

Reunion

“Give me all your cash! Do it!”

One of the things I enjoy about being a teacher is how you occasionally run into old students. Sometimes they're happy to see you, and it's always fun to see how successful they've become in life. Sometimes it makes me feel like some of the things I've done have mattered, just a little.

But in this case, meeting up with a former student didn't look like it would be much fun at all.

He was just a kid when I'd last spoken to him; a gangly teenager who didn't much like school, but loved to play basketball. We'd been pretty close.

He stood in front of me now in the 7/11, with one arm stretched out in front of him, pointing a handgun at the cashier.

He was intent on what he was doing, and while he'd seen me walk into the store, he'd merely motioned with the gun for me to come forward and stand by the counter. He hadn't looked at me.

“Stay there. Don't move! You! Empty out the cash drawer, now!” He waved the gun menacingly at both of us. He looked a little unsteady on his feet.

In the few years since I'd last seen him, Allen had lost a lot of weight. He'd always been skinny, but now he was definitely emaciated. There were dark circles under his eyes, the skin on his face under the unkempt and dirty hair was sallow and blotchy, and he was shaking.

“Allen, what ...”

He turned his head toward me, still keeping the gun pointed at the cashier. His eyes didn't seem to want to focus, but then we made eye contact. His eyes got large. *“Mr. Willis? ... no ... you shouldn't ... be here ...”*

Allen had never done well in school. He'd always had difficulty with reading, and by the time he'd hit high school, he'd been doing poorly in just about everything. But he'd wanted to play basketball, so he spent a lot of time after school getting help from some of his teachers, me included.

I hadn't been too enthusiastic about helping him, at first. I hadn't liked Allen very much then; he was mouthy, he swore a lot, and he was always causing some sort of disturbance or other, in the hallways or in the various classes he attended. Despite his willingness to stay after school occasionally for help with math, I'd never looked forward to those help sessions.

But things had changed once I'd gotten to know Allen a little better. He really did care about getting better results, or at least he said he did. And as I learned more about him, and about why he was the way he was, I came to understand that he really wasn't a bad kid after all.

He'd only had a mother at home, and she hadn't been very supportive. Mostly she'd let him do whatever he wanted. I'd asked Allen about that once, when we were talking about why he never did homework.

"I can't do anything at home, Mr. Willis. My mother ... well, she doesn't ..."

"Surely she won't mind if you do some homework once in a while!"

"It's not that. She doesn't care, I guess. Shit, mostly she just watches TV and drinks. I don't like being around her when she's had too much ... she gets, like, mean. So I do stuff outside. Build things, stuff like that."

I promised Allen I'd help. Find him time during the day when he could get some work done. We'd fix this, somehow.

We'd talked a lot that year about all kinds of things. I'd learned that Allen had a real talent for tinkering with machinery. Once I had him recondition an old lawn mower that I couldn't get to start. And he had a wicked sense of humour.

I guess you could say we became friends.

He'd tried to teach me to play basketball once. We'd spent a few hours in the gym after school one day, shooting baskets. Allen was pretty good, and he tried his best to help me learn to do it. But it was pretty hopeless; I'd never been very coordinated.

Allen was the kind of kid who was always late for class. He didn't do it on purpose; he was just sociable. He'd stop in the library to see what was going on there, and he'd stop in the office just to say 'Hi'. Everybody liked Allen. But that didn't stop him from getting into trouble.

Allen got sent to the office a lot. Sometimes for not doing any work. Once in a while for swearing. More often than not it was for talking back to teachers. But despite all of this, he was always cheerful. It was one of the things I grew to like about him.

I'd tried to help him behave better by talking to him a lot in the hallways, and occasionally visiting his classes, the ones where he would sometimes get into trouble. I think it helped. I know Allen was always happy to talk to me, about anything.

I'd discovered at one point that Allen wasn't eating very well. There'd never seemed to be much food in his house. After I'd learned that, I'd started keeping bread and peanut butter in a cupboard in my classroom, and invited him to help himself whenever he felt like it. We'd ended up having 'breakfast' together every morning.

It was at one of those impromptu 'breakfasts', one morning near the end of Allen's grade eleven year, that he told me he wouldn't be back the following year.

"But Allen, why? You're passing everything, aren't you?" I knew he was, but just barely, although I wasn't sure how well he'd do on final exams. He'd always had trouble with tests.

"There's no way I can pass grade twelve, you know that. And besides, I want to make some money. I have a great job this summer working on an oil rig north of here, and I think I'll just stay on in the fall."

"Well, I know the pay is good, but ..."

"I know what you're going to say, Mr. Willis. Get an education first, and all that. Shit, after a few months on the rigs, I'll be making more money than you! It's a good job!"

"I know, Allen". It was true. *"But are you going to do that for the rest of your life?"*

"I dunno. But for now, it'll do."

In fact, Allen had left the next week. He'd stopped in my room to say good bye.

"I start next week, Mr. Willis". He was excited. *"The camp is pretty isolated ... that's a good thing, right? I won't be able to spend all the money I make!"* He laughed. *"But in the fall, I'm going to get a new truck. I'll show it to you sometime when I'm back!"*

But Allen hadn't returned to show me his truck. I'd never seen him again.

Until now. Standing in front of me with a gun pointed at a cashier in a 7/11.

"Allen, what are you doing?"

He looked at me through bloodshot eyes, and I could see the panic there as he turned the gun towards me, and then back towards the cashier.

"What, Allen? Are you going to shoot me? Are you going to shoot her too?" I looked towards the cashier, who was obviously terrified; tears were running down her face.

"No, I just ... I just ..."

I wasn't afraid of him. And when he'd pointed the gun at me, I'd noticed the barrel. It was a pellet gun.

"Allen, all you're likely to do with that pellet gun is put my eye out. And you wouldn't want me to lose an eye, would you? I need both my eyes to play basketball!"

He paused at that, confused. Then he brightened a little. *"Damn, Mr. Willis, you were never any good at basketball. You never could shoot worth a shit!"*

I laughed, *"And your language hasn't improved any either, I see!"* He laughed too.

After that it was all right. Allen put the 'gun' down on the counter, and we sat down together against the back wall. We talked.

We talked about how his job had paid all too well, and how he'd spent his money almost as fast as he'd made it. He'd gotten into drugs, he told me, and although he didn't talk much about that, I suspected, from his gaunt appearance and his bad teeth, that it had been meth.

We'd fix this, somehow.

The cashier had obviously called the police, because they arrived as Allen and I were still sitting against the wall. I was holding him while he cried.

We'd fix this.

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Although I wrote myself into this story, the situation here is entirely fictional. It's just a story. You can read more of my short stories at:

<http://www.worsleyschool.net/stories/stories.html>