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Teacher Man

Frank McCourt

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Extract

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1

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The names and details concerning some individuals in *Teacher Man* have been changed.

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'My Papa's Waltz' by Theodore Roethke.
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PART I

It's a Long Road to Pedagogy

1

Here they come.
And I'm not ready.
How could I be?
I'm a new teacher and learning on the job.

On the first day of my teaching career, I was almost fired for eating the sandwich of a high school boy. On the second day I was almost fired for mentioning the possibility of friendship with a sheep. Otherwise, there was nothing remarkable about my thirty years in the high school classrooms of New York City. I often doubted if I should be there at all. At the end I wondered how I lasted that long.

It is March 1958. I sit at my desk in an empty classroom in McKee Vocational and Technical High School in the Borough of Staten Island, New York City. I toy with the implements of my new calling: five manila folders, one for each class; a clump of crumbling rubber bands; a block of brown wartime composition paper flecked with whatever went into the making of it; a worn blackboard eraser; a stack of white cards that I will insert row by row into slots in this tattered red Delaney book to help me remember the names of one hundred and sixty-odd boys and girls who will sit in rows every day in five different classes. On the cards I'll record their attendance and tardiness and make little marks when boys and girls do bad things. I'm told I should keep a red pen to record the bad things, but the

school hasn't supplied one, and now I have to request it on a form or buy one in a shop because the red pen for the bad things is the teacher's most powerful weapon. There are many things I will have to buy in a shop. In Eisenhower's America there is prosperity but it does not trickle down to schools, especially to new teachers who need supplies for their classes. There is a note from an assistant principal in charge of administration reminding all teachers of the city's financial plight and to please use these supplies sparingly. This morning I have to make decisions. In a minute the bell will ring. They'll swarm in and what will they say if they see me at the desk? Hey, look. He's hiding out. They are experts on teachers. Sitting at the desk means you're scared or lazy. You're using the desk as a barrier. Best thing is to get out there and stand. Face the music. Be a man. Make one mistake your first day and it takes months to recover.

The kids arriving are juniors, sixteen years old, eleven years in school from kindergarten to today. So, teachers come, teachers go, all kinds, old, young, tough, kind. Kids watch, scrutinize, judge. They know body language, tone of voice, demeanor in general. It's not as if they sit around in toilets or cafeterias discussing these things. They just absorb it over eleven years, pass it on to coming generations. Watch out for Miss Boyd, they'll say. Homework, man, homework, and she corrects it. Corrects it. She ain't married so she's got nothing else to do. Always try to get married teachers with kids. They don't have time for sitting around with papers and books. If Miss Boyd got laid regular she wouldn't give so much homework. She sits there at home with her cat listening to classical music, correcting our homework, bothering us. Not like some teachers. They give you a pile of homework, check it off, never even look at it. You could copy a page of the Bible and they'd write at the top, "Very nice." Not Miss Boyd. She's on to you right off. Excuse me, Charlie. Did you write this yourself? And you have to admit, no, you didn't and now you're up shit creek, man.

It's a mistake to arrive early, gives you too much time to think of what you're facing. Where did I get the nerve to think I could han-

dle American teenagers? Ignorance. That's where I got the nerve. It is the Eisenhower era and newspapers report the great unhappiness of American adolescents. These are the "Lost Children of the Lost Children of the Lost Generation." Movies, musicals, books tell us of their unhappiness: *Rebel Without a Cause, The Blackboard Jungle, West Side Story, The Catcher in the Rye.* They make despairing speeches. Life is meaningless. All adults are phonies. What's the use of living at all? They have nothing to look forward to, not even a war of their own where they can kill natives in distant places and march up ticker-tape Broadway with medals and limps for the girls to admire. No use complaining to their fathers, who just fought a war, or their mothers, who waited while the fathers fought. Fathers say, Oh, shaddup. Don't bodder me. I got a pounda shrapnel up my ass an' I don't have time for you bitchin' an' moanin' wid your belly full an' your closet stuffed with clothes. F'Christ's sakes, when I was your age I was out woikin' in a junkyard before I went on the docks so I could send your sorry ass to school. Go squeeze your goddam pimples an' lemme read my paper.

There's so much teen unhappiness they form gangs and fight other gangs, not rumbles like the ones you see in movies with star-crossed romances and dramatic music in the background, but mean fights where they grunt and curse one another, where Italians, Blacks, Irish, Puerto Ricans attack with knives, chains, baseball bats in Central Park and Prospect Park and stain the grass with their blood, which is always red no matter where it came from. Then if there's a killing there's public outrage and accusations that if the schools and teachers were doing their jobs these terrible things wouldn't happen. There are patriots who say, If these kids have the time and energy to be fighting one another why can't we just ship them overseas to fight the goddam Communists and settle that problem for once and for all?

Vocational schools were seen by many as dumping grounds for students ill-equipped for academic high schools. That was snobbery. It didn't matter to the public that thousands of young people wanted to be auto mechanics, beauticians, machinists, electricians, plumbers,

carpenters. They didn't want to be bothered with the Reformation, the War of 1812, Walt Whitman, art appreciation, the sex life of the fruit fly.

But, man, if we have to do it we'll do it. We'll sit in those classes that have nothing to do with our lives. We'll work in our shops where we learn about the real world and we'll try to be nice to the teachers and get outa here in four years. Whew!

Here they are. The door slams against the shelf that runs along the base of the blackboard, stirs a cloud of chalk dust. Entering a room is a big deal. Why couldn't they simply walk into the room, say, Good morning, and sit? Oh, no. They have to push and jostle. One says, Hey, in a mock threatening way and another one says, Hey, right back. They insult one another, ignore the late bell, take their time sitting. That's cool, baby. Look, there's a new teacher up there and new teachers don't know shit. So? Bell? Teacher? New guy. Who is he? Who cares? They talk to friends across the room, lounge in desks too small for them, stick out their legs, laugh if someone trips. They stare out the window, over my head at the American flag or the pictures taped to the walls by Miss Mudd, now retired, pictures of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Emily Dickinson and—how did he get here?—Ernest Hemingway. It's the *Life* magazine cover and that picture is everywhere. They gouge their initials on desk tops with penknives, declarations of love with hearts and arrows alongside the long-ago gougings of their fathers and brothers. Some old desks are gouged so deep you can see your knees through holes where hearts and names used to be. Couples sit together, hold hands, whisper and gaze into each other's eyes while three boys against the back closets sing doo-wop, bass, baritone and high notes, man, snap fingers, tell the world they're just teenagers in love.

Five times a day they push into the room. Five classes, thirty to thirty-five in each class. Teenagers? In Ireland we saw them in American movies, moody, surly, driving around in cars, and we wondered why they were moody and surly. They had food and clothes and

money and still they were mean to their parents. There were no teenagers in Ireland, not in my world. You were a child. You went to school till you were fourteen. If you were mean to your parents they'd give you a good belt in the gob and send you flying across the room. You grew up, got a laboring job, got married, drank your pint on a Friday night, jumped on the wife that same night and kept her pregnant forever. In a few years you emigrated to England to work on the building sites or to enlist in His Majesty's forces and fight for the Empire.

The problem of the sandwich started when a boy named Petey called out, Anyone wan' a baloney sandwich?

You kiddin'? Your mom must hate you, givin' you sandwiches like that.

Petey threw his brown-paper sandwich bag at the critic, Andy, and the class cheered. Fight, fight, they said. Fight, fight. The bag landed on the floor between the blackboard and Andy's front-row desk.

I came from behind my desk and made the first sound of my teaching career: Hey. Four years of higher education at New York University and all I could think of was Hey.

I said it again. Hey.

They ignored me. They were busy promoting the fight that would kill time and divert me from any lesson I might be planning. I moved toward Petey and made my first teacher statement, Stop throwing sandwiches. Petey and the class looked startled. This teacher, new teacher, just stopped a good fight. New teachers are supposed to mind their own business or send for the principal or a dean and everyone knows it's years before they come. Which means you can have a good fight while waiting. Besides, what are you gonna do with a teacher who tells you stop throwing sandwiches when you already threw the sandwich?

Benny called out from the back of the room. Hey, teach, he awredy threw the sangwidge. No use tellin' him now don't throw the sangwidge. They's the sangwidge there on the floor.

The class laughed. There's nothing sillier in the world than a teacher telling you don't do it after you already did it. One boy covered his mouth and said, Stoopid, and I knew he was referring to me. I wanted to knock him out of his seat, but that would have been the end of my teaching career. Besides, the hand that covered his mouth was huge, and his desk was too small for his body.

Someone said, Yo, Benny, you a lawyer, man? and the class laughed again. Yeah, yeah, they said, and waited for my move. What will this new teacher do?

Professors of education at New York University never lectured on how to handle flying-sandwich situations. They talked about theories and philosophies of education, about moral and ethical imperatives, about the necessity of dealing with the whole child, the gestalt, if you don't mind, the child's felt needs, but never about critical moments in the classroom.

Should I say, Hey, Petey, get up here and pick up that sandwich, or else? Should I pick it up myself and throw it into the wastepaper basket to show my contempt for people who throw sandwiches while millions starve all over the world?

They had to recognize I was boss, that I was tough, that I'd take none of their shit.

The sandwich, in wax paper, lay halfway out of the bag and the aroma told me there was more to this than baloney. I picked it up and slid it from its wrapping. It was not any ordinary sandwich where meat is slapped between slices of tasteless white American bread. This bread was dark and thick, baked by an Italian mother in Brooklyn, bread firm enough to hold slices of a rich baloney, layered with slices of tomato, onions and peppers, drizzled with olive oil and charged with a tongue-dazzling relish.

I ate the sandwich.

It was my first act of classroom management. My mouth, clogged with sandwich, attracted the attention of the class. They gawked up at me, thirty-four boys and girls, average age sixteen. I could see the admiration in their eyes, first teacher in their lives to pick up a sand-

wich from the floor and eat it in full view. Sandwich man. In my boyhood in Ireland we admired one schoolmaster who peeled and ate an apple every day and rewarded good boys with the long peel. These kids watched the oil dribble down my chin to my two-dollar tie from Klein-on-the-Square.

Petey said, Yo, teacher, that's my sandwich you et.

Class told him, Shaddap. Can't you see the teacher is eating?

I licked my fingers. I said, Yum, made a ball of paper bag and wax paper and flipped it into the trash basket. The class cheered. Wow, they said, and Yo, baby, and M-a-a-a-n. Look at dat. He eats the sandwich. He hits the basket. Wow.

So this is teaching? Yeah, wow. I felt like a champion. I ate the sandwich. I hit the basket. I felt I could do anything with this class. I thought I had them in the palm of my hand. Fine, except I didn't know what to do next. I was there to teach, and wondered how I should move from a sandwich situation to spelling or grammar or the structure of a paragraph or anything related to the subject I was supposed to teach, English.

My students smiled till they saw the principal's face framed in the door window. Bushy black eyebrows halfway up his forehead shaped a question. He opened the door and beckoned me out. A word, Mr. McCourt?

Petey whispered, Hey, mister. Don't worry about the sandwich. I didn't want it anyway.

The class said, Yeah, yeah, in a way that showed they were on my side if I had trouble with the principal, my first experience of teacher-student solidarity. In the classroom your students might stall and complain but when a principal or any other outsider appeared there was immediate unity, a solid front.

Out in the hallway, he said, I'm sure you understand, Mr. McCourt, it isn't seemly to have teachers eating their lunch at nine a.m. in their classrooms in the presence of these boys and girls. Your first teacher experience and you choose to begin it by eating a sandwich? Is that proper procedure, young man? It's not our practice here,

gives children the wrong idea. You can see the reasoning, eh? Think of the problems we'd have if teachers just dropped everything and began to eat their lunches in class, especially in the morning when it's still breakfast time. We have enough trouble with kids sneaking little nibbles during morning classes and attracting cockroaches and various rodents. Squirrels have been chased from these rooms, and I won't even mention rats. If we're not vigilant these kids, and some teachers, your colleagues, young man, will turn the school into one big cafeteria.

I wanted to tell him the truth about the sandwich and how well I handled the situation, but if I did it might be the end of my teaching job. I wanted to say, Sir, it was not my lunch. That was the sandwich of a boy who threw it at another boy and I picked it up because I'm new here and this thing happened in my class and there was nothing in the courses at college on sandwiches, the throwing and retrieving of. I know I ate the sandwich but I did it out of desperation or I did it to teach the class a lesson about waste and to show them who was in charge or, Jesus, I ate it because I was hungry and I promise never to do it again for fear I might lose my good job though you must admit the class was quiet. If that's the way to capture the attention of kids in a vocational high school you ought to send out for a pile of baloney sandwiches for the four classes I still have to meet today.

I said nothing.

The principal said he was there to help me because, Ha, ha, I looked like I might need a lot of help. I'll admit, he said, you had their full attention. OK, but see if you can do it in a less dramatic way. Try teaching. That's what you're here for, young man. Teaching. Now you have ground to recover. That's all. No eating in class for teacher or student.

I said, Yes, sir, and he waved me back to the classroom.

The class said, What'd he say?

He said I shouldn't eat my lunch in the classroom at nine a.m.

You wasn't eatin' no lunch.

I know, but he saw me with the sandwich and told me not to do it again.

Man, that's unfair.

Petey said, I'll tell my mom you liked her sandwich. I'll tell her you got in a lot of trouble over her sandwich.

All right, Petey, but don't tell her you threw it away.

Naw, naw. She'd kill me. She's from Sicily. They get excited over there in Sicily.

Tell her it was the most delicious sandwich I ever had in my life, Petey.

OK.

Mea culpa.

Instead of teaching, I told stories.

Anything to keep them quiet and in their seats.

They thought I was teaching.

I thought I was teaching.

I was learning.

And you called yourself a teacher?

I didn't call myself anything. I was more than a teacher. And less. In the high school classroom you are a drill sergeant, a rabbi, a shoulder to cry on, a disciplinarian, a singer, a low-level scholar, a clerk, a referee, a clown, a counselor, a dress-code enforcer, a conductor, an apologist, a philosopher, a collaborator, a tap dancer, a politician, a therapist, a fool, a traffic cop, a priest, a mother-father-brother-sister-uncle-aunt, a bookkeeper, a critic, a psychologist, the last straw.

In the teachers' cafeteria veterans warned me, Son, tell 'em nothing about yourself. They're kids, goddam it. You're the teacher. You have a right to privacy. You know the game, don't you? The little buggers are diabolical. They are not, repeat not, your natural friends. They can smell it when you're going to teach a real lesson on grammar or something, and they'll head you off at the pass, baby. Watch 'em. Those kids have been at this for years, eleven or twelve, and they have teachers all figured out. They'll know if you're even think-

ing about grammar or spelling, and they'll raise their little hands and put on that interested expression and ask you what games you played as a kid or who do you like for the goddam World Series. Oh, yeah. And you'll fall for it. Next thing is you're spilling your guts and they go home not knowing one end of a sentence from the other, but telling the moms and dads about your life. Not that they care. They'll get by, but where does that leave you? You can never get back the bits and pieces of your life that stick in their little heads. Your life, man. It's all you have. Tell 'em nothing.

The advice was wasted. I learned through trial and error and paid a price for it. I had to find my own way of being a man and a teacher and that is what I struggled with for thirty years in and out of the classrooms of New York. My students didn't know there was a man up there escaping a cocoon of Irish history and Catholicism, leaving bits of that cocoon everywhere.

My life saved my life. On my second day at McKee a boy asks a question that sends me into the past and colors the way I teach for the next thirty years. I am nudged into the past, the materials of my life.

Joey Santos calls out, Yo, teach. . . .

You are not to call out. You are to raise your hand.

Yeah, yeah, said Joey, but . . .

They have a way of saying yeah yeah that tells you they're barely tolerating you. In the yeah yeah they're saying, We're trying to be patient, man, giving you a break because you're just a new teacher.

Joey raises his hand. Yo, teacher man. . . .

Call me Mr. McCourt.

Yeah. OK. So, you Scotch or somethin'?

Joey is the mouth. There's one in every class along with the complainer, the clown, the goody-goody, the beauty queen, the volunteer for everything, the jock, the intellectual, the momma's boy, the mystic, the sissy, the lover, the critic, the jerk, the religious fanatic who sees sin everywhere, the brooding one who sits in the back staring at the desk, the happy one, the saint who finds good in all crea-

tures. It's the job of the mouth to ask questions, anything to keep the teacher from the boring lesson. I may be a new teacher but I'm on to Joey's delaying game. It's universal. I played the same game in Ireland. I was the mouth in my class in Leamy's National School. The master would write an algebra question or an Irish conjugation on the board and the boys would hiss, Ask him a question, McCourt. Get him away from the bloody lesson. Go on, go on.

I'd say, Sir, did they have algebra in olden times in Ireland?

Mr. O'Halloran liked me, good boy, neat handwriting, always polite and obedient. He would put the chalk down, and from the way he sat at his desk and took his time before speaking you could see how happy he was to escape from algebra and Irish syntax. He'd say, Boys, you have every right to be proud of your ancestors. Long before the Greeks, even the Egyptians, your forefathers in this lovely land could capture the rays of the sun in the heart of winter and direct them to dark inner chambers for a few golden moments. They knew the ways of the heavenly bodies and that took them beyond algebra, beyond calculus, beyond, boys, oh, beyond beyond.

Sometimes, in the warm days of spring, he dozed off in his chair and we sat quietly, forty of us, waiting for him to wake, not even daring to leave the room if he slept past going-home time.

No. I'm not Scotch. I'm Irish.

Joey looks sincere. Oh, yeah? What's Irish?

Irish is whatever comes out of Ireland.

Like St. Patrick, right?

Well, no, not exactly. This leads to the telling of the story of St. Patrick, which keeps us away from the b-o-r-i-n-g English lesson, which leads to other questions.

Hey, mister. Everyone talk English over there in Ireland?

What kinda sports didja play?

You all Catlics in Ireland?

Don't let them take over the classroom. Stand up to them. Show them who's in charge. Be firm or be dead. Take no shit. Tell them, Open your notebooks. Time for the spelling list.

Aw, teacher, aw, Gawd, aw man. Spelling. Spelling. Spelling. Do we haveta? They moan, B-o-r-i-n-g spelling list. They pretend to bang their foreheads on desks, bury their faces in their folded arms. They beg for the pass. Gotta go. Gotta go. Man, we thought you were a nice guy, young and all. Why do all these English teachers have to do the same old thing? Same old spelling lessons, same old vocabulary lessons, same old shit, excuse the language? Can't you tell us more about Ireland?

Yo, teacher man. . . . Joey again. Mouth to the rescue.

Joey, I told you my name is Mr. McCourt, Mr. McCourt, Mr. McCourt.

Yeah, yeah. So, mister, did you go out with girls in Ireland?

No, dammit. Sheep. We went out with sheep. What do you think we went out with?

The class explodes. They laugh, clutch their chests, nudge, elbow one another, pretend to fall out of their desks. This teacher. Crazy, man. Talks funny. Goes out with sheep. Lock up your sheep.

Excuse me. Open your notebooks, please. We have a spelling list to cover.

Hysterics. Will sheep be on the list? Oh, man.

That smart-ass response was a mistake. There will be trouble. The goody-goody, the saint and the critic will surely report me: Oh, Mom, oh, Dad, oh, Mr. Principal, guess what teacher said in class today. Bad things about sheep.

I'm not prepared, trained or ready for this. It's not teaching. It has nothing to do with English literature, grammar, writing. When will I be strong enough to walk into the room, get their immediate attention and teach? Around this school there are quiet industrious classes where teachers are in command. In the cafeteria older teachers tell me, Yeah, it takes at least five years.

Next day the principal sends for me. He sits behind his desk, talking into the telephone, smoking a cigarette. He keeps saying, I'm sorry. It won't happen again. I'll speak to the person involved. New teacher, I'm afraid.

He puts the phone down. Sheep. What is this about sheep?

Sheep?

I dunno what I'm gonna do with you. There's a complaint you said "dammit" in class. I know you're just off the boat from an agricultural country and don't know the ropes, but you should have some common sense.

No, sir. Not off the boat. I've been here eight and a half years, including my two years in the army, not counting years of infancy in Brooklyn.

Well, look. First the sandwich, now the sheep. Damn phone ringing off the hook. Parents up in arms. I have to cover my ass. You're two days in the building and two days you're in the soup. How do you do it? If you'll excuse the expression you're inclined to screw up a bit. Why the hell did you have to tell these kids about the sheep?

I'm sorry. They kept asking me questions, and I was exasperated. They were only trying to keep me away from the spelling list.

That's it?

I thought the sheep thing was a bit funny at the time.

Oh, yeah, indeed. You standing there advocating bestiality. Thirteen parents are demanding you be fired. There are righteous people on Staten Island.

I was only joking.

No, young man. No jokes here. There's a time and place. When you say something in class they take you seriously. You're the teacher. You say you went out with sheep and they're going to swallow every word. They don't know the mating habits of the Irish.

I'm sorry.

This time I'll let it go. I'll tell the parents you're just an Irish immigrant off the boat.

But I was born here.

Could you be quiet for one minute and listen while I save your life, huh? This time I'll let it go. I won't put a letter in your file. You don't realize how serious it is to get a letter in your file. If you've got any ambition to rise in this system, principal, assistant principal, guid-

ance counselor, the letter in the file will hold you back. It's the start of the long downward slide.

Sir, I don't want to be principal. I just want to teach.

Yeah, yeah. That's what they all say. You'll get over it. These kids will give you gray hair before you're thirty.

It was clear I was not cut out to be the purposeful kind of teacher who brushed aside all questions, requests, complaints, to get on with the well-planned lesson. That would have reminded me of that school in Limerick where the lesson was king and we were nothing. I was already dreaming of a school where teachers were guides and mentors, not taskmasters. I didn't have any particular philosophy of education except that I was uncomfortable with the bureaucrats, the higher-ups, who had escaped classrooms only to turn and bother the occupants of those classrooms, teachers and students. I never wanted to fill out their forms, follow their guidelines, administer their examinations, tolerate their snooping, adjust myself to their programs and courses of study.

If a principal had ever said, The class is yours, teacher. Do with it what you like, I would have said to my students, Push the chairs aside. Sit on the floor. Go to sleep.

What?

I said, Go to sleep.

Why?

Figure it out for yourself while you're lying there on the floor.

They'd lie on the floor and some would drift off. There would be giggling as boy wriggled closer to girl. Sleepers would snore sweetly. I'd stretch out with them on the floor and ask if anyone knew a lullaby. I know a girl would start and others would join. A boy might say, Man, what if the principal walked in. Yeah. The lullaby continues, a murmur around the room. Mr. McCourt, when are we getting up? He's told, Shush, man, and he shushes. The bell rings and they're slow off the floor. They leave the room, relaxed and puzzled. Please don't ask me why I'd have such a session. It must be the spirit that moves.