

○ Chairman Mildred

Billy Oates stood staring for the last time at the words on the mailbox: MILDRED HOPKINS, ENGLISH DEPARTMENT CHAIRMAN.

How many thousands of times, he wondered, had she reached her hand into that slot for the daily bulletin, for the compositions, the catalogues, and for all that other stuff that filled her life? And such a big hand it was, too. Alan Clovis, his old buddy from the English department, had joked under his breath that Mildred needed the larger slot because her hand would not fit into the standard slot assigned to regular staff. Cruel, but true. Mildred was a large lady.

○ Every day, she'd reach into this slot, gather up the mail in one hand, slide it into her briefcase, and then head down the hall to her office, nodding to but never bantering with people she passed. Bantering was definitely not her style. Just as it was not her style to say 'Chairperson.' She was and always would be a 'Chairman.' Or better yet, 'The Chairman.'

○ Billy looked around at the main office filled with empty desks, surrounded by walls with empty bulletin boards and a few animal posters and doors leading into the administrative offices. The counter, usually covered with stacks of paper, was completely bare. Empty flowerpots lined the window ledge. In a month, at the start of school, they would be brimming with roses and other flowers, and there would be people here: secretaries, well-tanned teachers, a few rested students. Don Lewis would have taken over as chairman. Don was Mildred's choice—a smart, quiet, single fellow. And well organized. By dying in the summer, Mildred had provided for a smooth transition for her

successor. And soon her name would be peeled off the mailbox and Don's would replace it.

To an outsider, it all might seem like meaningless stuff—a meaningless title in a meaningless department. To people like Mildred, Clovis, Don Lewis, and Billy, nothing else really mattered. And to Mildred, it mattered the most of all. She viewed her teachers as an enlightened army, holding back the advancing stupidity of the school administration. “Morons,” she would mutter at meetings. “Ex-coaches and ex-Drivers’ Education instructors. All morons. They’re not going to tell us what to teach.” And they didn’t; Chairman Mildred terrified them.

Billy had started at Forest High in 1972. Then, as now, Forest was a middle-size high school in a middle-size town, and it seemed to fit his middle-size aspirations perfectly. A shy son of Iowa teachers, he was looking for a place where he could fit in, and with his teacher genes, respect for books, and modest success in his first job the previous year, he figured he had a good chance to make it at a school like Forest.

He met Mildred at the very first Forest High School English department meeting, which was held in her classroom. The desks were in a semi-circle facing front. Coffee and juice and rolls were on a table in the rear, and that’s where they had their first conversation. She welcomed him with a firm handshake. He congratulated her on being promoted to chairman. She nodded down at him cordially. “I hope this new job won’t get in the way of my teaching.” And then she excused herself to greet the other teachers. He checked out some of the posters, one of Oscar Wilde with the quote: ‘Some people bring happiness wherever they go, others whenever they go.’ On the board was another quote—perhaps for her first class. It was from Emerson: ‘Foolish Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.’

She controlled the meeting that day, covering schedules, unexplained absences, fire drills, conferences, grades, textbooks, conventions. She told the people what they needed to know. She answered questions efficiently. She laughed politely at a couple of jokes by a teacher sitting next to Billy but moved the meeting forward. Forty minutes later the meeting was over. “Go get yourselves some lunch and spend all the time you need on planning your first classes. I’ll be around if you have any questions. And please remember,” she paused, and then in a clear voice without a trace of irony provided some parting words: “Take your job seriously.” As Billy thought about it then and often later, it was such an odd and wonderful thing for a new leader to say.

Billy ate downstairs and was joined by Clovis, the jokester at the meeting. He introduced himself as the department fuck-up. “I’m afraid,” he said, “our chairman’s words were aimed at me. Well, you know something? She’s right. I can be irreverent. What’s your story?”

Billy told him about his job in Iowa. A good place to start, he explained, but too small and not a happy place. But he liked the kids. He decided he wanted to be near a big city and not in one. Forest was the place. “I am a teacher’s kid, after all.”

After lunch, Billy returned to his classroom and studied the sophomore curriculum one more time. It was clear and sensible. The year would start with short stories and then move to poetry and drama. The curriculum told him what to do, leaving ample room for his own ideas. The last words were, *Look for opportunities*. He noticed that one of the authors of the curriculum was Mildred Hopkins.

From the beginning, things felt good. His students, basically an average bunch, liked talking about the stories and writing about them. He could keep them quiet. He could make them

laugh. He could connect what they were discussing to what was going on in their lives.

He made a point of staying on top of things, in part because he did not want Mildred coming after him. She observed his class in late October. The next day in his mailbox he found a short evaluation of his teaching: *Good questions. Make sure to include more kids in the discussion. Keep getting the papers back right away. It means more to the kids when they can see the results.*

The department meetings were short and infrequent. Mostly she would remind people of what was coming up. She pointed out an *Opportunity Board* she had for trips and special projects. And she never missed a chance to ridicule the administration. “We have a good curriculum and great teachers. I’m not going to let those yahoos add meaningless tasks. You worry about teaching, and I’ll worry about them.”

But still Billy was not quite comfortable around Mildred. From time to time he had tried to start up a conversation at lunch, but her short answers told him she had better things to do. She was never at the parties or the bar on Fridays or at the games. After his first year, he was pleased with his effort but still wary of Mildred.

When Billy entered the building the morning after he heard of Mildred’s death, the hall was filled with desks all pushed together. The squeaks of a waxing machine in a distant hall was the only sound. He didn’t see anyone, but he did smell the aroma from Rocco’s cigar. The heavy air held on to the smoke. Without the kids tearing through the halls, it would stay there for a long time. Rocco—Mildred called him ‘El Duce’—had been a janitor at Forest longer than Mildred had been a teacher. Rocco had fought with the Italians in the Second World War. Mildred had once asked him to be interviewed by one of her classes. She thought he had as much to offer as her other colleagues.

Billy got the news of Mildred’s death the night before. Clovis had left a message on his answering machine. “Bad news, Billy. Mildred died this morning. Neighbors found her in her front yard. She had a heart attack while walking back to her apartment with her newspaper. Services are Saturday. We thought maybe you could say something.”

Billy walked down the hall toward the classrooms. The custodians had finished waxing the floors in this hall, and the desks were out of view. He paused at the classroom where Mildred had taught for so long. Unlike some department chairmen who stayed away from the students, she always taught a full load of classes up until the last years, when her heart started to fail. But she did not quit. Last year, she’d taught three classes and picked up a fourth when young Tom Harris came down with mono.

When he reached the library, he stopped and looked in. There it was: ‘Billy’s table.’ That’s where he sat after school to grade papers. He had a key just in case the library was locked. He had started working there his second year, and he was still going strong. Next year he’d be back.

Mildred had joined him his third year. “They’re painting my office. May I join you?” Before he could say “Sure,” she sat down one table over, spread out her work, and began reading student papers. With her so close, he had a hard time concentrating. She was just too big for him. Her size, her pure volume, seemed to extend beyond her skin and consume the air around her.

She came back again a few days later and kept coming back. “I hope you don’t mind. It’s peaceful here. No telephone. Lots of books. You know how it is.” Did he? Did he know how it is? Anyway, he did not mind her being there. And at some point he would have minded if she were not there.

Every so often, they chatted about the papers they were reading. Billy asked his students to write about the books they were

reading and also about what they had done in their lives. And he gave them a chance to make up things and to write poetry. As long as they were writing, he was happy. Mildred, who encouraged this sort of thing, liked to hear what Billy's kids had to say. Her students were seniors. They spent more time analyzing and synthesizing works of literature. But she also gave them plenty of chances to express themselves.

But while the conversation was friendly and often informative, usually they didn't talk at all. And that's how it was for twenty-five years. Occasional talk about what their students were writing, nothing about the bozos in the office. Nothing about the boy with the gun, the girls who got pregnant, the football coach who had a gay lover in South Beach. Nothing about the state champion basketball team. Nothing about the graduate who became an astronaut. Nothing about the kilo of grass found in the class president's locker. Nothing about the changing atmosphere brought on by computers and the new emphasis on testing and No Child Left Behind. Nothing about who was doing what in the English department. Certainly not that, for Mildred had continued to be the strong, mildly intimidating, encouraging leader she had been from the start.

Other teachers, especially the chronic gossipers, knew how much time Billy and Mildred spent together. For most, this little unmarried man and this large unmarried woman belonged together, sitting at a table in a room full of books, purposefully working. Clovis, of course, had his own ideas. Once at a faculty party, he drunkenly eased up to Billy and quietly asked, "You're not humping her in there are you, Old Boy?" Billy had blanched and coughed and excused himself.

In this last year, Mildred clearly was failing. Her heart was weak; her energy gone; she had lost some control over her hands and could not write as well. She began to forget. At first

Billy refused to notice. She was, after all, invincible. But when she referred to Clovis as 'Cloris' and arrived late and confused at a meeting, he knew the person who had sat next to him for all those years was not the same.

And she knew that he knew. And they began to talk more. It was her way of reminding herself to keep her mind active. And one day she left a list in front of him. It was a short agenda for the meeting with spaces. She wanted him to fill in those spaces. He did so gladly. And as he helped her more, she relied on him more.

But the last day, she was sharp once again. The final meeting went smoothly. After the meeting, she found him in the library where he was writing a letter to a former student. "I have one more year, Billy, and then I leave. You'll be here, won't you?"

Of course.

Now three months later, he was imagining working alone in the library. He would try, but it might be too painful.

Time to go back home and write the funeral remarks. He knew what to include and what to leave out. Certainly he would leave out what had happened at a department meeting two years ago. At that meeting a new teacher mentioned having a review session in the library after school. Clovis beamed. "Not there, Patsy. That's where Mildred and her boyfriend hang out." It was a cute remark. A Clovis remark. It brought a few chuckles, but Billy, sitting across the table from Mildred, could see her blushing.