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**The First Day Of School**

Indian summer in a small Midwestern suburb, a hot, hot day in early September.

His heavy book bag slung over his shoulder, Jim Martin—slim, sandy-haired, freckled—trudged along the pitted sidewalk at 7:30 this morning, on his way to Thomas Jefferson Middle School.

He walked slowly, enjoying the heat, enjoying the spongy feel of his new running shoes, enjoying the familiar sights along the route.

Filled with excitement, filled with anticipation, filled with curiosity.

Nervous, too.

This was, after all, the first day of school.

At the bottom of the hill, exactly a mile from his house, he turned the corner and saw the school in front of him.

It wasn’t really a very nice building. Single story, squat, yellowish stone. Nothing stood out except the tall flagpole that would ring like a clock chime when the rope slapped it on windy days. Today, in the still air, the pole was silent.

Taking a shortcut through a hedge, Jim walked over the football field, dew leaping from the toes of his shoes, grasshoppers jumping out of his path.

He glanced to his right and noticed a shaded spot on the field near the home team bleachers and a memory suddenly came back to him—a spring day on that very spot. He and Sam Gordon facing each other, fists balled up, ready to slug it out. Sam was an 8th grader, a big kid—he’d been held back a year. He dressed in dark clothes that smelled of cigarettes and motor oil and he wore his anger the way some women wear too much costume jewelry. For no particular reason he’d taken an instant disliking to quiet Jim, who was a year younger and fifty pounds lighter. Sam had mercilessly tormented him all year until finally Jim had had enough and agreed to Sam’s taunt to fight it out after school.

The boys circled, Jim terrified but defiant. Sam threw the first punch. Jim blocked it but then the bully’s left fist appeared from nowhere and clocked Jim in the cheek. He went down on his knees and Sam leapt on him, flailing away, Jim’s thin arms helpless to protect him from the stunning blows. The big boy then stood and was about to deliver a vicious kick to Jim’s ribs when a man’s voice cut through the April air.

“Boys! That’s enough.”

Coach LaBell stepped forward, pulled Sam away and ordered him to the principal’s office.

Sneering, the boy stalked away.

The coach then helped Jim up and surveyed the damage to his face. The man said, “First the nurse, but I’m afraid you’re going to the principal too, Jim.”

“Yessir.”

The grizzled, crewcut man handed Jim a Kleenex for the blood, and the tears, waited a moment and then he said, “I want to tell you something, young man.”

“Yessir?” Jim asked.

“You want to know what I think the biggest difference is between being a child and being an adult?”

“What’s that?”

“Knowing the difference between the times you have to fight and the times you should walk away. You know what I’m saying?”

Jim nodded.

“Good. Now go see the nurse. Get that cut cleaned up.”

As Jim walked sullenly toward the door, Coach LaBell called, “Oh, Jim?”

The boy turned. “Yessir?”

“About those times you do have to fight?” The man pointed a stubby finger at Jim. “You better learn to watch out for left hooks. Or you’re gonna lose some teeth.”

“I’ll do that, coach.”

Now, this hot, hot first day of school, trudging through the dewy grass, Jim shifted his heavy book bag to the other shoulder, and he thought about how the coach’s words had really made a difference in the way he looked at life.

Closer to the school now, walking past the buses, yellow as pollen, watching the students and teachers, the impatient parents in the car pool lane. Jim waved hello to a few of the kids but he was still lost in his thoughts. He was glancing at a nearby classroom, Mr. Carter’s math class.

Oh, Jim hated math. He did all the homework; he’d spend hours studying for tests, but he could never do better than a C plus, at best. He now thought of one of Mr. Carter’s classes, early in the semester. The teacher had passed out a graded test—Jim’d gotten a C minus. After all that work, he was so frustrated, so discouraged. The teacher must’ve seen the look in his eyes and called him up after class.

“Having some trouble, I see, Jim.”

“I just don’t get it,” the boy said. “I mean, I try. I do the work. But it’s like it’s overwhelming. I freeze up and, you know, I panic.”

Soft-spoken Mr. Carter pulled a slip of paper out of his desk and wrote down several names. He said, “These’re math tutors, Jim. I want you and your parents to call one of them. I think they’ll be a big help.”

“Okay,” Jim said uncertainly. Then he took a deep breath and confessed, “The thing is, Mr. Carter, I just, I mean, I just don’t like math. I’m never going to like it. I know that.”

The teacher smiled at this. “Don’t like math? . . . .” He nodded. “Well, Jim, you have to understand something. Your goal here isn’t to learn to like math. I don’t want to teach you that. I don’t even care about that.”

“You don’t?”

“No, no, no . . . . I want to teach you to love learning about math, that’s all.” He repeated it. “I want you to love learning whatever it is you study.”

And Jim nodded, digesting this. He took the note home and he and his parents got a tutor and his grades improved a bit, not much. But he started to get some B minuses. The important thing for Jim, though, wasn’t the grade but what his teacher had told him. And he thought now, as he walked through the doorway to Thomas Jefferson Middle on this first day of school, about how the math teacher’s words, like Coach LaBell’s, had made a real difference in the way he thought about things.

Walking through the cool halls now, Jim smelled fresh paint and girls’ perfume and those weird biology lab smells. He got a drink at the fountain and headed for home room.

As he did he passed another classroom and another memory hit him. Ah, Mrs. Peabody’s English class. She was a stern, older woman the kids called psychic because she magically knew which students had read the real assignment and which had read the Cliff notes.

Jim thought about the time Mrs. Peabody had given the class a writing assignment. “Write about summer vacation,” she said. “Be as creative as you can. But,” the stern woman added, as she always did, “make sure you use proper spelling and grammar.”

Well, that night Jim sat at his desk at home and stared unhappily at a blank sheet of paper. He didn’t want to write a stupid essay about his summer vacation. For one thing it’d  been a dog. A water park, two weeks of camp, his paper route. Boring . . .  He’d actually been happy to get back to school.

So he gave up on the assignment and wrote what he wanted to. Not an essay at all but a short story. Science fiction. It was about a distant planet that didn’t have summer—it was spring all the time. And it didn’t have vacations either. The aliens on the planet worked 24 four hours a day.

The next morning he handed in the story but that night he lay awake until three a.m., thinking, Why did I do that? I totally ignored the assignment. What the heck was I thinking of? And here English was his favorite class. Maybe it’d take Mrs. Peabody a few days to grade the essays. He’d beg her for a chance to write another one, the sort she wanted.

But when he got to class the next morning it turned out that Mrs. Peabody had read and graded the essays.

And when he saw the way she glanced at him with a strange look in her stern, psychic eyes, he wished he’d stayed home sick.

The teacher said, “I’m going to pass back your summer vacation essays in a minute, but I want to say something first. When you write, when you put your words out for other people to read, you have to learn to take criticism. You have to remember that a critic’s words aren’t attacking you as human beings; they’re only an opinion about something you’ve created, no matter how harsh the opinion seems. . . . . And in this case I’m afraid I’ve got some rather harsh words to say.”

I’m in trouble, Jim thought, blushing already, betrayed by his freckles. Staring at the floor.

Mrs. Peabody continued, “Almost everyone in class wrote an essay about his or her summer vacation . . . . Almost everyone.”

This’s bad, Jim thought. I’m getting an F, I know it.

“But,” the teacher said, “one student decided he didn’t feel like doing that.”

Jim glanced up long enough to see her eyes focused on him.

This’s worse than an F. . . . I’m in note-to-the-parents territory now.

Then Mrs. Peabody looked away from Jim and studied the rest of the class. “All of your essays read as if they were written in your sleep. It’s clear to me that you didn’t take the assignment seriously and none of you spent more than ten minutes on it. Just one of you had the courage to be as imaginative as I asked you to be. Jim Martin is only one who got an A on the assignment. Now I’m going to ask him to come up here and read his story to you as an example of thinking independently and being creative.” Then, being Mrs. Peabody, she added sternly, “though he should’ve a little more attention to proper spelling and grammar.”

Hands trembling, Jim walked to the front of the classroom in triumph, as if he were climbing to the summit of Mount Everest or were the first person to step onto the surface of Mars.

What a small thing really, he now reflected as he dodged through the crowded hallway, just a single assignment. But what a difference that moment had made to him.

Strolling into his home room now, Jim unslung his book bag and sat down as the last of the students filed in. He could see that some of them too were filled with excitement, some with anticipation.

Some with curiosity.

And some were nervous. Just like him, on this hot, hot Indian Summer morning in September.

Then the bell rang, a jarring noise, and eventually silence filled the room, silence broken only by the shuffle of papers, the click of pens, the snapping clasps of purses. The students looked toward the teacher’s desk.

Silence . . .

Jim took a deep breath, paused and he stood. He turned around and picked up a marker. He wrote on the white board, “Mr. Jim Martin, Home Room and Eighth-grade English.” And he added his office hours beneath his name.

He turned back and said, “Good morning, class.” And with a smile he looked over his students on this, the first day of school . . . and his very first day as a teacher. How strange it was, he thought, to be starting his career here at Thomas Jefferson, the same school where he himself had been a student so many years ago and where he’d learned so much.

Like knowing when to fight and when to walk away—but always looking out for left hooks.

And loving learning for itself, whatever the subject you’re studying, even if you only get a C plus.

And always having the courage to think for yourself and to be creative—but making sure you use proper spelling and grammar.

Then he pulled his lesson plan and class roster out of his book bag and as he called the name of each of his students he thought again briefly about Coach LaBell and Mr. Carter and Mrs. Peabody and the teachers here and in the other schools Jim had attended throughout his life and he knew that, like them, he too was going to make a difference.

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1. Write a 3-5 sentence summary of this story
2. Make a list of all the people in the story
3. Which ones had the greatest impact on the author?
4. Make of list of word you had to look up
5. Do a word art – ignore words like “Jim” or “Mr.”
6. Find the theme, feeling & focus for this story
7. Make a mind map for the word you find the most important to the story