THE HEADMASTER

On a Saturday morning in the spring of 1964, Sue and I each drop a nickel into the machine and board the *Gold Star Mother,* the ferry that will take us from Manhattan to Staten Island. In the fall, we'll start teaching on Staten Island, and we need to find a place to live. Before sitting down on an outside bench, I buy a hot dog heaped with sauerkraut. It's small and slightly gray. It looks tired and doesn't taste too good. I seem to recall that a few years ago, a Belgian tourist had encountered a human knuckle inside one of these ferry wieners. I lob the rest over the side just as we chug past the Statue of Liberty.

Staten Island, the joke goes, got its name when Peter Stuyvesant, sitting in a small boat in New York Harbor, squinted through the fog at a large hunk of land to the south and asked, "Is staten island?" I've already heard this joke several times and expect to hear it some more, and before long I'll start telling it.

Our future boss is waiting for us in the parking lot of the ferry terminal. His name is Henry Morrison, and he is the headmaster of the Staten Island Academy. He is leaning against an old green Chevy and smoking. Instead of the sport coat with the leather elbow patches that he wore so comfortably at our interviews, today he's wearing a faded green flannel shirt, jeans, and old tennis shoes. His hair is barely combed. He is thin, almost fragile.

At our interview, he had been pleasantly rambling. When I talked, he listened carefully. I told him I had not been an honors student in high school, but that I had always had an idea that I might want to teach. In college, I didn't break any records, but I kept thinking of myself more as a teacher than a scholar. My work at Columbia

Teachers College convinced me all the more that I should be in the classroom. “I’m glad to hear that,” he had said, “I’m not looking for intellectuals.”

Along the street behind him loom old factories and warehouses. These spooky buildings, the hulking ferries, and the smoky air drifting across the water from New Jersey give the scene a gritty urban feeling. “Welcome to our lovely island,” he says. He gestures to what’s behind him and nods wryly. “It’s a good day for apartment hunting. I’m really glad you came out today.”

I’m sure he means it. When he hired Sue and me, he filled two teaching positions at once. Rather than cranky radicals or scowling misfits, we must look like the well-adjusted suburban types that we are. And he’s probably pleased that we are practical young people who take care of matters early. We won’t be showing up in the fall without a place to live.

On the way to his house, Henry pulls up in front of a liquor store and disappears inside. A few minutes later he’s back, lugging a case of whiskey. “Some school people are coming by tomorrow,” he wheezes as he pushes the case next to where I am sitting in the back seat.

We head up Todt Hill past large houses set back in the woods. It’s hard to believe that this is New York City. At the very top of the hill stands an old mansion that is now the elementary school for the Staten Island Academy. It’s a massive, red brick building with sturdy, white colonial pillars. I have been told that the high school will be moved up near here in a few years, but for now the building, known as Dongan Hall, is surrounded by large athletic fields. On the edge of one of the fields sits a small half-timbered cottage-like place where Henry and his wife Janet live.

Janet Morrison greets us at the door. She is taller and sturdier than her husband. She leads us into a simple living room filled with stuffed bookshelves. On the table

are tuna fish sandwiches, chips and iced tea. We serve ourselves while she pours a bourbon for Henry, who has folded himself into a large chair by the fireplace. Through the window on the lawn we can see a round, red-haired youngster raking. “That’s Dennis,” Henry smiles. “He’s been driving his teachers crazy so I thought I’d have him spend the day working here. Maybe I can figure out what’s going on. And maybe not.” He shrugs and sips on his drink.

I like the guy. He’s not afraid to have a drink in front of us. He drives a crappy car. He wears ordinary clothes. He wants us to call him by his first name. He speaks frankly and not in some phony educationese. He asks Dennis to rake his lawn. He’s going to let us borrow his car so we can hunt for a place to live. He’s not one of those public school principals who moved up from the coaching staff or from driver’s education to be the boss. I already know that he graduated from Colgate, earned an M.A. from Trinity and taught in several Eastern prep schools. William F. Buckley is one of his former students. This is the kind of guy I can respect. After all, I’m going to be a new teacher. I want my boss to know what he’s doing. I want him to have a sense of what good teaching is. Henry strikes me as someone like that.

After lunch, I take the wheel of Henry’s car, while Sue, a much better navigator, sits next to me with a map of the island and a newspaper in her lap. The two of us check out apartments in New Dorp, Dongan Hills, Tottenville, and several other little villages that make up Staten Island. Compared to our Greenwich Village neighborhood, most of Staten Island below the hills seems unapologetically plain. We find a little place we like in West Brighton—ten minutes down the hill from the school and around the corner from a Chihuahua stud service.

Later that afternoon we sit on chairs on the lawn recently mowed and raked by Dennis, drink gin and tonics

and eat chips and dip. We describe our place in West Brighton. Henry tells us that lots of teachers live “down” there, but not many students. “That’s not quite right,” Janet laughs, and then, for some reason, we all laugh.

After several more drinks, Henry takes over the conversation. He tells us that the school is good now but will become even more “highly competitive.” Teachers like us will make it that way. We are the kind of “nifty” people he wants. He obviously likes words like *nifty* and *highly competitive*. He’s showing off for us, but I also really believe that he has a clear vision of what his school can become.

On the way to the ferry, he leans back and talks while Janet drives. He wants us to know that we’ll like where we’ll live and that he and Janet have many friends from that part of the island. We shake hands in front of the ferry terminal. “We’ll see you in the fall, and maybe you’ll decide to stay here for a long while. Maybe raise a family here. That would really be nifty.” His wife leads him back to the car, and with nickels in hand, we walk toward the ferry.

The memory of Henry sticks with me as I complete my M.A., and it is still with me later that summer as Sue and I drive back to Chicago and I begin to think about the 5th and 6th graders I will be teaching. In my imagination, I can hear Henry’s New England accent, see his slightly stooped angular body, his messy hair, his slightly shaking hands. He is always nearby, looking over my shoulder, sending me notes, quietly advising me, listening attentively, explaining a subtle rule of grammar, sticking a novel in my mailbox. He is smoking, of course, and his breath smells slightly of bourbon.

The night before my first day of teaching, I stack my grad-school books in a bookcase near my desk. There are methods books, linguistics books, novels and collections of short stories. There are books by John Dewey and James Conant and several books of criticism.

Last year I lost myself in these books; this year I may never open them. I write down a simple plan for tomorrow's half-day of school.

The next morning, I walk up the creaking steps to the third floor of Dongan Hall. It's an old building, once the home of FDR's Secretary of State. That man's children probably slid down the long banister. I wear a brown sport coat, a red tie, dark pants, and loafers. The third floor has four large classrooms. If they are converted bedrooms, the bedrooms were immense. The central hallway is lighted by a large window. Sprinklers hang from the high ceiling. It feels like exactly what it is: a mansion of pre-income-tax opulence made over into a school.

As I head for my room, I'm excited. Downstairs, Sue is greeting her 1st graders. And I'm up here, ready to become a teacher. For the first time in my life I carry a briefcase, a gift to myself from E. J. Korvettes. I have two pens, one already well chewed. Chewing pens is a family habit. By noon the second pen should likewise be well gnawed.

Some teachers are on the third floor already. Ada Sanchez, the French teacher, is sitting at her desk in a room on the left. I can see flowers along her window ledge and a neatly arranged bookshelf. I make a mental note not to spill coffee on her desk. A compact little lady with gray hair and good posture, she also speaks fluent Spanish. She was born into a wealthy Castilian family outside of Madrid. I have been warned not to ask if she is Mexican or Puerto Rican. She's friendly, but doesn't smile much. "Good morning, Bob," she calls out. "All set to go?" I tell her I am and wonder what she thinks of all the teachers like me who come here for a few years and then move on while she stays and stays and stays. She probably imagines each class as a bus and the teacher as the driver—steering, accelerating, turning, braking and finally hopping off for another to replace him.

Does this Ada Sanchez know what little driving experience I have? I have a post-graduate degree from Columbia Teachers College, so I have spent time thinking about teaching and talking with real teachers, but I have no classroom experience except for one time last spring (at my request) when I came out to Staten Island to teach for one hour. That day I read Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Black Cat” aloud with the class and then rattled off a dozen leading questions about character and conflict. The teacher I was replacing slouched in the back and read *The Ginger Man.* I wanted to ask how he enjoyed Donleavy’s writing. But I didn’t. When the class was over, he said I did fine and shook my hand. By 3:00 PM I was back on the ferry heading to Manhattan. So much for my student teaching.

But I think I know what’s expected of me. The main thing seems to be: Keep ’em quiet. Keep ’em busy. Show up on time. Give ’em plenty of homework. Fill the grade book with marks. I was surprised to discover that we would be giving letter grades to these kids. I learned this yesterday at the elementary school faculty meeting. Henry had welcomed us and then introduced the lower-school principal, Alan Stone, who is also the math/social studies teacher. Stone’s a big guy in his fifties with lots of white hair and a gruff voice. He looks like a large W.C. Fields. While Henry looked on uncomfortably, Stone talked about running “a tight ship.” Henry excused himself as Stone began to talk about the day-to-day business of the school, finishing off with one more rant about tight ships. After the meeting, Stone took me aside to tell me that Anderson, the teacher I am replacing, couldn’t keep the kids quiet. He hoped I could do a better job.

The other key word, of emphatic importance, is “prepare.” If I do a good job, the kids will be “prepared” for the next grade as they move on toward high school and eventually college. If they are not “prepared,” I will have done a bad job. My job is to keep track of what the next

year's teachers expect my kids to know. It's not really what we talked about at Columbia, but "prepare" is a useful term to hang on to. But it's an odd word. Do we prepare kids the same way we prepare a meal or prepare our income-tax report? I assume that as the year develops, I will keep adding to my sense of what the students need in order to be prepared. In the meantime, we'll read books, study grammar, and write papers. Isn't that what kids do in English?

I'd be worried if I were walking through the hall of some blackboard-jungle school with greasy-haired guys in leather jackets snuggling up with their smirking slutty girlfriends. I'd be downright terrified if I were about to face a class of AP high school seniors who already knew all about Milton, "The Waste Land" and the objective correlative. But I've got small people in my future. We'll meet in a building that used to be someone's house. How dangerous could these kids be? How complicated is the material? What could ever happen that I could not handle? Several teachers have told me that what really matters is to stay ahead of the kids. Just get to where they're going before they get there.

I write my name on the board, erase it, write it again, fiddle with the stuff in my briefcase and wait for my 5th graders to show up, and before long two blond-haired boys walk through the door. We shake hands and introduce ourselves. One is named Ricky, the other Mark. Ricky is easily a foot taller than his friend. They wear plaid sport coats and clip-on ties. They move to the back of the room. I ask if they are Mets fans and find out that they are. More kids walk in, and soon all eighteen desks are filled with little people. One girl is so short that her feet do not touch the floor when she sits at her desk. Next to her sits a short boy named Pierre, who, I have been warned, suffers from epilepsy. They all look at me matter-of-factly as if I belong in front of the room. No one stands up and calls me an impostor.

I pause, take a deep breath and become a teacher.

"I'm Mr. Boone," I say. I have never been a "Mister" before. I point at my badly written name on the board. "I'm your English teacher." I take roll, mispronouncing several names. They really howl when I pronounce the name "Harry" as "Hairy." That's my Midwestern accent, I tell them, but when a boy in the back row keeps on laughing, I send him a stern look and he covers his mouth. We will be studying language, I tell them, and reading books like *Rascal* and *The Call of the Wild*. We also will study mythology and write lots and lots of papers. I make a list on the board of what we will cover. This all comes out easily. I am much more organized and confident than I expected. "Tomorrow I will give you the assignments for the first few weeks." My voice is just like a teacher's. How did that happen?

With fifteen minutes to go, I'm done talking, but before I have time to panic, Peter, a roundish boy in a green sport coat, asks me why I came to Staten Island. He's one of those kids with an open face and ill-fitting glasses that it is impossible not to like on sight. I tell him why Sue and I came here, and my answer prompts a random chat with the kids, who all seem eager to talk.

"My wife and I are interested in Staten Island," I tell them. "What are some things to do?" I feel as if I've just started a conversation with agreeable strangers at a bar or on a train. They act as if all they want to do is yak it up.

"Go to the Tibetan Museum."

"The zoo has a great snake house."

"What about restaurants?" I ask, just to keep things moving. How many 5th graders are going to be gourmands?

"Gene's is good."

Bookstores? "There aren't any."

Then Tommy, a slender boy with a sly cast to his face, asks me if I know why the southernmost bridge over to New Jersey is called the "Outerbridge Crossing."

"I suppose because it's the last bridge. The outer bridge."

"Wrong," they all laugh. "It was named after a guy named Outerbridge. They couldn't call it the Outerbridge Bridge."

Nick tells me I'd better take the ferry to Brooklyn soon. "When the bridge is done, that ferry will close down. All they'll have is the ferry to Manhattan."

"What do we do at recess?" I ask.

"We have a catch," says Beth. She's a large girl with sandy hair and braces. She has already learned to slip a palm in front of her mouth when she laughs.

"You mean 'play catch'?" I ask incredulously.

"We New Yorkers say have a catch; you guys from Chicago can say it the way you want."

They keep asking questions. Am I related to Daniel Boone? Did I know their former teacher? Could we take a trip to Asbury Park? Why do I chew pens? This is my first lesson in how acutely observant my students will always be.

I think about their ideas while I wait for the 6th graders. Through the window I can see the athletic fields. Henry's house is partially visible on the other side of the soccer field. In the woods somewhere out there is the grave of one of the minor Vanderbilts. Nearby is an Augustinian seminary. Todt Hill is the highest point on the eastern seaboard, and I am by far the tallest person here on the third floor, so what does that make me? *Todt* means death in German. I hope that's not significant.

The 6th graders are a little bigger and noisier but just as agreeable as the 5th graders. One boy has a red bow tie. I recognize Dennis, the boy who mowed Henry's lawn. I keep playing the teacher role—even firing off a frown at two chattering girls in the back. A few minutes and I seem to have their respect. I tell the 6th graders that they will study grammar and read *The Arabian Nights, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Gulliver's*

Travels, The Diary of Anne Frank and *The Odyssey*. I make a list for them, and then I ask them questions. Like the 5th graders they seem to enjoy this bantering. I am pleased by how easy it is to start a conversation with these kids.

I see Henry in the hall after school. He asks how my day went, but when I start to answer, he tells me that last night he heard David Brinkley say "between you and I." I shake my head and frown mournfully at the misuse of this pronoun. I walk out of the building feeling confident.

The next morning I see Henry in the hall again. He asks how I'm doing, but when I start to tell him, he excuses himself and hurries off to greet a parent. Mary Ann, the 4th-grade teacher, walks up and tells me not to take it personally. It happens all the time. I tell her he must be very busy. "Are you kidding?" she laughs.

At recess this second day, Fred and Ricky ask me to teach them how to punt a football. I tell them what I know: Drop it straight down. Kick the ball on the inside of the foot to make it spiral. Kick so high that the other foot leaves the ground. I imagine a picture from an old college program of a grinning punter—one leg high, toe pointed, arms outstretched. I demonstrate, and the ball sails off in a perfect spiral, landing fifty yards away. I have never kicked a ball that far. Everyone on the playground looks over at me. Who is this guy? Someone throws it back. I politely refuse to kick again, but the kids insist. This time the ball shoots off the side of my foot and nails a small girl in the ear. She's not pleased.

Toward the end of recess, Pierre has a minor seizure. He's on the ground shaking, and the kids are there stretching him out while Nick slaps his legs. This is just what Stone told me would happen. By the time I get there, Pierre's on his feet smiling. He straightens his shirt and adjusts his tie, pushes his blond hair away from his forehead, and casually moves away. I expected an epileptic fit to be more dramatic than that.

I have decided to concentrate on reading for the first few weeks. I had made list of different plans of attack, but until the second day I had never really decided. It was almost as if I was waiting to see what I would do. The 5th graders will read mythology, and the 6th graders will read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. I know the subjects. I'm confident I can fill the time productively. How can I go wrong with reading? At some point I will add more writing and grammar, and then I can keep the whole thing going until June.

The choice seems right. The kids read at home and in study halls. In class we read aloud and stop to discuss anything that seems important at the time—a new word, a funny passage, odd behavior. I give little quizzes and bigger ones and finally tests. I want to make sure they are able to comprehend the stories at a literal level. Who was Injun Joe? Who was Muff Potter? When do people realize that Injun Joe killed the doctor? Where did they find Injun Joe's body? What is a Real Barlow? What did the schoolmaster wear on his head? Why did people think Tom was dead? Who was Hera? What is a Titan? When did Orpheus look back? Where did Paris take Helen? Why did Cronus eat his kids?

The new teacher in me wants to see that grade book filled. But the reader in me wants the kids to enjoy the stories as much as I do. My best teachers in high school and college left me with a deep affection for reading. I can't resist terms like conflict and characterization, but I certainly don't want to get into literary analysis with 5th and 6th graders. Whether I'm being scholarly or not, the kids respond enthusiastically to the stories, but I think their enthusiasm has more to do with the books than with me. One time Ronny asks if we could stop talking so he could read by himself.

One day a 6th grader asks me about theme. Do all stories have morals? No, I tell her, they don't. She studies me as if I too am a story with a central theme. Her older

brother said they did, she argues. “I want you to enjoy the stories,” I tell her. “Worry about the morals later on.” She shrugs noncommittally.

The “teachers' room” at Staten Island Academy isn’t the kind of inviolate sanctuary that can be found in many schools—it’s simply one of the smaller rooms in the mansion, with a single door and just one window facing the grounds. It’s comfortable enough. It’s always dense with cigarette smoke. Occasionally I see Sue here. She’s often exhausted from teaching the little kids, an artist trying to adapt to a life of teaching 1st graders. Sometimes I pass the lunchroom and see her sitting in a little, tiny chair along with her kids. In class, she’s finding more and more ways to use her art.

In the teachers' room one afternoon, Henry walks up while I am mimeographing a mythology quiz. He nods and asks if he can borrow a copy of the quiz. Later I find it left on top of the radiator near the door.

In class we’re always on the lookout for puns. Peter tells me that the man outside mowing the lawn has a “sod job.” Peter’s face lights up whenever he thinks of a pun, glowing almost as brightly as his red hair. I tell him he has no sense of “humus.” Katrina’s puns are usually more sophisticated than mine. She says that an unopened package in the hall gives us “Crate Expectations.” Several of the kids tell me I’m a “Boone” to mankind. One day I ask the kids to use “abhor” in a sentence, and Eric says that a house with hate in it could be called an “abhor house.” How had he ever thought of that? Fred points out that an old plant on the windowsill is a “has bean.” And a boat that left the dock was “out to launch,” and that a person who is not hanged might think “no noose is good noose.”

All the joking around relaxes the atmosphere and makes it easier to learn. It gives the class a feeling of belonging. It also shows the kids how much they have inside of themselves already. They gain respect for their

own spontaneity. I gain even more.

After a loud joke one afternoon, I notice Henry squinting through the window in the door. When he sees me, he nods and hurries away. This happens a few more times in the next few weeks, but he never says anything. An older colleague tells me that Henry's usually had a couple of bourbons before he makes these little "inspection tours." Anyway, I'm told, I shouldn't worry about it because Henry has no idea what's going on. It's clear by now that most people at the school don't take him seriously. Still, I expected to have more contact with him, and when I do, maybe I'll find the thoughtful schoolmaster I met last spring at the ferry.

I also have started a writing unit. I figure writing a lot is better than writing a little, so I have them write a lot. They write book reports. They write summaries of what they have read. They write about the characters in the stories. I respond initially by telling then what I like and what needs more work. But I also talk about organization, mechanics, and spelling. I have to concentrate to make sure they can read my lousy handwriting.

Stone gives me a ride home one day. I'm sure he's going to ask about some of the noise coming out of my classroom, and I'm ready to defend myself. Instead he asks me why I didn't teach at college. Shouldn't I have stayed in school for a Ph.D.? I tell him my M.A. is from a teachers' college and that I want to teach younger kids. I also tell him I was only a fair student in high school. In college I did well only in my major. I've struggled in school like most other people. He seems pleased and tells me that he was a terrible student. We stop for shot and a beer at a bar down the road, next door to the Chihuahua stud service.

My friends at Columbia want to know about ten and eleven-year-olds. They are all teaching high school and can't quite imagine doing what I am doing. I tell them that my students are much more mature than I had

anticipated. I'm really not sure what they can't do. My advisor is pleased that I like the younger pupils. "You might be in the right place," he tells me.

At the moment I do feel I'm in the right place. I had never considered teaching younger kids, but they seem perfect for a person like me. There are so many things I can't do—dance, sing, swim, speak foreign languages, play chess, write neatly. I am not really a scholar. I like books. I like to write. I can do several things at the same time. 5th grade seems like a safe spot for me.

I get along with the other lower-school teachers, who are mostly women. They approve of my teaching but are suspicious of the new grammar. They gripe about Henry's lack of backbone, lack of memory, lack of self-control, but I still like what I remember about him. Stone, to most of these teachers, is a semi-harmless oaf. Over time, I also get to know the upper-school teachers. They complain more openly about Henry. They complain about low pay and rude students. Some feel guilty because this is a private school.

For parents' night I wear a new sport coat and a blue tie. I have even polished my shoes. Very snappy, I think, a real, professional teacher. The classrooms are jammed with adults. My room reeks of perfume. The plan is for Mom to squeeze into the school desk while Dad crouches nearby. I talk about the books their children have read and the papers they have written. I tell them that the new grammar describes the language more accurately and that it gives me more choices for activities. But still I have included the old grammar so kids will know parts of speech and how to diagram a sentence. I am fearful of one of the parents who teaches English at NYU. But he says nothing. I try to look organized and thorough for all the business executives in the room. I'm nervous, but I speak well enough. Several parents come up afterwards to say how much their kids like my class. They have sent their kids to a private school for greater

personal contact, and they think they have found it.

I expect this kind of parental interest. These parents—whether they are Manhattan business people or NYU professors, whether they are Barry Goldwater Republicans or old-fashioned New York liberals—expect to play a key role in their kids' education. When I teach in other schools in other communities, this might not be the case. Henry, I'm told, sucks up to these people all the time. This is odd because Henry and the parents don't seem that much alike. My sense is that the parents welcome creative teaching if the teacher seems serious. As it turns out, progressive education will do much better in the rich suburbs than in the inner city.

Afterwards I go with Stone to a local bar known as Pop's Last Chance. I feel relieved because no one asked me tough questions. The parents seem pleased with what the kids are doing. Stone crows about dodging the questions "the asshole parents" asked. Schools don't need parents around. All they do is "fuck things up." I can tell he likes me better now that he knows I'm not some effete Ivy League superstar. He tells me about a time he and his Navy buddies were beaten up in a small Southern town by a bunch of rednecks. He also talks bitterly about Henry who has "fucked up the discipline." Henry would not have lasted a minute in the Navy. This is the first time he's been so openly critical of Henry. Before we drive home, he tells me I'm doing a pretty good job of running a tight ship—much better than my predecessor—but there's still too much noise coming out of my room. Some field trips are coming up, and it will be my job to keep the kids quiet on the bus.

I can usually keep my classes quiet, but not always. The kids know that I am not really a tough person, so threats don't work. Sometimes they laugh too much and things come apart. But, because of Stone, I did emphasize discipline right away. Besides, I like a quiet classroom with no shouting and no interruptions. Nick is

my biggest problem. He can be noisy and rude. He can be a bully. He's big and handsome and even Katrina has a crush on him. Shouldn't a girl as smart as Katrina be able to see through Nick? Nick and I talk a lot about his behavior. He understands why I want him to be quiet. He understands why this material is important, but in most classes he either talks or lets his mind slip away.

By Thanksgiving I know a lot about the kids. I know Pierre asks irrelevant questions and I also know that his father died last year. Eric and Katrina want to be doctors, just like their parents. Ricky loves music; Chip's parents want him to go to Princeton; Greg does not like me; Bobby's house is big and friendly; Ronny knows all about the Civil War. Most seem to like sports. They are up to date on recent fads like the "Name Game." They travel to Manhattan frequently. Not all are from wealthy families, but they are all living comfortably. Yet they don't strike me as spoiled rich kids.

The kids spend part of the week before Thanksgiving taking standardized English and math tests. The smart kids do well, the not-so-smart kids do not do as well. The English scores are higher than the math scores. No one pays that much attention, but a few people do congratulate me as if I were responsible for this. It occurs to me often that the people who say I'm doing a good job are either wrong or insincere. They often really mean I am doing a good job because the kids are quiet or busy.

Also in November I meet individually with the parents. Even if I intend to say something critical, I end up saying that I have seen improvement or certainly potential. I show them tests and papers, and I speculate on how their children will do in high school. Pierre's mom asks about her son's epilepsy. Another mother asks if her son cries. Tony's mom is afraid that her boy might hurt the smaller boys. She tells me her husband's ancestors came here to help build the New York subway system. She wants us to come over in the spring to use the

swimming pool. Liz's mother says that my family can stay at their club when they come to visit.

In December, I run out of energy. It is as if I have hit a wall, like a long-distance runner. Suddenly nothing is more important—absolutely nothing—than getting through the next few weeks and leaving for a while. I am not laughing as much. The little voices are penetrating. The kids don't seem to listen to me as well. Katrina yawns while I am explaining noun clauses. A parent calls to ask if I'm aware I have made several spelling errors in my comments on his daughter's paper. I'm turning into a bore. Pierre has three fits in one day. Nick gives Ricky a bloody nose. Someone pees on the radiator. I find myself saying things like, "You'd better learn this or you'll be sorry when you get to high school." I can't get rid of a cold. I lose things. At the end of the day I am as anxious as they are to hit the road.

I smoke because I am tired, and I am tired because I smoke. I smoke whenever I have the chance, but so does everyone else. If I stay late to grade papers, I smoke right at my desk. When we take the kids on the bus down the hill to the Moravian church to play basketball at the gym, I smoke in the bus. Everyone smokes.

The day before vacation many of the kids bring presents to the teachers. By nine o'clock my desk is piled with books, scarves, gloves, wine and aftershave lotion. Bobby, who has not brought me anything, suddenly excuses himself and runs out of the room. I look out the window and see him sprinting across the field to his house. A few minutes later he is back with a half-filled bottle of vodka wrapped in yesterday's *Staten Island Advance*.

In January, after trips to Nashville to visit Sue's parents and Chicago to visit mine, things fall back into place. Now I know not to be surprised when I run out of energy. I look for a place to grade papers during free

periods. I consider the attic, a very large closet, the kitchen and an unused boiler room. I finally decide on the kitchen. In the morning Mrs. Bux, the head cook, and her crew are in this kitchen, cooking up shepherd's pie and other meals for the kids. In the afternoon the kitchen is warm and empty. I can sit and grade papers at a long table near the stove by a wall covered with hanging utensils. One afternoon, Henry wanders in, and we chat for a moment. He looks confused and unhappy. I have heard that he has had to cancel a play at the high school because of questionable language. At issue was the word "chamberpot." Evidently a parent had complained about it. The teachers say this is just one of many times he has given in to pressure from the parents. I start to tell him about the papers I am grading, but he excuses himself and walks back out the door.

Finally, in April, Henry asks me to meet him after school in the library to discuss my teaching. Should I be worried? No one takes him seriously, but still, he's the boss. Lately, I have been testing new waters. The 6th graders are writing original stories. The 5th graders are working on memory pieces. Both classes did a reading of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* for the smaller kids. Henry might see this as frivolous stuff that I picked up in teachers' college. How will this prepare the kids for next year? How is this really leading them down the road to college? I'm ready with answers about the importance of creative expression, but I can't draw upon much experience to support my points.

The library used to be the family living room. There's a fireplace along one wall and large windows looking out onto the grounds. I sit at one of the long wooden tables and write an *Oliver Twist* quiz for my 6th graders. Earlier that week Ronny had said that Oliver didn't say "I want some more." He said "I want Samoa," and that means he's a land-grabber. Henry is late. I look up, and he's walking by. I call out and with a surprised

look he makes a sharp turn and sits down across from me. He's smoking. For some reason we shake hands. He borrows a piece of paper and gets ready to write. How do I like the little kids? I love them. Is Stone too gruff? We get along fine, I tell him. Do the parents bother me? Not really. I expected private-school parents to be concerned. Do I understand why some of the teachers don't like the parents? I do, but they don't bother me. Would I ever want to teach in the high school? Sure. We pause for a while. He has run out of questions. I think I can smell bourbon. He lights another cigarette, and we start to talk about college. I ask him how many Staten Island students go to Big Ten schools.

"Well," he coughs and blows out smoke and grinds his cigarette out in a coffee cup, "if the truth be known, we prefer for our kids here to shoot higher than the Big Ten." Then, just as he is about to list the schools he does prefer, he stops talking. His Adam's apple moves up and down. His jaw drops. His hands shake. He reaches into his shirt pocket for another smoke. He has just remembered that Sue and I both graduated from a Big Ten school, the University of Wisconsin. I start to make a joke out of it, but he's on his feet mumbling about a meeting and then out the door. I can hear him rushing upstairs to his office.

For a while, I keep the Big Ten story a secret. But finally I tell another teacher what happened. Word spreads fast. They all nod knowingly. Can't I see that all he really cares about is how things look? Now he's embarrassed because of how he looks to Boone.

I finally have to admit to myself that I was simply wrong about Henry. The Henry I thought I understood last spring is not the Henry who runs the school. Last year I thought that he was guided by a vision of an old-fashioned prep-school instructor committed to excellence. He might bend a little to the parents, but in his heart he was an educator, pure and simple. Now I see him as

totally under the spell of what he imagines outsiders want him to do. I don't think he's a total phony; he's just weak, and booze makes him weaker.

But as Sue and I get ready to go spend a couple of months in Europe, I feel good about the year. Teaching captured my life so thoroughly that Henry's odd behavior made no difference. The parents thank me for making school fun, though several wonder why I was such an easy grader. Stone doesn't like the easy grades or some of the noise from my class, but he finds the time to say I had done a pretty good job. He clearly sees me as a male buddy in a building full of women. The other teachers look at me as part of the team. I am especially pleased because I have found so many different ways to keep kids involved.

The final faculty meeting of the year is held in the lunchroom. Stone thanks us for keeping a reasonably tight ship. He hopes next year we won't go back to the Museum of Modern Art. ("It all looks like scrambled eggs to me," he says.) Henry tells us that next year the Staten Island Academy will be even more competitive than ever and that he has hired more nifty teachers like all of us. We have some scholarship money to encourage some of the kids "down the hill" to get a fine education at our school. He figures even more of our kids will go to highly competitive schools like Yale, Brown, and—he looks right at me—the University of Wisconsin.