

A Teacher's Rewards

ROBERT PHILLIPS

Life is replication—the great lesson of mortality and middle age—but replication is the second step; the first is understanding. (“The first forty years is text, the remainder commentary,” is the way someone else put it.) Phillips, an award-winning poet, prolific writer of short stories, anthologist (Aspects of Alice, 1972) and biographer (Denton Welch: The Lost Poetry of Delmore Schwartz), makes his case for the first stage with quiet and awful elegance.

“What’d you say your name was?” the old lady asked through the screen door. He stood on the dark porch.

“Raybe. Raybe Simpson. You taught me in the third grade, remember?”

“Simpson . . . Simpson. Yes, I suppose so,” she said. Her hand remained on the latch.

“Of course you do. I was the boy with white hair. ‘Old Whitehead,’ my grandfather used to call me, though you wouldn’t know that. I sat in the front row. You used to rap my knuckles with your ruler, remember?”

“Oh, I rapped a lot of knuckles in my time. Boys will be boys. Still, the white hair, the front row . . .” Her voice trailed off as she made an almost audible effort to engage the ancient machinery of her memory.

“Sure you remember,” he said. “‘Miss Scofield never forgets a name.’ That’s what all the older kids told us. That’s what all the other teachers said. ‘Miss Scofield never forgets a name.’”

“Of course she doesn’t. I never forgot a pupil’s name in forty-eight years of teaching. Come right in.” She unlatched the screen door and swung it wide. The spring creaked.

“I can’t stay long. I was in town for the day and thought I’d look you up. You were such a good teacher. I’ve never forgotten what you did for me.”

“Well, now, I consider that right kindly of you.” She looked him up and down through wire-rimmed spectacles. “Just when was it I taught you?”

“Nineteen thirty-eight. Out to the old school.”

“Ah, yes. The old school. A pity about that fire.”

“I heard something about it burning down. But I’ve been away. When was that fire?”

“Oh, years ago. A year or two before I retired. After that I couldn’t teach in the new brick schoolhouse they built. Something about the place. Too cold, too bright. And the classroom was so long. A body couldn’t hardly see from the one end of it to the other . . .” She made a helpless gesture with her hand. He watched the hand in its motion: tiny, fragile, transparent, a network of blue veins running clearly beneath the surface; the skin hung in wrinkles like wet crepe paper. Denison paper, it had been called, when he was in school.

“That’s rough. But you must have been about ready to retire anyhow, weren’t you?”

Her watery blue eyes snapped. “I should say not! All my life I’ve had a real calling for teaching. A real calling. I always said I would teach until I dropped in my tracks. It’s such a rewarding field. A teacher gets her reward in something other than money . . . It was just that new red-brick schoolhouse! The lights were too bright, new-fangled fluorescent lights, bright yellow. And the room was too long . . .” Her gaze dared him to contradict her.

“I don’t think much of these modern buildings, either.”

“Boxes,” she said firmly.

“Come again?”

“Boxes, boxes, nothing but boxes, that’s all they are. I don’t know what we’re coming to, I declare. Well, now, Mr.—”

“Simpson. Mr. Simpson. But you can call me Raybe, like you always did.”

“Yes. Raybe. That’s a nice name. Somehow it has an honest sound. Really, the things people name their children *these* days! There’s one family named their children Cindy, Heidi and Dawn. They sound like creatures out of Walt Disney. The last year I taught, I had a student named Crystal. A little girl named Crystal! Why not name her Silverware, or China? And a boy named Jet. That was his first name, Jet. Or was it Astronaut? I don’t know. Whatever it was, it was terrible.”

“You once called me Baby-Raybe, and it caught on. That’s what all the kids called me after that.”

“Did I? Oh, dear. Well, you must have done something babyish at the time.”

A shaft of silence fell between them. At last she smiled, as if to herself, and said cheerily, "I was just fixing to have some tea before you happened by. Would you like some nice hot tea?"

"Well, I wasn't fixing to stay long, like I said." He shuffled his feet. "It'll only take a second. The kettle's been on all this time." She seemed to have her heart set, and he was not one to disappoint. "Okay, if you're having some."

"Good. Do you take lemon or cream?"

"Neither. Actually I don't drink much tea. I'll just try it plain. With sugar. I've got a sweet tooth."

"A sweet tooth! Let me see. Is that one of the things I remember about you? Raybe Simpson, a sweet tooth? No, I don't think so. One of the boys always used to eat Baby Ruth candy bars right in class. The minute my back was turned he'd sneak another Baby Ruth out of his desk. But that wasn't you, was it?"

"No."

"I didn't think it was you," she said quickly. "I called it the black-

board. Did you know, in that new school building, it was green?"

"What was green?"

"The blackboard was *green*. And the chalk was *yellow*. Something about it being easier on the children's eyes. And they had the nerve to call them blackboards, too, mind you. How do you expect children to learn if you call what's green, black?"

"Hmmm."

She was getting down two dainty cups with pink roses painted on them. She put them on a tin tray and placed a sugar bowl between them. The bowl was cracked down the middle and had been taped with Scotch tape, which had yellowed. When the tea finally was ready, they adjourned to the living room. The parlor, she called it.

"Well, how've you been, Miss Scofield?" he asked.

"Can't complain, except for a little arthritis in my hands. Can't complain."

"Good." He studied her hands, then glanced around. "Nice little place you got here." He took a sip of the tea, found it strong and bitter, added two more heaping spoons of sugar.

"Well, it's small, of course, but it serves me. It serves me." She settled back in her rocker.

"You still Miss Scofield?"

"How's that?" She leaned forward on her chair, as if to position her ear close to the source.

"I asked you, your name is still Miss Scofield? You never got married?"

"Mercy no. I've always been an unclaimed blessing. That's what I've always called myself. 'An unclaimed blessing.'" She smiled sweetly.

"You still live alone, I take it."

"Yes indeed. I did once have a cat. A greedy old alley cat named Tom. But he died. Overeating did it, I think. Ate me out of house and home, pretty near."

"You don't say."

"Oh, yes indeed. He'd eat anything. Belly got big as a basketball, nearabout. He was good company, though. Sometimes I miss that old Tom."

"I should think so."

An old-fashioned clock chimed overhead.

"What business did you say you were in, Mr. Simp . . . Raybe?"

"Didn't say."

"That's right, you didn't say. Well, just what is it?"

"Right now I'm unemployed."

She set her teacup upon a lace doily on the tabletop and made a little face of disapproval. "Unemployed. I see. Then how do you get along?"

"Oh, I manage, one way or the other. I've been pretty well taken care of these last ten years. I been away."

"You're living with your folks? Is that it?" Encouragement bloomed on her cheeks.

"My folks are dead. They were dead when I was your student, if you'll remember. Grandfather died too. I lived with an aunt. She's dead now."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I don't think I realized at the time—"

"No, I don't think you did . . . That's all right, Miss Scofield. You had a lot of students to look after."

"Yes, but still and all, it's unlike me not to have remembered or known that one of my boys was an *orphan*. You don't mind if I use that word, do you, Mr. . . . Raybe? Lots of people are sensitive about words."

"I don't mind. I'm not sensitive."

"No, I should think not. You're certainly a big boy, now. And what happened to all that hair? Why, you're bald as a baby." Looking at his head, she laughed a laugh as scattered as buckshot. "My, you must be hot in that jacket. Why don't you take it off? It looks very neavy."

"I'll keep it on, if you don't mind."

"Don't mind a bit, so long's you're comfortable." What did he have in that jacket, she wondered. He was carrying something in there.

"I'm just fine," he said, patting the jacket.

She began to rock in her chair and looked around the meager room to check its presentability to unexpected company. Maybe he had his dinner in there, in a paper poke, and was too embarrassed to show it.

"Well, now, what do you remember about our year together that I may have forgotten? Were you in Jay McMaster's class? Jay was a lovely boy. So polite. You can always tell good breeding—"

"He was a year or two ahead of me. You're getting close, though."

"Well, of course I am. How about Nathan Pillsbury? The dentist's son. He was in your class, wasn't he?"

"That's right."

"See!" She exclaimed triumphantly. "Another lovely boy. His parents had a swimming pool. One Christmas Nathan brought me an enormous poinsettia plant. It filled the room, nearly."

"He was in my class, all right. He was the teacher's pet, you might say." Raybe observed her over the rim of his bitter cup. He looked at her knuckles.

"Nathan, my pet? Nathan Pillsbury? I don't remember any such thing. Besides, I never played favorites. That's a bad practice." She worked her lips to and fro.

"So's rapping people's knuckles," he laughed, putting his half-full cup on the floor.

She laughed her scattered little laugh again. "Oh, come now, Raybe. Surely it was deserved, if indeed I ever *did* rap your knuckles."

"You rapped them, all right," he said soberly.

"Did I? Did I really? Yes, I suppose I did. What was it for, do you remember? Passing notes? Gawking out the window?"

"Wasn't for any one thing. You did it lots of times. Dozens of times." He cleared his throat.

"Did I? Mercy me. It doesn't seem to me that I did. I only rapped knuckles upon extreme provocation, you know. *Extreme* provocation." She took a healthy swallow of tea. What was it she especially remembered about this boy? Something. It nagged at her. She couldn't remember what it was. Some trait of personality.

"You did it lots of times," he continued. "In front of the whole class. They laughed at me."

"I did? Goodness, what a memory! Well, it doesn't seem to have done you any harm. A little discipline never hurt anybody . . . What was it you said you've been doing professionally?"

"I been in prison," he said with a pale smile. He watched her mouth draw downward.

"Prison? You've been in prison? Oh, I see, it's a joke." She tried to laugh again, but this time the little outburst wouldn't scatter.

"You try staying behind those walls for ten years and see if you think it's a joke." He fumbled in his pocket for a pack of cigarettes, withdrew a smoke and slowly lit it. He blew a smoke ring across the table.

"Well, I must say! You're certainly the only boy I ever had that . . . that ended up in prison! But I'm sure there were . . . *circumstances* . . . leading up to that. I'm sure you're a fine lad, through it all." She worked her lips faster now. Her gaze traveled to the window that looked out upon the night.

"Yeah, there were *circumstances*, as you call it. Very special circumstances." He blew an enormous smoke ring her way. The old woman began to cough. "It's the smoke. I'm not used to people smoking around me. Do you mind refraining?"

"Yeah, I do mind," he said roughly. "I'm going to finish this cigarette, no matter what."

"Well, if you must, you must," she said nervously, half-rising. "But let me just open that window a little—"

"SIT BACK DOWN IN THAT CHAIR!"

She fell back into the rocker.

"Now, you listen to me, you old bitch," he began.

"Don't call me names. Don't you dare! How *dare* you? No wonder you were behind bars. A common jailbird. A degenerate. No respect for your elders."

"Shut up, grandma." He tossed the cigarette butt to the floor and ground it out on what looked like an Oriental rug. Her eyes bulged.

"I remember you very clearly, now," she exclaimed, her hands to her brow. "I remember you! You were no good to start with. No motivation. No follow-through. I knew just where you'd end up. You've run true to form." Her gaze was defiant.

"Shut your mouth, bitch," he said quietly, beginning at last to unzip his leather jacket.

"I will not, I'll have my say. You were a troublemaker, too. I remember the day you wrote nasty, nasty words on the wall in the

supply closet. Horrible words. And then when I went back to get papers to distribute, I saw those words. I had to read them, and I knew who wrote them, all right."

"I didn't write them."

"Oh, you wrote them, all right. And I whacked your knuckles good with a ruler, if I remember right."

"You whacked my knuckles good, but I didn't write those words."

"Did!"

"*Didn't*." They sounded like a pair of school children. He squirmed out of the jacket.

"I never made mistakes of that kind," she said softly, watching him shed the jacket. "I knew just who needed strict discipline in my class."

He stood before her now, holding the heavy jacket in his hand. Underneath he wore only a tee shirt of some rough gray linsey-woolsey material. She saw that his arms were heavily muscled, and he saw that she saw. She was positive she could smell the odor of the prison upon him, though the closest she had come to a prison was reading Dickens. "I never made mistakes," she repeated feebly. "And now, you'd better put that coat right back on and leave. Go back to wherever you came from."

"Can't do that just yet, bitch. I got a score to settle."

"Score? To settle?" She placed her hands upon the rocker arms for support.

"Yeah. I had a long time to figure it all out. Ten years to figure it out. Lots of nights I'd lie there on that board of a bed in that puke-hole and I'd try to piece it all together. How I come to be *there*. Was it my aunt? Naw, she did the best she could without any money. Was it the fellas I took up with in high school? Naw, something happened before that, or I'd never have taken up with the likes of them in the first place, that rocky crowd. And then one night it came to me. *You* were the one."

"Me? The one? The one for what?" Her lips worked furiously now, in and out like a bellows. Her hands tightly gripped the rocker's spindle arms.

"The one who sent me there. Because you *picked* on me all the time. Made me out worse than I was. You never gave me the chance the others had. The other kids left me out of things, because you were always saying I was bad. And you always told me I was dirty. Just because my aunt couldn't keep me in clean shirts like some of the

others. You punished me for everything that happened. But the worst was the day of the words on the wall. You hit me so hard my knuckles bled. My hands were sore as boils for weeks."

"That's an exaggeration."

"No it isn't. They're *my* hands, I ought to know. And do you know who wrote those words on the closet wall? *Do you know?*" he screamed, putting his face right down next to hers.

"No, who?" she whispered, breathless with fright.

"*Nathan Pillsbury*, that's who!" he shouted, clenching his teeth and shaking her frail body within his grasp. "*Nathan Pillsbury*, *Nathan Pillsbury!*"

"Let me go," she whimpered. "Let me go."

"I'll let you go after my score is settled."

The old woman's eyes rolled toward the black, unseeing windows. "What are you going to do to me?" she rasped.

"Just settle, lady," he said, taking the hammer from his jacket. "Now, put you hands on the tabletop."

"My hands? On the tabletop?" she whispered.

"On the tabletop," he repeated pedantically, a teacher. "Like this." He made two fists and placed them squarely on the surface. She refused.

"*Like this!*" he yelled, wrenching her quivering hands and forcing them to the tabletop. Then with his free hand he raised the hammer. For once, he finished something.