

## 1. The Wolverine

Mix equal parts vision and tyranny. Season liberally with pathos, obstinacy, and illogic. Cook in a small dish at intense heat for eighteen hours per day. Serve very chilled. Garnish with ample helpings of processed sugar and caffeine.

Such was the recipe that made up Dr. Connie Rumsford.

She had not killed anyone, not literally anyway, not yet. But as principal of newly opened Shadowcliff High School, she had made them ponder their mortality, question their sanity, and, occasionally, contemplate the essential questions of mankind. This particular problem had vexed them for more than a month, since mid-August.

Three teachers now shared a table at Wingding's, a spacious local tavern whose dark wood interior was illuminated by the glow of ubiquitous neon signs and unrelenting televised sports, and by shafts of Arizona glare injected into the darkness with each opened door. For years, Wingding's had been popular for cheap Happy Hour beer, hot wings, and free peanuts, and now it had become the unofficial watering hole for Shadowcliff High School faculty.

A cheer arose from a distant table. Jimmy Clayton's head swiveled instinctively, but he was unable to ascertain the cause of the excitement. So he turned back to face his colleagues.

"Let me tell you how it is," Clayton announced, sitting tall in his chair. He dramatically sipped his Bud Light as he waited for all to quiet, then began, "I was watching *Animal Planet* last night when it came to me—"

"—You were watching *Animal Planet*?" interrupted Bob Cockrell, a tall, jovial, rumped man who moved like a bear with sore feet. "What happened? You get tired of the women's bass fishing tournament on ESPN?"

“I watch more than ESPN,” Clayton argued. His dark mustache twitched at the indignity of Cockrell’s assertion.

“Yeah, you watch ESPN2, too.”

“So? You spend all your time watching the fucking Rowboat Channel. I bet you actually know who won the women’s bass fishing tournament.”

“Of course I do. Eliza Carney,” Cockrell said matter-of-factly. “She was my lab partner in college.”

“First of all,” Clayton explained, grabbing a handful of peanuts, “the University of Eastern Oregon is not college. It’s more like Fred’s Camping Outlet. The Unabomber was probably your history professor—”

“—Math,” interrupted Keri Tanner. “The Unabomber was a math professor.”

“Whatever. Second, bass fishing is not sports. It’s like watching a fruit fly masturbate on PBS.”

“Oh, lovely,” said Keri dryly, pulling her blonde hair back from her face.

“So is that the answer that came to you? The masturbating fruit fly?” asked Cockrell.

“Seems like a mouthful. ‘I have a meeting with the masturbating fruit fly.’ ‘The masturbating fruit fly wants me to turn in my lesson plans for the next twelve years.’ ‘I have to change my socks because the masturbating fruit fly doesn’t like yellow.’ I thought nicknames were supposed to be short.”

“Jesus, Bob, I was just making a point....”

“And that point was?”

“It does have sort of a catchy ring to it,” Keri decided.

“The point was—” His attention was suddenly drawn to the TV overhead. “He was safe, you moron! What a lousy fucking call.” His gesticulations spewed peanut shells into the beer

mugs being carried by a passing waitress, who eyed him contemptuously as Greg Samson—who taught four different classes, coached cross country, and sponsored two clubs—finally arrived, slipped into a vacant chair, and casually pitched a peanut shell into Keri Tanner’s cleavage.

They were an unlikely bunch, a group which otherwise would probably not spend that much time together. But like those who had endured shipwrecks, World Wars, and Monday morning queues at Starbucks, they had forged an alliance of survival. They had persevered through interviews, questionnaires, and psychological screenings. They had watched the video by master teacher Elden Ray Fong and pretended to read every page of his book. They had filled out two hours of District paperwork and signed the following statement:

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (hereinafter referred to as “Teacher”), do solemnly pledge to be trustworthy, vigilant, and beholden. I further vow to uphold the laws of the State of Arizona and to support and abide by the policies, procedures, and directives of Sweetwater Unified School District No. 43. Most important, I promise and assure my unending loyalty to the Constitution and the democracy that is the United States of America.

Having therefore satisfied the late Senator McCarthy, they were now first-year teachers as part of the most innovative educational setting in the state of Arizona: the newly opened Shadowcliff High School. A school which employed block scheduling, Mentor Time, and heterogeneous grouping. A school with carpeting, snack time, and Mozart piped-in over the intercom before first period. An environment of student-centeredness, shared decision-making, and esteem-building. All theories espoused, and now presided over, by Dr. Connie Rumsford.

“So, another week goes by at Shadow Valley Cliff Ridge Desert High School. Which one are we at?” Greg asked as he leaned forward.

“Shadowcliff,” Keri helped. She reached for the peanut shell inside her shirt. “And no, I don’t need your help with this.”

“I can’t keep ‘em straight,” said Greg, settling back into his chair. “Maybe it’s the fourteen-hour days. You’d think the legislature could pass some sort of law that required school names to have some originality. I guess they were too busy sanctioning the sexual deviancy of Catholic priests.”

“My future ex-husband is Catholic,” Keri added, offhand. A slight smile creased her lips. Clayton was now absorbed in a game on the television on the other side of the bar.

“Who’s playing?” Greg asked.

“WKU and ETSU,” Clayton replied, never taking his gaze from the inch-high figures on the television fifty feet away.

“Who are they?” Greg asked.

“No idea,” replied Clayton.

Greg shrugged and turned back to the others. He was tall and tanned, with a thin frame and thinning hair. His sharp features included a craggy nose and prominent cheekbones on a gaunt face, softened occasionally by an impish smile. As he once explained, “Women don’t necessarily run away from me in sheer terror, but they are always careful to maintain a safe distance.”

On a TV much closer to the group, a man in an ill-fitting suit sat in an uncomfortable chair and spoke woodenly to the camera. The words “Actual Client” appeared beneath him. He explained that his was a “real success story” in which he had won millions, “all thanks to the wise and ethical representation by the law firm with teeth: The Lyon.” This last part he said with great drama.

“Cute slogan,” Clayton said. WKU and ETSU were at halftime.

“I went to law school with that guy,” Greg said.

“Wait a minute,” Cockrell demanded. “You said you went to business school.”

“I did both,” Greg replied. “It was a joint program, MBA and JD.”

“So why aren't you a lawyer?” asked Cockrell, genuinely confused.

Greg chuckled. “After law school I was lucky enough to get a college teaching position. That lasted three years, and it was great. Then, when I moved back here, I just didn't want to work sixty hours a week.”

“How's that working out for you?” asked Keri, already knowing the answer. Greg's wry smiled affirmed the irony.

“At least I get to ‘share the privilege and responsibility of guiding America's young people,’ in the words of some pamphlet I picked up in Human Resources. That's worth something.”

“Yeah,” said Clayton, wiping the beer from the lower edges of his mustache. “About thirty-two thousand a year.”

While the waitress delivered a sandwich to Cockrell and a basket of fries to Clayton, Keri turned to Greg and asked, “What were you saying about school names?” It took him a moment to process, as he found himself captivated by her sky-blue eyes and curious about the slight bump on her nose that somehow made her all the more desirable.

“One year, new high schools in Sweetwater, north Phoenix, and wherever the other one is, and absolutely no identity,” Greg resumed.

“What, you don't think Cactus Valley, Shadow Valley, and Shadowcliff are original?” asked Cockrell.

“I grew up in this district. Bonanza High School, class of '86. Every single school had a western name. Eldorado High School was our rival. I went to Sierra Elementary School and Cimarron Middle School. But nowadays, it's like they name 'em using those poetry magnets for your refrigerator, except due to the budget crisis they bought a defective set. Only had four words to choose from.”

“But our fearless leader was able to convince the School Board to make Shadowcliff one word,” noted Cockrell.

Added Keri, “As she reminds us, every single week.”

“No doubt about it,” Greg said, contemplating a mustard label, “she’s a true educational visionary.”

Indeed, Dr. Rumsford was a champion of innovation, reading educational journals with the voracity of a buzzard on a roadside carcass. She constantly exposed herself to the most cutting-edge theories about learning styles (“Brain Engagement is No Myth!” *Southern Educational Review*, vol. 1, November 2003), the most passionate practitioners of child psychology (“Johnny Hates Himself,” *Children’s Mental Health Quarterly*, vol. 17, Spring 2004), and the most vociferous critics of American education (“Why American’s Can Not Spell,” *Journal of English in Action*, vol. XXIX, March 2005).

“Now Greg,” Bob cautioned. “Be more nurturing. You must be more nurturing.”

“Please,” Greg protested, filling his glass. “Two weeks ago she asked me to go through all the footage of the school being built, and then put together a video to show on the announcements. It took days, then another couple hours actually editing. I thought it was pretty good, considering I didn’t have much to work with. I even added music. ‘School is In’ by—”

“—Josie Cotton,” Clayton jumped in. “I know my eighties music.”

“I’m not sure that should be a point of pride, but anyway, Rumsford comes in to watch the finished product, and I show it in front of the entire class, and when it’s over she frowns and turns to the class and says, ‘I thought it was terrible. What do you guys think?’”