carry her around for the rest of their lives. We'll meet over there around four, Ana says, and when she turns to leave the classroom Peter consciously avoids looking at the back of her jeans out of respect; after all, they are meeting at McGann's at four o'clock.

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Students in Peter's first period Literature class are reading *The Pigman*, a novel that was formally adopted by the school board because it has been hailed as a classic in the genre of juvenile literature and a book that Peter's students think is a hell of a lot better than the rest of the books on the school's stodgy reading list like *The Pearl* and *Call of the Wild*. It is doubtful that they give a whit about the book's status in the world of juvenile literature, but more likely that they are hooked in Chapter One when the narrator refers to a substitute teacher as *slightly retarded*. In the chapter that Peter assigned as homework last night, the two main characters (high school students) share their first kiss. Mr. Chlebeczek, they ask, do you remember your first kiss? Peter knows that his students are attempting to play the game Get The Teacher To Talk About His Personal Life So That He Will Forget Today's Academic Agenda And Therefore We Will Not Have To Do Any Work. Today, Peter is more than willing to play along. Her name was Nikole, he tells his students, who lean forward, elbows propped sharply on their desktops, struggling mightily to contain their oh-my-God-he's-falling-for-it! smirks. We both worked at the same restaurant - The Golden Duck. It's the one on Ogden Avenue just across the tracks, you know the place I'm talking about?

His students nod their heads whether they do know or do not know the place he is talking about. Not only is Peter playing the game, but it sounds like he is going to reveal something personal. Something embarrassing, if there is a God in junior high school heaven. It was one of those humid summer nights where you start sweating the minute you walk out of the house at 6:00 a.m. and are still sweating when your head hits the pillow at night. Do you know the kind of summer day I'm talking about? Twenty-eight heads bob up and down. Well, it was one of those days. The restaurant didn't close until midnight, but they had to let us clock out at 10:00 because we were only in high school. I can't even begin to tell you how much that bothered the owner. How many of you have grandparents that are still alive? A smattering of hands creep up, unsure of Peter's angle. He pauses, then nods his head. And how many of your grandparents tell you stories about how much better things were in the old days? About how much harder their lives were, and how you don't appreciate how good you've got it? Hands fly up all over the classroom. Peter nods again. So you know what I'm talking about. The owner of the restaurant wasn't my grandfather, but he was the same kind of guy. If the two of them had ever met, they would've gotten along great. Anyway, he had to let Nikole and me

leave early. A single hand goes up. Mr. Chlebeczek? Wouldn't it be Nikole and I? To be grammatically correct? Peter smiles. No, Jimmy, it wouldn't be Nikole and I. Unless you're using a pronoun as the subject or predicate nominative, you use what we call object pronouns. It's kind of like when people say between you and I - trying to sound sophisticated - when the correct wording is between you and me. Jimmy sinks back in his seat and the other students look at him like how could you ask a question like that you dumb ass? Continuing the story, Peter says, Nikole and I were sitting on the curb outside the restaurant. Nikole was waiting for her boyfriend to pick her up, and I was waiting with her because it didn't seem right to let her wait all by herself. As the minutes passed and the boyfriend wasn't showing up, Nikole started to complain. Sometimes I think he doesn't respect me, she said. He yells at me for no reason, and I ask myself the question Would he yell at me if he really truly loved me? I spoke without thinking. I would never yell at you, I said, putting my arm around her shoulder. You wouldn't, would you, Nikole said, turning to face me. Before I knew what was happening she leaned in, pressing her lips against mine. I could taste her salty tears dribbling in-between our lips, but I did not care in the slightest because I was 16 years old, kissing a

pretty girl on the curb. Dude! one of Peter's students yells, breaking the tension. On a different day Peter might have been offended, but today he simply waits for the laughter to die down. And just then I heard the angry roar of a car's engine at the edge of the parking lot. Nikole jerked her lips away from mine, leaving me gasping for air. And when a black Trans Am pulled up to the curb, its gold trim reminded me of a hockey player's grin, with all the fillings and crowns. What happened then? one of Peter's students asks. Well, Peter says, Nikole hopped off the curb and her boyfriend's Trans Am squealed its tires against the blacktop before zooming away. What ever happened to Nikole? Peter's students ask. I don't know, Peter replies, shaking his head and not at all telling the truth. In his head he remembers that the following week Nikole quit her waitressing job and went to live with her aunt in Milwaukee while she waited to give birth to her boyfriend's baby.

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The after school gathering at McGann's is of course not a date and Peter is of course aware of this fact. Ana's best friend Katie will also be there and that is okay because even though Katie still brags about being named Most Friendly Senior Girl nine years after graduating from high school and Peter still

catches her looking at him from across the room at faculty meetings through in an accusatory way as if to say Really? You and Ana are actually friends?, the reality is that Ana invited Peter, to McGann's after school today and even though there will be three of them, Ana and Peter will exchange knowing glances across the table and at some point when Katie checks her cell phone messages or goes to the bathroom to tend to her Most Friendly Senior Girl hair, Ana and Peter will at last find themselves alone, at last have a chance to talk. Peter does not know, exactly, what they will talk about because he has not allowed himself to think that far in advance. But he suspects that Ana will initiate the conversation, and she will find the reason he does not wear jeans to be so adorable (that's the word she will use - adorable) that she will ask him about his mother and father and he will admit that his mother makes the best kolacky he's ever tasted. This revelation will be so endearing that Ana will divorce her husband (politely, of course, there'll be no need for anguish, Peter and Ana were meant to be together, even her soon-to-be-ex-husband will realize that), and Peter and Ana will be married inside of a year.

At ten o'clock Peter walks into the Teachers Lounge. On the rectangular table around which teachers eat their lunches and

say mean things about their colleagues who are not present, he sees two boxes of Dunkin Donuts. For the second time today Peter is happy. Biting into a chocolate long john, he thinks a little more about the way his conversation with Ana at McGann's might start. So, those were some pretty good donuts in the lounge today, he will say. Oh my God, she will say, rolling her eyes, don't remind me. I had half of one of those jelly-filled ones with vanilla frosting, like I need the extra calories. Are you kidding me? Peter will respond. You're in great shape. You're in the best shape of any teacher at this school. Oh stop it, she will say, chucking his bicep and dropping her eyes toward the table in a way that will make Peter want very badly to kiss the top of her head.

Suddenly Peter hears Ana speak. Not the imaginary, donut-guilty Ana in his head, but the real, live, flesh-and-blood Ana in the hallway outside the Teachers Lounge. So, a bunch of us are going to McGann's today after school, do you want to come? Peter freezes mid-chew, listening for another voice. Sure, I'd love to, another voice says, and Peter knows immediately who it is: Theresa, a middle-aged, pear-shaped science teacher who drinks her daily coffee out of a mug that looks like a beaker. The fact that she will be going to McGann's

with Peter and Ana is not good news and it is not bad news, it is just news. Maybe, Peter thinks, it will be like going on a date with a chaperone.

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Now it is fourth period and Peter is teaching *The Pigman* once again, only this time to a different set of students. Last night's homework assignment was the same, and the book's main characters are sharing their first kiss for the second time today. Mr. Chlebeczek, one of his students asks on cue, do you remember your first kiss? The smirks are still there, maybe even more than the last time, because not only do the other students know the game they are about to play, but they have heard from their friends in first period Literature that Peter is willing to play along. That was a long time ago, Peter says. So, who was the girl? the same student asks, willing to ask as many probing questions as it takes to avoid doing actual class work. Peter pauses, the faint taste of a chocolate long john clinging to the roof of his mouth. Let's save that talk for another day, Peter says. Take out your study guides, please. We need to talk about theme. He pretends not to hear their groans as he turns toward the white board to pick up a dry erase marker.

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Between periods Peter looks down the hall and cannot believe his eyes. Mainly because his eyes tell him that Ana is talking to Cory, McArthur's P.E. teacher, a young teacher with an outdoorsy tan and tousled hair. Although Cory walked on to the University of Iowa football team five years after he graduated from McArthur, he did not play in any of the games during his freshman year and quietly quit the team his sophomore year. Because of his tan and his hair and his ex-college football status, many of the women at McArthur Jr. High are kind of in love with Cory. It makes Peter wonder What the hell do they see in him? He was a walk-on, for crying out loud. A walk-on who quit the damn team! Shouldn't that tell you something? Ana's classroom is on the second floor and Cory's gymnasium is on the first floor and therefore there is no reason whatsoever why the two of them should come into casual contact like this. Even worse, there is no reason for Cory to be flirting with Ana, who is for God's sake a married woman. And yet here he is talking to Ana in her rye bread jeans, her eyes getting wider and brighter every time he leans in to say something quiet, something bold, something illicit. She curls a lock of wispy hair over the top of one of her little bird ears in a way that seems to say If

there were no students in my room right now, if we were all alone...

Suddenly Peter's brain synapses back to an early-morning, faculty pick-up game earlier in the school year when Cory leaped up and dunked the basketball, slamming it right down onto Peter's head. Peter was shocked that the ball when it collided with his head did not make the same percussive, slapping sound one associates with the ball being dribbled against the hardwood floor. There was no sound at all, none that Peter can remember, anyway, just the startling sensation of being punched in the temple, though when Peter thinks about it this makes sense because what is a slam dunk other than a basketball-legal way for one man to punch another man in the face and get away with it? The thing that brought tears to Peter's eyes - other than the blunt basketball contact - was the fact that Peter was a soccer player by nature and the only reason he was even playing was that the principal asked him to and Peter thought it might help him get along with the rest of the guys. As the bell rings and passing period ends, Cory walks by and nods at Peter, jutting out his chin as though he will remember that dunk every day for the rest of his life. Hey, buddy, he says, his eyes grinning like hell. You going to McGann's after school?

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Peter's sixth period students have settled into their seats, happily wired on cafeteria sugar, and the ensuing energy puts Peter very much on edge. His eyes dart over to the first two seats of the first two rows, where a short boy with early developing muscles and a buzz cut is showing his new calculator to the girl sitting next to him. She is wearing a tank top with a plunging neckline, and she is reaching out to take the calculator from the boy in her little bird hand.

Go to the office right now, Peter says to the girl. She looks up at him, eyes wide. What? Dress code. Peter knows that if he does not send this girl to the office right now, she will grow up thinking that it is perfectly all right to bare this much skin in public, to put on a show for all of the boys, to ask them to go out for drinks when all she really wants is an excuse to be social with that Cory bastard. The boy with a buzz cut speaks up. Dude, she's been dressed like this all day. How come none of the other teachers have complained? You go to the office, too. For what? the boy demands to know. Disrespect. First of all, the boy with the buzz cut should not have even had his calculator out during Literature class. The school has policies about that sort of thing. These days calculators come

with video games, of all things. Plus to be truthful, Peter has never really liked him. Take out your study guides, Peter says to everyone else. Right now.

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Minutes after the final bell Ana thrusts her head into Peter's classroom, her backside jutting into the hallway, safely out of sight, her bird hand hanging loosely at her side. She makes no effort whatsoever to knock on the door, and it is this last detail that makes Peter hate her so much that his chest hurts. I'm heading over there right now, she says. See you soon. In much the same way that he did not want to play basketball with the principal and his friends, Peter does not want to go to the bar with Ana and hers. Jesus Christ, can't you stop bothering me? he asks, looking up from his desk. But of course by now Ana is gone and does not hear a single word that Peter has said.

THE END