

## Substituted

It was a foggy November day when a car maneuvered its way into an empty parking spot, seeking cover underneath a maple tree, which only a few days before had been a fiery red; for weeks had burnished, torch-like, but faded now, having shed its glory. The morning was busy- buses gasping open its doors, students emerging: feet sluggish, heads down, fingers swiping and tapping, smiling and giggling.

An old man walked purposefully through the front doors, went directly to the front office and reported to the receptionist that he was ready for duty. The receptionist gave him a wary smile. It had been a frenetic morning and a line was soon to form; in her experience, substitute teachers were of two sorts: the first, solicitous (retired types, or young, fresh from university); the other, emboldened, familiarized (full-time moms with side gigs like these- peanuts, they called the pay, hardly worth doing). And yet here was this man- elderly, most likely retired- who was regarding her rather imperiously.

“Are you here for the full day or half day?” she asked him.

“I’m Mr. Baberowski. Or Mr. B, as they used to call me.”

“Wonderful,” she said smoothly, masking her irritation. “Have you subbed for Liberty before?”

“I was a teacher here. I taught here for thirty-one years.” He eyed her. “I suppose you’re too young to remember. At any rate, the principal called me personally and asked if I would come back.”

Oh dear, the receptionist thought. The kids will eat him alive. Just one day of subbing and a movie might suffice; some busy-work (which the teacher would collect and toss); and of course the kids had their phones- giant pacifiers, really, to keep the time bearable. But two weeks? It must have been an emergency for Mrs. Holden to require a substitute for so long; and it was true that they’d been calling retired teachers as they’d been desperately short on subs.

“Here you go.” She handed him the orange folder (everything was orange, navy blue, or a combination of both). “The attendance rolls are inside. There’s also the office phone numbers; my number is highlighted in case there are any questions. The sub plans are typically on the teacher’s desk...”

He’d walked off! And she hadn’t given him his placard yet! Who’s to know he wasn’t some creep wandering the halls if he wasn’t wearing his placard. She considered going after him, but there was a line now, and so she made a mental note to check on him later that day. Again, as subs were hard to come by, one must take what one could get.

Mr. B, having shed himself of the busybody receptionist, knew where he was going, of course, but he felt rather unmoored- it all looked so different now.

“Need some help?”

This was said by a coach, judging by how casually he was slumped against the wall, wearing a jersey brandishing the school mascot- one of the sports, he couldn’t tell- coming to the aid of a bumbling old man. Like he’d never been here before. Ha.

“No,” Mr. B replied brusquely, moving on. He managed to make his way to the stairwell, and then around the corner to the C hall, students becoming sparser as he went deeper into its bowels. The school was waking up- projectors warming, coffee percolating, copiers rumbling- just like the old days,

and this comforted him. And yet he was invisible, students and staff hardly registering him. When he came to C219, the door was locked. He scowled at it. He walked to the classroom next door, in which he found a young woman stapling papers. He assumed (although he couldn't be certain), that she was the teacher in charge. He told her he required her assistance, that he didn't have a key.

"Oh yes!" she cried, "You're the sub!" An industrious young lady, she bumbled on that she had printed him a copy of the sub plans; that Mrs. Holden had emailed her early that morning; that her poor sister had died unexpectedly, and so on and so forth, until she became aware that he was regarding her with an air of impatience. "Anyhow, my name is Kristen."

"Mr. Baberowski," he returned pointedly, disliking the familiarity of first names.

Another torrent of words: if he needed anything, anything at all, she'd be next door; his third period was his planning period; that the English teachers had D lunch at 1:45, yada yada. She paused long enough to unlock the door. "And the teacher's lounge," she continued, "is down the hall, just past the boys bathroom. There's a fridge in there and a microwave, and of course you can eat in your classroom if you want..."

He put up a hand- a barrier against this gust of information, blustery and unnecessary. He knew where the teacher's lounge was, naturally. He'd eaten there countless times before.

After she took her leave -her demeanor a bit chillier now- Mr. B took a moment to assess the classroom. Although he'd worked in a similar one, down yonder in A hall, it looked remarkably different. Desks and chairs- they still had those- but instead of a chalkboard, a whiteboard covered half the room, with colorful borders outlining classroom expectations and homework assignments and tests and dates and exclamation points. It was all so cluttered, and he was of the belief that spartan decor went twain with a clear mind. Dictionaries and textbooks were placed haphazardly around the room, stacks of paper spilled out from the teacher desk onto the floor. And the carpet! Pillings of hair, candy wrappers and Cheetos ground into powder. Other unmentionables. It made him feel ill. In his day, students didn't eat in class. Snacks, whatever they were- crispy, salty, crumbly things- were eaten at lockers, bathrooms, the cafeteria. His classroom was not a kitchen.

On the desk there was a paper typed in bolded letters: **Sub Plans**. He gave it only a cursory glance. A bell rang shrilly in his ear, which gave him a start. Again, this was new. And where were the students? They couldn't all be tardy, despite the languid impression they gave him. He looked at the clock- ten minutes before nine, and from the view from his window, they were still coming, swarms of them, not in any particular hurry.

A few kids began to trickle in. The quiet ones eyed him, while a laughing group of boys punctuated the air with: "Yo!" "You a sub?" "Dude!" "Where's Mrs. Holden?"

He did not answer them; instead, he leaned against the desk with his arms crossed and glowered. This only made them laugh more.

"Yo, man, seriously, where's Mrs. Holden?"

"Does that mean we aren't taking the quiz today?"

In response, he walked over to the whiteboard and wrote his name in concise letters: Mr. Baberowski. He found a crate filled with paperbacks, removed its contents, and held it up to the class.

“When I call your name, you will come up to the front and place your phone in here.” Mr. B knew what smartphones were- he himself possessed one- but not with the drooling idolatry of the golden calf.

More laughter, some in disbelief, others in hilarity. “Dude!” one retorted. “We’re not giving you our phones!”

“Those of you who do not comply will have their phones sent to the office for the duration of the day.”

As in response, the final bell rang. The students, thirty in all, were attuned now, focused on what the scene would unfold. An old man, a substitute teacher, was telling them to give him their phones. Three months into the school year, most teachers had absconded their phone rules. Some had organizers- like shoe caddies- hung up on the wall, that rarely got used. New teachers measured their worth against the task of engaging their students, sans phones, which left them in a constant state of anxiety. The most stalwart teachers, not easily intimidated, would have them relinquish their phones as soon as they entered the classroom. For most teachers, it was an endless and tiresome mantra: “Put your phone away. Pay attention. Put your phones away. Put them away.” The veteran teachers knew better: Compromise. You listen to me, you can have your phone. You do your assignment, you can have your phone. You finish your quiz, you can have your phone. Carrot and stick.

But substitutes- they didn’t have that right. They could threaten students with all sorts of things- confiscation, AP visits, putting names down for the teacher- but in reality, they were largely bluffing. And the students knew this. They, Mrs. Holden’s especially rowdy first period, “knuckleheads” she called them, mostly endearingly, knew the score. For the most part, she had them in line. Mostly. But this dude?

Mr. B began. “Faith Anderson.”

Poor Faith felt the stares of twenty-nine kids on her. She was already the quiet type, conditioned to obey the rules, but this felt torturous. Self-consciously, she dropped her phone into the crate, in which it promptly slid through the narrow slats and onto the floor. The class laughed while she quickly picked it up, checking for cracks in the screen.

“Is it broken?” someone asked.

“No,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Her first period was her least favorite class. Mrs. Holden acted exasperated with them, but in truth, she beamed her energy toward “those knuckleheads,” the ones who interrupted, and talked back; and yet they could also be charming, tell jokes loaded with innuendo- just enough for Mrs. Holden to chide them while her eyes sparked from amusement. Each one of her classes, Faith discovered, was like a silo: different students, pendulums of friendships, teachers’ personalities, the ease or difficulty of a subject- an island of its own. In this class, in particular, she felt like her voice was uttered in a vacuum. There were too many of them, too many noises- a cacophony of laughter and complaints, basic teenage drama- and her voice, quiet as it was, snuffed out.

Mr. B found a manila folder and crammed it inside the crate in order to create a barrier. Without apologizing, he held it out to her again, and she set her phone inside, gently, carefully now.

He continued with the roll and all went smoothly...until Antonio Flores.

Everyone stared at Tony and giggled. Mr. B looked up. “I am marking Antonio Flores absent.”

“It’s Tony,” he said from the back of the room.

“If you don’t answer to your name on the roll, then you are marked absent.” He made a point to check a spot on his list.

“You can’t do that,” Tony argued.

“Maya Fontaine.”

“Whatever. I’ll just tell my parents.”

Mr. B fixed him with an icy glare. “Mr. Flores, you may bring your phone up to the front.”

“Not if you marked me absent.”

He didn’t take the bait. “Maya Fontaine,” he continued drolly.

The class was amused, titillated by this, especially when it came time for the next knucklehead to enter the scene.

“Tyler Hall.”

Tyler leaned back in his seat and grinned. “I’m here, but I don’t got my phone.”

“Is that right,” Mr. B said dryly.

“Yeah, man, my mom grounded me.” Smugness, merriment, shone in his eyes.

A voice rang out: “What you do, Ty?”

“I didn’t clean my room,” he said, still smirking.

“Then how come I saw you on it this morning?”

And on it went until all thirty names were read and in sum there were three students who didn’t have their phones. They’d been grounded, apparently. One boy said he’d never owned a phone. He didn’t know what they were. *Like yo, what’s a cell phone?* Which only elicited more giggles.

“You have a quiz today,” Mr. B said to the class and they groaned. “When I call your row”- and he signaled to a spot under the giant whiteboard- “you will come up to the front and put your backpack here.”

There was, as expected, a barrage of complaints: “We just gave you our phone!” “Mrs. Holden doesn’t do that!” And so on and so forth. This man was crazy, they thought. They’d all had their share of crazy subs, but this guy reigned supreme.

Impervious to their objections, he signaled to the first row. “You may go.” He didn’t say please; didn’t grease social graces; didn’t ease into their goodwill. He demanded and waited for them to obey. In which they did, with chortles and words of protests, but their backpacks were all grudgingly dropped before him.

Without explanation, he organized them all, putting them upright, not haphazardly or slouched against each other. Again, the room buzzed with amusement. He was a sideshow, an interesting anecdote they could later share with their friends and parents. He told them to take out their pencils. He went to the first row and did the thing that old men do the world over: licked his thumb for greater purchase, handing out the exact number of quizzes for the student to pass back.

Revolted! The girl at the front of the row made a face, and then giggling, deliberately picked from the bottom of the stack. And so on with the bubble sheets, the process repeated. Finally, they were told to begin.

“Yo, Teacher-Sub, I don’t got a pencil.” This was Heath, and such was the usual parlance when it came to quizzes and tests. He would wait until the class began and then proclaim to Mrs. Holden that he didn’t have a pencil. Mrs. Holden would mock-scold him and retrieve one from her desk, all the while he waited, king-like, for her to deliver it to him. But he always said thank you, and she was mollified. The usual dance, no big deal.

Mr. B said, “That’s not my problem.”

Heath waited a few beats. “Then how am I gonna take the quiz?”

“You don’t.”

“Can I get a pencil from Mrs. Holden’s desk?”

“You may not.”

Heath looked like he was going to challenge him, but instead he leaned back in his chair. “Okay, that’s chill. Can I get my phone back then?” A rhetorical question- he knew he wasn’t getting it back- but he was enjoying the attention. Anyway, he didn’t care about the quiz. When Mrs. Holden returned, she would make sure he took the quiz and he wouldn’t have to remind her. She’d simply stick him in the hall, at a desk she kept outside her classroom for that purpose, and he’d sit there, idly watching for students to walk by on their way to the bathroom, especially the girls- in which he’d flirt with them, cute or not, no difference to him. Mrs. Holden would come out now and again to prod him, and he’d say in a needling voice that he was working on it, and they’d both share a smile because they knew the dance so well. And then, about twenty minutes before class ended, he’d hunker down and fill in the bubble sheet, sometimes reading the questions, sometimes not; it depended if the eligibility progress report was coming up, in which he’d be disqualified from wrestling if his grade was below passing. He toed the line, but Mrs. Holden was cool. Whatever.

Ignoring him, Mr. B paced the room, walking up and down the rows. Papers shuffled, students coughed, Tyler sighed, Heath bobbed his head along to his airpods (carefully concealed underneath his hoodie), and the sub walked the room, back and forth, back and forth.

“Can we get our phones back?” someone asked.

“You may retrieve your phones when the entire class has completed their quiz.”

Warm to the knowledge they would be reunited with their phones, and with a half hour left of class, it motivated them to finish. One by one the quiet was punctured with the maw of the stapler, and so as not to upset the crazy sub, they complied.

Alas it was not meant to be. Unbeknownst to them, Mr. B was boiling mad. Only those who knew him well would have seen the warning signs: the tic of his eye, the grim set of his mouth, even the modulated tone of his voice, stern though it was. It took one final parting shot: Heath, having tapped on his airpod, turned up the volume, and with the rhythmic bass emanating from his hoodie, it was, as the saying goes, the final straw.

Mr. B, locating the source, stared at Heath.

“Yo, man, what’s your problem?” Heath countered, a fair question, one he would have asked anyone, old man or not.

To everyone’s surprise, Mr. B laughed. Darkly he laughed, mirthlessly so, and they laughed in response- At him? With him? It mattered not.

Mr. B gathered his things. Still cackling, he left the classroom. From the upper window of C219, the students watched him emerge from the school, walking jauntily to his car. As was their habit, they went to grab their phones to record him.

But wait!

So stunned had they been when he'd left, they hadn't noticed that he'd taken the crate with him. Mr. Baberowski, former science teacher at Liberty High, with a tenure of thirty-one years, dumped the phones behind his car, a modest Toyota Camry, and then reversed over them- and then forward, and then back again, and then repeated once more. And then he drove away.

Left behind was the maple tree, stripped of its former glory, but now, underneath its limbs, shone the sparkling shards of broken glass.