

THE TEACHER

by

BRAD REED

Okay, so now I'm supposed to call her *Miss Whitcomb*? She was just *Leslie* for the two whole years she went out with my older brother Paul. Then she goes off to college in Seattle to learn to be a teacher (that's why she and my brother broke up) but I never figured she'd come back to crummy old West Hills and teach at my middle school, and definitely not in *my* English class!

So I just told you that she was my brother's girlfriend, but that's not quite right because Paul's not my full brother. He's just my half brother and he's way older than me seeing as how I'm fourteen and he's twenty-five. His real father ran off with some floozy from work (that's how my mom says it) after my brother was born, but he must still feel real guilty about it because he sends *me* money on my birthday sometimes even though I'm not even his kid or anything and I've only ever seen him maybe three times in my whole life. Walter is my dad. Technically he lives with us but it doesn't feel like he does. He works on a science ship that studies something called *dead zones* in the Pacific Ocean. It has something to do with how all the air gets sucked out of the water and kills all the fish for miles around. He tried to explain it to me once when he was home but it didn't make much sense. I mean, why don't the fish just swim somewhere else that has air in the water?

Anyway. So I go to my first day of 9th grade at West Hills Middle School and there's Leslie—Miss Whitcomb—still wearing those same tight sweaters like she wore back when she was going out with Paul. But now she's my English teacher! Weirdo, man!

But that's not even the worst of it, not by a long shot! She tells us right there on the very first day that we have to read nine books for her class. Nine! One for every single month of school. And they can't have any pictures at all in them, she says. Just page after page of nothing but words, words, words. I figure its because she's too new to know that what she's asking us to do is impossible. I just stare around at all these shelves of books and not even one of them looks smaller than one inch thick. Miss Whitcomb is holding one of the books up in her hand like it's a piece of cake or something and jabbering all about it. Her sweater keeps going up in the front when she moves her arm and her bellybutton keeps showing. I wonder if my brother ever had sex with Miss Whitcomb. I'm pretty sure I'm going to tell my friends he did and that I heard them doing it since his room was next to mine. He probably did anyway.

So anyway class gets out and I'm hightailing it out the door so I can forget about how thick nine of those books would be all stacked on top of each other and all of the sudden Miss Whitcomb calls out my name. Reed, she says, wait up a minute. And the other kids all give me this look like how does she know your name already? I just try to look all cool like it is the most natural thing in the world and stay behind while the other kids go out into the hall. Miss Whitcomb tells me how fun it is that I'm in her class and then she goes over to one of the real tall shelves of books and she reaches way up high and I can see her bellybutton again. She pulls down an old beat up paperback that has this real cool picture of a dragon on the cover. As soon as I saw your name on my roll, she says, I thought of this book. And then she just hands it to me

like it's something special and our hands rub together when she hands it to me. I think it's just the kind of book you'd like, she says.

I figured I'd never be able to read this book but I'm starting to think maybe I can after all. The first couple of chapters were a little tough but then things really take off. It's about this boy named Aæmon. I thought it was a typo at first but they just keep on spelling it that way with that squished together a-e and everything. Something really weird happens when I get past the first couple of chapters though. I start feeling like I am kind of like Aæmon. I mean, there aren't any dragons around West Hills and nobody ever gave me a magic sword or anything, but it's almost like I'm him in some weird sort of way. I start thinking about how Aæmon's dad getting killed is kind of like the way my dad is almost always out on his ship instead of at home. And now I think of Tyler Fackrell as kind of like a dragon. Sure, he doesn't breathe fire at me or anything, but every time he passes me in the hall he thumps me square in the chest with his knuckles and gives me this bruise that he keeps purple all year long. But the more I read this book, and the more I see how Aæmon handles things, the more I feel like I can handle things, too.

And then I get to this one particular sentence and all of a sudden it was like the book was talking right to me. That's when I realize why Miss Whitcomb picked out this book for me. It feels almost like she must have some kind of magic that lets her see inside me, into what I'm thinking and how I'm feeling about stuff. Or maybe she knows something about me from when she used to hang around the house with my brother all the time. Anyway, I start to just read that line over and over. I even get out a pencil and, real softly, underline it. I feel kind of bad doing it since it's Miss Whitcomb's book and all, but I can't help myself. I just stare at it for a long time after that. Something about underlining that sentence makes me feel like I actually wrote a part of the book. When anyone else reads it now, they'll get to that sentence and see that

underline. They'll think man, oh, man this is important. And there will be a kind of connection between me and that person. But that seems a little nutso, doesn't it.

I have to ask Miss Whitcomb how she knew that Aæmon's story would hit me like it did. I have to know if it was because it hit her that way too. I have to know if the sentence I underlined means the same thing to her that it means to me. It's like she gave me this secret encoded message that I recognize because we are like each other in some special way.

I stay late after class on a Friday because I know all the other kids will be in a rush to get out and go home. I fumble around with my backpack for a long time until the room empties out and it's just me and Miss Whitcomb. The room feels different with just the two of us surrounded by all these books. It feels kind of like a church somehow. Miss Whitcomb is packing up her lesson plans and sliding them into a slim black bag when she looks up and realizes I'm still in the room.

"Reed," she says, surprised. "No big weekend plans to rush off to?"

I reach into my backpack and pull out the well-worn copy of the book. I'm afraid she might be upset that I've wrinkled the spine up so much more.

"This book," I say to her, not knowing exactly what I'm even trying to ask.

Miss Whitcomb, her eyes the same vibrant blue as the sweater she's wearing, just smiles and waits for me to go on.

"This book," I say again.

"It's good?" she asks. "You really should be moving on to your second book by now."

My breath catches in my chest and I choke a little. Why is she acting like this is just any old book? And did she just ask if it was *good*?

"It's amazing," I say. "But you know that, right?"

"Oh, I haven't read it," she says and snaps her bag closed. "It was just in a big box of books I bought for a few dollars at a yard sale. I remembered that dragon poster you had on the wall of your bedroom and the cover of this book reminded me of it. I figured you might like it." I stare at her, feeling like the weight of the book in my hand just doubled, like it's going to fall to the floor.

"What?" I ask.

"I'm glad you liked it," she says. She motions me to the door. I walk through it dumbly. "Have a nice weekend," she adds as my sneakers squeak on the tiles in the bright hall. "And get started on another book right away."

I stop and turn back to her. I hold the book out in my palm. "You should read this," I say. "I'm all done with it and—"

"Oh, Reed," she interrupts while fishing jangling keys out of her purse. "I'm sure it's a good book, but I just don't have time to read anymore. And I've got a stack of books I've been trying to get to. But I'm glad you liked it."

"But you have to read this," I tell her, my hand still reaching out to her with the book. "It's—it's—"

She stops rattling her keys and looks right at me. "Tell you what," she says. "Why don't you keep that book? It's yours." She smiles a big, toothy smile and ushers me out of the school.

When I get home I rummage through my mom's purse for the red pen she uses to write in her checkbook register and I write my name on the inside cover of the book. Then I flip to the page with the underlined sentence. I trace over the pencil with a thick line of dark red ink. I go over it and over it until the ink begins to bleed through to the other side of the page. The big red underline feels even more like writing my name in the book than writing my name just did. My

name is just my name. Reed. It doesn't mean anything. This sentence, though. This sentence means something. This sentence says something about who I am.

I read the whole book again instead of going to sleep. Straight through. And I underline more sentences in pencil. Some of them I go back over with the red pen, too. The more I read, and the more sentences and words I underline, the more it feels like it isn't really Aæmon's story at all. It's my story. It's me here on these pages. I have somehow gotten into these words.

At breakfast the next morning, my mom notices how red my eyes are from staying up almost the whole night. I want her to know about the book. I want her to read it. I want her to understand the ways that I am like Aæmon and how he seems to know something about how it feels to have Dad always gone. I want her to see how he feels about it because I can't ever get the words to come out right. I want her to underline the same sentences I underlined when she reads it. I pull it from my backpack and start telling her about it.

"You should read this, Mom," I say. "I think you'd really like it."

She looks at me with her eyebrows lifted and scoops fried eggs out of the skillet onto her plate. "I should read it?" she asks. I nod my head and push the book across the table to her. "You know I can't help you with that kind of homework," she says.

"It's not for homework, Mom. I've already read it."

"You need to read the book yourself," she says. "Honey, I can help you with math or writing, but you've got to do your reading yourself."

"No, Mom. I've read it. A couple of times. I was hoping you'd—"

"That's enough, Reed. Eat your eggs or you'll miss your bus."

I shovel bland eggs into my mouth and get up to put on my backpack.

"Mom, why don't the fish just swim somewhere else where there is some air in the water?"

"What?"

"Never mind."

At school I try to get Pete and Lonnie to read it, but they both have their own "dumb" books to read for their own classes. When I get home I email my father on his ship out in the Pacific, tell him a little about the book—do a real sales job—and tell him he should read it, that it would mean a lot to me, that it can be a way that we can sort of be together while we're so far apart. A few days later he emails back and says he might look at it when he gets home but no promises. That's how he says it: no promises. He said the same thing about being home for Christmas, about maybe making it to one of my soccer games last year, and about applying for a job over at the community college. I know what no promises means.

I turn fifteen today. I still haven't been able to get anybody to read the book yet, which is pretty obvious by the kind of presents I get. It's like they don't know me at all. Paul gives me a new soccer ball: I quit the team at the end of last year. I get a NASCAR video game from my mom: she doesn't know I'm into fantasy games now. I get a gift certificate to the Wal-Mart from Dad in the mail: it's always a gift certificate to somewhere from him. My older brother's dad sends me a twenty dollar bill in a white envelope.

I ride my bike to the Wal-Mart and buy a fantasy role-playing game that turns out not to have any kind of good story to it. But as I'm leaving, I notice a book store across the street and pedal over to check it out. I spend close to an hour thumbing through books—thin ones, thick ones, some with dragons and orcs on the cover, some with scantily-clad warrior women. But

none of them feel like they have that same magic as the book Miss Whitcomb gave me. I even close my eyes and pretend I am her, imagine myself in a tight sweater and reach out for a book on the shelf. I open my eyes to discover that I've grabbed the same boring-looking book that Lonnie is trying to read for his class.

There it is, low on the shelf, with a cover so different that I almost don't recognize it. It is a hard-cover version and the dragon has been redone. It looks scarier, more blood-thirsty. And this one has a picture of Aæmon on it, looking nothing like he is supposed to look. They've drawn him tall and muscular with a strong brow that juts out over his eyes. I had imagined him looking a little more like, well, me. I pull it from the shelf and feel its weight in my hands. It feels important, heavy, substantial—almost like I can feel the weight of the meaning inside along with the paper and binding. I turn through the pages and the story washes over me again. The same words are here inside this shiny cover. The chapter headings are the same, the dialog is the same, and it even has the same thick capital letters to differentiate each new section. I turn to the back and find the sentence—that one line. It looks naked without a thick red underline beneath it. But they are here, these words that feel like a part of me. I tuck the book under my elbow, fish the twenty dollar bill from my pocket, and head to the cashier.

At home I dig through the trash and find the bright red ribbon that my mom wrapped my video game in. I wrap it around the book and take it to school with me the next day. Miss Whitcomb is writing the daily grammar exercise on the board when I step into her room. I can tell it's going to be something about proper dialogue punctuation because she's got the comma after the quotation marks instead of inside them.

"Miss Whitcomb?" She turns to me with a haggard expression on her face. "I have something for you," I say. "A kind of thank you." I reach out to her with the book.

"A thank you?" she repeats.

"For recommending this book to me. It's been amazing. I really want you to read it. I've underlined the most important sentences for you."

"Oh, Reed," she says. I thought for a second that she was going to say no promises.

"This is so sweet, but I can't accept this."

I try to make my face hard like a statue.

"You can borrow it then," I say. I hold it up higher to her.

Miss Whitcomb thinks for a moment, glances at the fiery dragon on the cover. "I'm afraid I'd lose it, Reed. Plus you'll get much more use out of this book than I will," she says.

"You should keep it."

I tuck it back under my arm and am suddenly embarrassed by the ridiculous bright red ribbon. I make a beeline for my desk.

"And Reed?" I turn back to face Miss Whitcomb who already has her back to me and is finishing the sentence on the board. "I'm a little concerned that you seem to be preoccupied with that one book. How many others have you read so far this year?"

"Just this one," I admit. "But I've read it a bunch of times."

"Reed, there are a lot of books out there—and far better books than that one. I think you need to forget about that one for awhile and move on."

Forget about this one? Forget about all those underlined sentences? Forget about how much Aëmon misses his father? Forget about how he keeps fighting those dragons, even when it doesn't seem like he'll ever win? Now I understand that Miss Whitcomb—*Leslie*—doesn't understand me at all. I'm glad she didn't take the book. She wouldn't have had any idea why I underlined the things I did.

At home that night I open the new copy of my book to the page with my favorite sentence—the one that I was so sure she had meant for me to find—and tear it out. The hole it leaves in the book makes me think of a tooth knocked out of a mouth. I grab the red pen and scrawl across the top of the page:

*If this writing means anything to you,
meet me at the baseball backstop at lunch today.*

- *Reed*

I use all the computer paper we have left in the house to make copies of the page on our printer. There must be about a hundred copies. My mother yells at me for using up all the ink but I tell her it's for a homework assignment. The next morning I ride my bike to school so I can get there before any of the other kids. I slide every one of those hundred copies of the page through the little vents in the lockers, folding each one in half to get it to fit. I skip the lunch line later that day and go straight to the backstop.

I wait there alone for fifteen minutes, kneading my hands together and thumbing through my copy of the book as the breeze rattles the chain link. Finally, someone shows up. It's Jenny, a girl I barely know from Miss Whitcomb's class. She's the kind of girl who always has her hair in a ponytail and, now that I think about it, looks as good in a sweater as Miss Whitcomb. She walks up to me, ponytail bobbing at the back of her head and a folded piece of printer paper in her hand. My hands start to sweat.

"Are you Reed?" she asks.

"You—you liked the page? It meant something to you?"

Jenny hesitates, then nods her head. I can feel my heart beat up into my neck. For a second it feels like the ground underneath me starts to undulate the way it does for Aæmon just before a dragon shows up.

"You—you haven't read this book, have you?" My voice squeaks in my chest. I hold my breath. I imagine her copy of the book nestled next to her pink-blanketed bed at home, sentences underlined in red and its spine all wrinkled.

"No," she says. "I don't like to read. But it seems like you do." I let out my breath in a puff of air. "I need to write a book report and I thought you could tell me enough about this book so I could just write it without having to actually read it." She pulls at her ponytail and twirls it in her fingers.

I close my eyes and see Aæmon. Not the one from the hardcover, but the Aæmon that lives inside me now. I open my eyes and look at Jenny.

"No promises," I tell her.

I never dreamed I'd be back at West Hills Junior High School all these decades later. Miss Whitcomb is still here, although her students call her Mrs. Barton now—a name written on her by a husband who came and went quickly, leaving only his name behind. She is sixty-two years old and thinking about retiring in the next couple of years. She still wears sweaters, though now they hang loose on her body and never come close to showing her bellybutton. She shuffles into my classroom to welcome me to the staff, doesn't recognize me at first. I remind her of it all: my older brother Paul, my time as a student in her class some thirty years ago. I don't mention the book. She wouldn't have remembered it anyway. She asks about the years and I tell

her about my marriage, my sons, the decades spent teaching English in California before moving back to this place.

She walks over to the tall bookcases along the walls where I have just finished unloading box after box of books collected over the years. She runs her fingers over the titles, caressing their spines like they are the cheekbones of old friends. She lingers over the locked display case, peers through the glare of the harsh fluorescent lights on the glass, and smiles at the volumes she sees: Hemingway, O'Connor, Steinbeck. Vintage copies of the classics—my treasured collection. She raises her gray eyebrows as she spies a well-worn paperback amongst the great hardbacks of American Literature. Its spine is held together with layers of cellophane tape and its pages are dog-eared and yellow. There is a picture of a dragon on the cover. She clucks her tongue at it.

"Looks like you got something accidentally mixed in with your collection," she says. "Wouldn't want to give the kids the wrong idea about the value of genre fiction." She peers at me over her spectacles with those same blue eyes from a lifetime ago and I feel like her student again. I unlock the display case, slide the glass door open, and pull the book from the shelf. I place it gently in Mrs. Barton's hands and close them around it.

"I think it's just the kind of book you'd like, if you gave it a try," I tell her. She looks at me skeptically, nods, and takes the book. She holds it up in her hands and it falls open to a page with a sentence that has been underlined in red ink so many times that the color has bled through to the pages around it. She leans in close to read:

"Of course I know you," Aëmon said, "not because I know your name or where you were born, but because you've shared the stories you love with me, and no one can express who they are more powerfully than by sharing the stories that they love with others."

Mrs. Barton closes the book and holds it to her chest. "That's beautiful," she says.

"Yes," I tell her. "It is."