

Short Story
about 2400 words

Revenge

“It’s so stupid,” the girl said. “How is any of this *li-ter-a-ture*,” spitting the word out in chunks, as if to describe a kind of distasteful and snooty foolishness, “going to ever help us in our lives?”

How many times already in his brief career had James Nelson heard this argument? If you could call it that. Usually it was delivered by one of the failing, angry kids, in this case a girl who had situated herself in the back row for secret note passing, texting and the applying of cosmetics. A small chorus of supporters, who had also failed to complete the assigned reading, grumbled.

“I’m sorry, Miss Branch,” he said. “You are entitled to your opinion, but your opinion does not excuse you from taking the quiz.”

“Well,” the girl persisted, “my dad says he had to read the same book when he was in high school, and said it was unChristian and should be banned.”

Teachable moment! James thought, and, hoping to initiate discussion, said, “So, what would be the unChristian parts so far, Miss Branch?”

She said nothing.

“Miss Branch?”

Face and neck flushed in anger, she said, “You’re just trying to embarrass me, Nelson, and I won’t go along with it!”

“I’m sorry, Miss Branch. The last thing in the world I want to do is embarrass you,” James said, meaning it. Good rarely came as a result of a student’s embarrassment. “You brought up what you claimed was an unChristian aspect in the book. So, naturally, I thought you might want to discuss it. Any one else?” he said, opening the subject for anyone’s thoughts. Several hands went up. “Nancy?” he asked.

“Well,” Nancy said, a touch of quaver in her voice, “there is the choir all in black, and from a distance, looks like some kind of beast.”

“Excellent!” James said. “Black possibly symbolic of...? Billy?”

“Well, symbolic of death, I suppose, or evil. But I was thinking of Jack’s red hair, his ugliness, his knife.”

“Interesting! And all this implying...?”

“Well, he’s like a devil, isn’t he,” Bill said. “Like Satan.”

“And he’s the head of the choir, so isn’t that kind of antiChristian?” Nancy said.

James Nelson shrugged. “There is that possibility. But is the threat of death or the presence of evil unChristian? Or are they facts of life, and is the way we face them important to our lives? Anyone else?” No one volunteered. “Well, you’ve made some excellent points; so, as we read on, observe closely how our characters behave when faced with these threats.” He had been moving around the room and now stopped front and center. “Any more discussion before the quiz? Questions?”

After school, teacher Nelson sat at his desk thinking. He had just taught three, 90-minute-long classes and felt drained, even a bit beat up. “Rode hard and put away wet,” came to mind. He found himself chuckling softly. Why on earth did he like this job

so much? Was it one of those conundrums wrapped in an enigma? He chuckled more and felt his energy rising in him, like a small tide. There was no need analyzing it. The need for analysis would follow if the question were, instead, “Why did he keep doing this job he hated so much?” He looked around him, feeling wrapped in joy. Across the room, in the corner, the door stood open, an invitation to any student who might want help. On the desk in front of him stood stacks of quiz papers and essays. He’d better get with it, he thought, while he still had the chance.

James Nelson lowered his head and began reading the first of the Contemporary Literature quizzes. As luck would have it, the first effort belonged to Barbara Branch. Actually, it responded to none of the five questions the quiz had asked. Rather it ranted on about how teachers should not be allowed to humiliate students, how it destroyed their self-esteem, making it impossible for them to learn and how she would get even. The words “get even” were underlined in red.

As he read, the door to the classroom closed and by the time he looked up, Barbara Branch stood before him, her blouse open and her bra pulled up fully exposing both breasts. The shock of this threw James Nelson back in his chair. How often had the faculty discussed this kind of danger? Horrified, he looked for the classroom doorway, found it blocked by the door itself, a strict violation of a school policy aimed at preventing these kinds of situations. Her face wore a sick, triumphant smile.

“Miss Branch!” The loudness of his own voice frightened him. “Good God! Cover yourself!” He stood up, his chair crashing to the floor behind him, and reached to cover her.

Just then, the classroom door opened and Peggy Smith, Barbara Branch's soul sister, walked in and gasped dramatically: "Oh my!"

"Bu-u-s-s-ted," Barbara Branch sang softly as she retreated. Then, as in great alarm: "Mr. Nelson, how could you ever think...?" The two girls fled and James thought he heard them giggling away down the hall.

James Nelson stood for a moment paralyzed by the shock, unable even to think. Those breasts, that sick, triumphant smile, his reaching out, that doll's voice softly singing, "Bu-u-s-s-ted." Finally, he was able to turn and right his chair. He sat in it heavily. They had gone this far. Wouldn't they go further? Get him? Make him an example? He had to tell somebody, but who? The vice principal who oversaw English, of course. He picked up the phone. Couldn't remember the extension. Looked over his shoulder at the phone list on the bulletin board. 334. He dialed. After forever, the administrative secretary answered: "This is Mrs. Shaw's office, Betty speaking. Mrs. Shaw has been called away from her desk. May I take a message?"

"Will you ask her to call me as soon as she returns, Betty? This is James Nelson."

"Oh!" She sounded surprised, but didn't explain. "I certainly will, Mr. Nelson," she said.

James realized he was soaking wet with perspiration. He locked his door and headed for the restroom. He felt self-conscious about the way he walked. How did an accused, but innocent person walk? In long, confident strides? No? Casual strides? How the hell did one stride casually? "Idiot," he accused himself for thinking humorously at such a moment. His face felt hot, red probably. He hoped he wouldn't

run into anyone, but he did, of course. Mostly clots of students. Then, Wilma Harrington, English Department chairman, nearly bumped into him as she left her room. He nodded and started by.

“Mr. Nelson, are you all right?” she asked.

“Fine,” he said.

“You look as though you’d just witnessed a murder,” she said, cocking her head on her long neck and smiling through her concern.

“My own?” he asked.

“Could be, but your standing here would make it a slow death.”

“Indeed.” Then he told her. She was, after all, the head of the department and intelligent beyond reason.

“Good God!” she said. “Just what we’re always worried about in the back of our minds. Do you think they’re just trying to scare you? Or? No, not likely,” she answered her own question. “Bared breasts is pretty extreme. Obviously a setup. We must talk to Shaw.”

“She’s away from her desk.”

After the restroom, James walked to the office. He nodded and smiled as he passed students, feeling out of sync with himself, glad none asked to talk. In the office, clerks and secretaries watched him strangely, or it was his imagination tormenting him again. Before he could reach the vice-principal’s office someone had him by the upper arm. It was Smoky Brown, the campus police officer.

“Come with me,” he said.

James tried to stop, but officer Brown kept walking, pulling.

“I was just going to see Sally Shaw,” James said.

“Too late for that Mr. Nelson,” Brown said. “This is a fast moving sucker. Two eye witnesses and two more complainants already.”

They went through the doorway to Officer Brown’s office. He shut the door.

“Two?” James said. “You don’t actually believe...”

“It’s not what I believe, Mr. Nelson. We have procedures we have to follow.” He sat behind his desk and motioned for James to sit across from him. James stood for a moment before sitting. “It’s for your protection as much as theirs.”

“What other kids?” he asked.

“Can’t tell you that. Not yet, anyway. They’re being interviewed by Mrs. Shaw and one of the counselors. A police department specialist is on her way.”

“Interviewed? Separately, or together?” James jumped to his own defense.

Brown smiled. “Separately. I told you, we’ve got procedures to follow.”

“So, it could take hours,” James said. “Why don’t I go back to my room then?”

“Off limits until this reaches another stage. Maybe you don’t realize the seriousness of the accusations.”

“How many did I rape and kill?” James asked bitterly and was instantly sorry for the weakness. Brown raised a finger, but before he could speak, James said, “Anything I say can be used against me?”

Brown nodded. “You’ve been advised.”

“So, now what?”

“We wait.”

A week later, the preliminary hearing was finally convened. James had not been allowed back on campus; everything that had been on his desk, or on the lectern had been boxed and stored under lock and key. A substitute teacher had been appointed. Somehow her education had not included the novel *Lord of the Flies*, so she called him nightly for advice.

In the small court room, his accusers would not look at him, except when identifying him as the “suspect”; not even then would they meet his eyes. The parents glared at him. Knowing that to look away would be interpreted as an admission of guilt, James experimented with different expressions, but none made sense. He could see these were parents who desperately needed for him to be guilty of what their daughters had accused. High school for them so far had been more than three years of failure, dishonesty, dramatic outbursts and sulking silences. James Nelson’s guilt, he sensed, could in some desperate way condemn the school system for the pain high school had inflicted on all of them.

For the most part, though, James went through the hearing in a fog. A couple girls he’d never had in class testified to his groping them. Where? Somewhere. When? Sometime. He was famous for groping. Everybody knew it. He was still unmarried, wasn’t he? If you hadn’t been groped by Mr. Nelson, you were nobody. Barbara Branch experienced Mr. Nelson’s lust from across the desk? Was that physically possible? Her friend, Peggy Smith witnessed Barbara’s nakedness from where? From behind? It made no difference. People became confused in stressful situations, disoriented. The girls only glanced his way. They grinned toward each other as one would after scoring a point in a sporting event. James’ life was shriveling before

his eyes. He would never teach again, never have another girlfriend, never have his own children and usher them through school.

“Jesus, James,” his union-supplied lawyer said, “all this so-called evidence against you is very convincing. I can’t believe you didn’t see it coming. Give me something to work with, buddy.”

From the ashes of his career, from his very life, James woke. “My quiz,” he said.

“What?” the lawyer said.

“Her answer to my quiz,” he said. “I was reading it when she came into the room. It’s in the stuff that’s locked up, or should be. She said she would get even and this is it!”

An hour later the hearings officer was presented with Barbara Branch’s quiz, the one in which she vows revenge. She read it.

The courtroom exploded in chaos. Screams and shouts of anguish and rage mixed with those of joy. All around him the room rose up, leaving James Nelson in his seat, trying to recover from the enormous, sudden sense of relief. People slapped him on the back, congratulating, never doubting him for a moment, welcoming him back. He stood up to hugs, handshakes and more backslapping. Across the room, James saw tears, dismay, anger and hateful expressions cast his way. The sound of a gavel rapping and someone yelling for order, but it was over and James Nelson was to be a teacher once more.

Like a giant, formless beast, the crowd belched from the mouth of the courthouse. James saw them on the fringes, the small groups of losers trying to survive this latest fueling of their misery. He saw the terrible realizations pulling at their faces,

gouging at their eyes. Not only, it seemed, was the teacher to go free, but their daughters may be charged with perjury and several other serious offenses. If this came to pass, they would have to spend money hiring lawyers, money on counselors to correct their children who would be further persecuted for their unforgivable transgressions.

But James Nelson was in the flood of happy revelers who jostled him good-naturedly, seeming not to notice the outskirts mourners. And no one noticed the young man depart the knot of irate arguers around Barbara Branch but James Nelson and Barbara, herself, who first called, then started after him, then screamed, "Look out! He's got a gun!" Then everyone, it seemed, was screaming and running and ducking and James was having trouble keeping track of the young man whom he saw take something from under his coat as he ran. Then, he lost him in the crowd nearby, then heard a popping and felt explosions in his chest and felt the world slide sideways, slam up into him, saw the faces looking down blur.

All girls involved were allowed to transfer to other schools. Barbara Branch was given a suspended sentence after what was depicted in the newspaper as her heroic action. She had tackled her younger brother and wrestled the gun from him. He had been sent to reform school. The emergency room doctor said surgery to stop heavy internal bleeding had been successful. Mr. Nelson would survive and, except for two ugly scars and some nightmares, would fully recover. Later, James Nelson thought that in the end Barbara Branch's revenge ended better than most.