

## SPECIAL PROJECT

by

Robert Boone

“A plan, Clemons? Do you have a plan? A strategy? An escape? A way to cover your ass?” Clemons could hear the impatience and weariness in Jim’s voice. Thursday was not Jim’s usual drinking night. But Jim went on, “Can you make it look like you didn’t forget the kid was in your class?” At 11:30 p.m. on a school night, Kelly’s Tap was practically empty. Kelly was slouched in the corner reading Sports Illustrated. Next to him a silent TV set was showing an ancient rerun of “Mash.” (At the moment, Klinger in full drag, was pointing a bejeweled finger at a frazzled Frank.) Customers walked behind the bar to pour a beer and leave the change beside the cash register. Jim and Clemons sat at the bar. To their left was an old couple whispering intently at each other.

“Yeah, I’ve got a plan—if you want to call it that. It’s all I have left.” Clemons frowned at a full glass of beer in front of him and wondered if he would ever want to drink again. “First, I find Jerome. This won’t be easy because the little scumbag is swimming around with the other low lives of Forest High. I’ll tell him that he’s still in my class, but to make it official, he’ll have to come back. His work out of class will count as a special project.” Clemons could almost feel the disbelieving stare of his friend. Jim, they both knew, could fuck up almost as badly as he could, but Jim would always catch himself in time. He would never lose track of a student.

“I’ll even make sure,” Clemons continued, “that my record book shows he’s written most

of the papers and taken the tests. And then I'll give him a grade." He sighed and winced and looked with more interest at the beer. He pushed back his mop of curly black hair and scowled at his hands.

"So," Jim yawned, "your plan is to lie." He reached over the bar to draw himself a beer.

"Lie through my teeth. What I describe never happened. I'm creating the past. Creative nonfiction is what they call it, don't they?"

"Tell the truth." Jim said flatly. "Tell that moron of an assistant principal the simple truth."

"The truth? Are you nuts? Are you fucking nuts?" The couple down the bar stopped whispering and looked in Clemons' direction. "You want me to admit that I forgot this kid was in my class, that somehow I left his name out of the grade book. For eight weeks he's been humping fourteen-year-olds and selling Ecstasy while his classmates have been comparing Brutus and Cassius." He reached into his side pocket for a cigarette pack. It was empty. He leaned over the bar and grabbed one from a pack left by Kelly.

"When Hastings confronted you with this, what did you say?"

"He called me in during a free period. I thought it might still be something about the fire in the library. He was still pissed about my giving students the key to the building. But then, from out of nowhere, he curled his snout, grunted and innocently inquired about Jerome Simmons."

"And you practically shit." Jim broke out in a half smile.

"Did I ever. It all came back. At one time, I had known the little viper was probably in the class, but I figured he had dropped. I meant to do something, but I never got around to it. Then I totally forgot and time went by and here I am sitting in this asshole's office and grades—

freakin' grades—are due next week. Unfuckingbelievable.” Clemons reached for his beer, stared hard at the foam and drained the whole glass. He stood up and walked to the back, held the empty glass under the spigot and pulled the tap.

“Didn't he ask to see your grade book? I can see his great brow furrowing and his lips moving as he tries to make sense of your handwriting.”

“I told him the grade book was back at my apartment. I frowned a lot and raised my eyebrows when he told me that Jerome had been spotted out of class when he should have been in English with me. Most of the time he spent asking me how a kid who was supposed to be studying English could be unaccounted for. He's almost positive that I had forgotten about Jerome. He just wants to act professionally. He doesn't want to make a big deal because it will take time from coaching defensive ends. I told him that Jerome had been in class, but that he—along with a lot of second semester seniors—was working on special projects.”

“Artie, old buddy, your plan sucks. You can't trust that Simmons kid to go along with you. He wears a nipple ring. Make a new plan.”

“It's too late.”

“Why not say you forgot? What can they do?”

“Plenty. Fuckin' plenty. Last year I got in all that shit for borrowing money from my students. The administration's always sending me notes about my smoking in class. And then I let Ferguson drive the school van.”

“You let a student . . . ”

“Don't you give me any shit. Besides I had no choice. I got in more trouble because the literary magazine went \$2,500 over budget and I caught serious grief for Audrey Rogers' poem.”

“Ode to Fellatio”?

“It turned out to be a sonnet. And I don’t have tenure. I lose this job and I’m finished as a teacher. Believe me.” Clemons glared defiantly back at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. That morning in the bathroom mirror he had seen a living corpse—haggard and exhausted. A recently released hostage. Now, after talking to his best friend and coming up with an escape plan, he looked partially alive. His color was back and he was sitting straight. “Jim, old buddy, they might call you in on this. You do teach right next to me. We have been colleagues for years.”

“If they call me in, I’ll remind them that you’re a capable teacher, and careless. I’ll tell them you’re popular with the ‘at risk’ students. I’ll list all of your accomplishments. And then I’ll assure them that Jerome was part of an independent project. But, Artie, this is the last time. I do have a family and a future. You really should get married or take up decoupage or something wholesome.”

Clemons tracked down Jerome during the lunch period. He was leaning against his red Chevy in the parking lot, smoking a long, thin cigar. He was wearing a red kerchief and holding a cordless phone. He was a short, solid kid who had once wrestled. But that was way back when he was a freshman. Since then he’d aimed his life away from the mat. Everyone, including Clemons, assumed that he used drugs and sold them. Beyond that who knew? He wore lots of leather and stood close to his girl friends. And there were plenty of these—libidinous, foulmouthed, chain-smoking little nymphets that all looked the same to Clemons. In class they would yawn right in his face.

“Jerome, we have to talk.” Jerome’s smile grew to expose a front tooth sporting a red jewel of some kind. He lifted the phone and began to punch numbers. “Coral, I’ll be a little late. This time bring everything with you.” He hung up and put the phone in a briefcase on the top of

his car. Even in his unease, Clemons could recognize that it was exactly like the briefcase his department chairman had recently lost.

“Mr. Clemons,” Jerome said gleefully, “What are you doing in our parking lot? The last time I saw you, you were writing a check to Audrey Rogers. I think you had borrowed some money to make a car payment or something.”

Clemons had no time for small talk. “Jerome,” he moved slightly closer, turning his back on a group of smokers standing close by. He selected his serious teacher voice. “Jerome, we need to cooperate on something. You are still a student in my senior English class. I forgot to write your name in the book, but as far as the school is concerned, you are in there earning credits. That was eight weeks ago. I have to give you a grade.” He wanted this to be fast and serious. “For your sake, I can’t tell the administration that you were cutting.”

“For my sake?” Jerome’s eyes widened as they came more into focus.

“All right, for our sakes. Look, this can be done easily. If Dean Hastings asks, say you had been in class, but from time to time you worked on special projects away from the classroom.”

“No problemo, Artie. I did use that time for all kinds of special projects. Some of them even took me into Chicago.” Right then Clemons became aware of a girl sprawled in the back seat of the Chevy. Everything but her purple hair and face was covered by an enormous tie-dyed T-shirt. She wore a nose ring and an eyebrow ringlet. Could she be naked? Could she be dead? “Don’t worry about Mimi. She’s just taking a nap. We had a late study date last night.”

Clemons nodded and went back to business. “Anyway, you come back; I’ll let you make up some of the work, and then I can give you a grade.”

“What did I get?”

“How about a C?”

“A C! Come on, Clemons. I’m not coming back for a C. I’ve got too much to lose . . . Give me a B+ and I’ll stop around.”

“You’ll have to do some work, most of the work. Do you have your books?”

“In the trunk.” Clemons followed Jerome to the back of the Chevy and watched him open the trunk. It was, he had to admit, a fantastic thing to behold. The school books were in a bag from the bookstore. The receipts were probably still in them. Other bags, stereo equipment, two laptop computers, several brown packages, sleeping bags, and a case of Two Fingers Tequila filled the rest of the space. “I’ve got a meeting now, Artie. See you on Monday.” Checking his watch, he slammed the trunk closed, trotted to the driver’s door and climbed in. Before he sped away, he shook Clemons’ hand as he gave him a large smile and a wink.

“Make sure you bring your copy of Julius Caesar and a notebook,” Clemons shouted feebly at the disappearing car. Only the smokers heard this plea.

Clemons planned a movie for Jerome’s return—a full period film entitled “What Happens in Julius Caesar.” It was a “content rich” educational film made by the Illinois Humanities Council. Jerome would sit near the front. Some kids might think he had been there the whole time. The rest wouldn’t care. Only Tina Jones, an honor student and Jerome’s former girlfriend, would figure out what was happening. Tina could be trouble if the plan didn’t work to perfection. After the class, Clemons would give a few special assignments. One of these would go to Jerome.

He also pinned up new pieces of student writing on the bulletin boards. He even considered poetry by Audrey Rogers, but nothing seemed suitable. He did find a sample of Jerome’s writing from last year. It was a description of a jazz bar.

To Clemons' delight, Jerome marched in early. He even dropped a folder on Clemons' desk. The words "Special Project" were emblazoned on the front. Clemons nodded casually and gestured to the seat near the front. "We'll have to make an appointment to discuss your independent projects." Jerome nodded importantly and reached for his notebook. Clemons felt like applauding. The night before he had fixed the grade book. By a stroke of luck Chloe Stone had dropped the class in September, This gave Clemons a spot for Jerome in the right part of the alphabet. For several of the days he wrote down "I.P." for independent project. He made sure the ink color always matched. He was pleased with his work.

The class filled. Clemons made a short announcement as he turned down the lights and turned on the projector. "As you've heard me say before, I want you to hear a more traditional explanation of Julius Caesar. The narrator will explain the theory of tragedy and then show how it works in the play. He uses actors—bad ones. But he knows what he's talking about. When the movie is over, I'll have some of you write about it and report back tomorrow. I want to know if you learned anything." By now the film had started and an old guy with a pipe and leather elbow patches was speaking earnestly into the camera. Jerome, who had listened carefully to Clemons' introduction now looked bored. "Don't you dare go to sleep, you little fucker," Clemons said to himself. "Keep those beady little eyes open."

About fifteen minutes into the movie, it happened. The actors had just completed the scene with Brutus and Calpurnia. The professor was explaining for the eighth time that Brutus' character was leading him down a tragic path. Some of the kids had laughed at the bad costumes, but most seemed to be paying attention. Tina Jones was taking lots of notes. She had moved to a desk closer to the screen. Even Jerome looked alert. And once he even scribbled something down in his notebook. Then, just as Caesar was about to enter the Senate, off went Jerome's beeper.

The beeps penetrated Clemons like deadly lasers going instantly to his stomach lining

It shouldn't have mattered. These things happen all the time. A good teacher learns to deal with such interruptions. Ordinarily the class would turn and laugh. The teacher might have to say, "All right, class, let's get back to our film." But this was different because instead of turning off the beeper and apologizing, Jerome was on his feet jogging toward the door. He muttered something to Clemons on his way out and then was gone, leaving a few beeps behind.

Clemons tore after him, but all he could see was the back of the leather jacket at the far end of the corridor. Clemons reentered the classroom, seized his grade book, turned furiously to the current page, and slashed an absence mark next to Jerome's name. Like those of the actors in the movie, his gestures were big and obvious. He was glad the lights were out so he didn't have to see Tina Jones's expression. On the screen Marc Anthony was delivering his funeral oration, but by now most of the kids were in deep conversation. Clemons sat at his desk dazed and let them talk. The movie ended; the bell rang. He was alone.

He looked down at his hands. They were yellow with nicotine. The nails were chewed to the nub. Next to them lay Jerome's "Special Project" folder. More like a robot than a human, Clemons reached for the package, opened it, and poured out the contents. No compositions but lots of stuff: several condom packages, cigarette paper, photos of nude teenagers, a small spoon, and a cassette tape. The tape was neatly labeled "A parking lot chat with Mr. Clemons. October 28, 2000." Under these words was one more, a word that surely Jerome did not have to write. But he did anyway. The word was "Copy."

THE END