

David?

Fiction

by Robin Andrews

I'm sitting here with the lights out, wondering when Foster is going to call. I know he's going to want to talk to me about the planning session we had this afternoon. And I know what he's going to say. That I shouldn't have spoken that way to a client. I didn't mean to, of course, the words just came out. Sometimes it's hard not to let them out; they seem so right, so real. That won't matter to the client though. So I know Foster is going to call me. Tonight. At home.

I'm sitting here in my basement den with just enough light coming down the stairs to see the bookshelves lining the walls, and I'm thinking of this kid I once knew. In Mr. DeSalvo's class, junior year.

Mr. DeSalvo was one of the few memorable teachers at Meadowood High School; an emaciated-looking guy with a shaved head, two earrings, and goatee, at a time when most teachers still thought it was rebellious to have long hair. I remember he had this way of standing, with his left foot crossed over his right, so his legs were like two springy twigs, bent

and ready to explode. His arms would be up and waving around as he talked about some line from O'Neill or Joyce, and he had an energy escaping from him that you could feel all the way to the last row of seats.

This kid I was remembering, David, he ended up in DeSalvo's class by accident. It was actually a Literature class you could take instead of normal English, and mostly it was for the A students. David was not exactly an A student, but Mrs. Alexander, his Sophomore English teacher, had recommended him for it. She even set up a special meeting with the guidance counselor where the two of them persuaded him to give it a try. Said he could always transfer out if he didn't like it. The kid wasn't into literature, he was into going to college so he could get a good job, because he knew that was what really mattered. But he went along and took the class. Because they said he would be good at it, and doesn't everyone want to be good at something?

What I'm remembering is one essay the class had to do. We had read some poem, and we were supposed to write an essay about it, and then read the essay to the class. So everyone reads these essays about the poem, and mostly they analyze it - say what they like and what they don't like. Then it gets to be David's turn. He was always one of the last to go, as if he wasn't really sure anyone would want to know what he had written.

In DeSalvo's class you had to stand up to read, and you had to be loud. If you were timid, DeSalvo would pop up out of his seat and cheer you on. "Sing it out," he would say, or "let your words blossom and grow in the air. Your words are you, they are your life's blood.

Spill them with gusto.”

So David stood up, and you could hear in his voice how nervous he was, but he read it anyway, only instead of just analyzing the poem, what he had written was almost a poem itself. “Like sharpened fingers of fog on a wind-torn night,” it began. That’s all I can actually remember, but it went on from there, David’s words whipping around and in between the author’s words, pulling out images, dissecting them and embracing them at the same time. From the things he said about that poem you could tell what he was really talking about was himself. I remember there was something in it about making your own choices, and something else about having to live up to what was expected of you. Typical high school stuff, I guess. But as he read it you could feel every person in that room listening to every word and getting it, like it was their own words, if only for a moment.

DeSalvo must have felt that way too, because when David finished he said something about David’s piece being “the best work I have heard from this class, maybe from any class I have ever taught.” Said he absolutely “loved” it, which was not the best choice of words, because some of the kids had wondered aloud about Mr. DeSalvo. The worst thing he did though, was that he asked David to stay a moment after class.

What DeSalvo told David after class was that he had illuminated the essence of the poem more clearly than anyone else, and that he had a lot of talent. “Maybe even a gift,” DeSalvo said, and that a gift was not something to ignore, but to pursue.

I wasn’t the only one who heard those words. I know that ‘cause it got around the

school that DeSalvo had made a fuss over David's story. In study hall Anthony Ballard was all over it, asking David "whatcha gonna do with your gift? Save it till Christmas?" Another kid - I think it was John Simons - made up a little sing-song, calling David 'Byron', as in "Lord Byron/the fairy poet/ DeSalvo's favorite student/and we all know it."

It was Mark Goodman though, who really got on David's case, trying to grab the essay away from him. Telling everyone he wanted the essay so he could make a book out of it and publish it. Said he would sell it to all the fancy college professors with the tight pants and earrings and make a fortune. All through lunch he kept shouting stuff over the tables, "Hey David, wrote any poems lately?" and "Valentine's day is coming, are you gonna get DeSalvo a nice card?" David just blushed and tried to eat his lunch but he was burning up inside. He wasn't the kind of kid who wanted attention, of any sort, and he didn't know how to tell the guys to shove it, much less have the confidence to make it stick. So he just got hotter and hotter.

Finally he stood up in front of everyone and walked over to the big garbage cans where you scraped your lunch plates.

He had the essay in his hand and when he got there he said, really loud, "this is for Mr. DeSalvo." He held the paper up as high as he could and started tearing off little pieces and letting them fall down into the trash cans; into the gobs of spaghetti and the ketchupy left-over pieces of hamburger bun, the piles of peas and the dribbles of milk; jagged-edged bits of white essay fluttering down like snow onto a landscape of uneaten pizza crusts and spit-out gristles of mystery meat. "My words are my life's blood," he sang out, in perfect imitation of DeSalvo's cadence, "and I spill them *with relish*."

The place erupted; kids cheering and clapping. They loved it. They loved David. He was one of them.

David transferred out of DeSalvo's class the next day.

Out of Literature into Mrs. Markowski's Practical English, the class that John Simons and Mark Goodman and all the other big kids on campus took.

I'm sitting here, remembering that essay and that kid, and those things DeSalvo said. I'm wishing I could read that essay again, right now, and I'm wondering what might have happened, how different things might have been, if David had stayed in that class.

I'm sitting here in the dark when I hear the phone ring. I don't pick it up. I'm telling myself the reason I don't is because most of the calls in the evenings are for my wife, that it's probably for her, but really I know it's Foster, calling to say that he can't have an account executive who talks to his clients that way. That it's not the first time but, regrettably, it will be the last time. I know all this, and that's why I don't pick up the phone.

I hear it ring again, and on the third ring I hear Elaine get it, upstairs in the kitchen. I can't make out the words but I can tell she's being real friendly. Not quite sucking up to the person on the other end, but close enough. There's a pause, and in my mind I can see her putting her hand over the receiver and twisting her body around toward the half-open basement door. I hear her voice down the stairs, and it's a little bit unsteady. Just like that teen-aged kid in Mr. DeSalvo's class all those years ago.

“It’s for you,” she calls, and I know she’s looking at the door at the top of the stairs, her eyes wide with worry.

Still I don’t say anything, and I hear her call again, louder. “David?”