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# Meeting Johnny Fernandez on the Football Field After School

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## Meeting Johnny Fernandez on the Football Field After School

Doyle Wesley Walls

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Rhonda combed her sun-streaked hair in class, though doing it was against school rules. On Saturdays she was out in her front yard in shorts, practicing cheers and watching for boys, or she was in her room listening to The Beatles or Joan Baez and talking on the phone and listening for the high school boys in cars driving slowly by her house.

After first period, Johnny Fernandez said something to me at the lockers about our end-of-school-year swim party. Next year we would be in high school, ninth graders. He bounced up and down and back and forth, talking about Rhonda. "Rhonda in a swimsuit, man! God!" Johnny and I rarely ever spoke to each other. All we had together was Athletics, sixth period. Once, in the hall between classes, Johnny came up to me and pointed to Diane White who was walking a few feet ahead of us. It was believed that she wore the biggest bra in the whole school. Johnny told me he knew Diane had already done it. He could tell, he said, just by watching her walk. I didn't tell him that I had danced a slow dance with Diane to "Hey Jude" at Susan's party just days before. Johnny wouldn't have known about the party.

I went to a party at Lori's house one night and found Rhonda there, alone and very friendly to me, wearing big lashes and red lipstick and something that wasn't really a dress or a swimsuit. There was no skirt to it, and she was wearing hose. I have a Polaroid snapshot. She's pretty white teeth and all legs, and I'm holding her, stunned and giddy about my good fortune.

Before Social Studies began, second period, before we went over our Texas history again or the details we were supposed to memorize like the major rivers of Texas, I managed to say something to Rhonda about Johnny Fernandez and what he had said. Maybe I shouldn't have said it. Maybe it's just that I said it the wrong way. I just wanted to make contact, to kneel down beside Rhonda as she sat at her desk in her miniskirt, chewing her gum and bouncing the right leg that was crossed over her left. I wasn't thinking about Johnny. I wanted to say something to

Rhonda about her being in a swimsuit. His comment was one way to introduce a subject I very much wanted to discuss.

Rhonda copied song lyrics in her notebook, like "Love Is All Around" by The Troggs and "Happy Together" by The Turtles, and looked over them while she was daydreaming during class. Rhonda passed notes in class. Rhonda liked boys, and boys liked Rhonda. Rhonda missed a lot of the action in football and basketball games when she was leading cheers because she was often talking to the other cheerleaders about the boys on the field or the court.

By third period, Rhonda had talked to her friends, and very quickly Johnny knew she knew.

One day after lunch I walked around behind the school building near the football field and saw Rhonda walking with her friend Jan. I saw a dust devil move straight toward them, and for a moment Rhonda's long, wide skirt billowed up in the back and was held aloft, and through the dust I saw the sweet outline made by her legs and white panties before her hands gracefully and nonchalantly smoothed her skirt down. It was hot and dry outside. It was just another boring school day inside, and all I was hoping for was to get out of it without punishment. Just days before, during a filmstrip presentation in biology, the teacher noticed that I was humming a song. I didn't know I was doing it. He made me stand over at the side of the class and hold my arms out. He stacked heavy books on my hands. I had to stand there like a crucified Christ, holding those books for thirty minutes without dropping them. My arms ached to the breaking point, but I made it for thirty minutes and didn't have to start over. I just wanted to get out of the day without getting licks from some coach with a custom-made, shaved-and-waffled baseball bat for laughing at something he had said that wasn't supposed to be funny. I was on my way to learning something my educators were trying to teach me—that I should shut up. I still had not learned my lesson. Making any sound with the mouth at school only caused trouble. A girl's body was the only respite from boredom and pain. I needed what I saw that day. I was the only one there. I was lucky to see that view of her body, and I'll never forget it.

Just before English class started, fifth period, Rhonda asked me what Johnny had said. I was to tell her everything. I said he hadn't said much. He was excited about the swim party, and he

was looking forward to seeing her there. I didn't go on to say that every guy in the eighth grade was going to be dreaming about seeing her body in a swimsuit at the party.

When those of us who were on the track team were changing in the locker room for sixth period Athletics, word was passed down the line to me that Johnny wanted to see me after workout on the football field. I looked his way. He was looking my way. He wasn't smiling.

After workout, I walked out toward the football field. I could see Johnny waiting for me. I looked around. He appeared to be alone. You had to be careful. I had often heard from friends and acquaintances that "Mexicans" would fight in groups, that they'd fight with knives, that they wouldn't fight fair. As I approached him, he started pacing back and forth.

The football field in May was green. We stood about five yards from each other.

"What have you been saying to Rhonda? Stupid, man. Shit! You trying to get me in trouble with her?" His right hand was balled up in a fist as he talked.

"No, there's no trouble," I said. "I didn't say anything bad about you. She's not upset about it."

"What did you say to her? I heard some shit after lunch."

"Look, I told her you didn't mean anything by it. She knows you wouldn't do anything to her. I told her in English."

"Did you think I thought that you'd told her in Spanish?"

I paused.

"Spanish? No, man, English class, English class, fifth period."

Something in his face broke. I saw it. He looked like I'd just hit him. I'd been called out on the field, but now I had the advantage. He looked shaken. I had only one language, and he had two. But one of his languages was the wrong language to have. In the cafes in our town, in the post office, in the doctor's waiting room, at the County Courthouse, it was the wrong language. I was smart enough to have picked up that much. All of my friends remembered the Alamo, and some of us remembered the major rivers of Texas, but none of us would study Spanish. We could see that it was the language of shanties, old cars that broke down by the side of the road, and migrant workers bent over in the fields. We were told outright and told in subtle ways that it was the language of lie, cheat, and steal, the language of

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filthy and lazy, the language of knife wounds on Saturday nights at the VFW. After we learned there was a Catholic church in the old part of our town, we would learn that Spanish was not the right language there, though it was the right language of the smaller, poorer Catholic church outside of town, the church the "Mexicans" attended. Spanish would not be the language of the senior Humanities course for college-bound, accelerated kids like me who would halfheartedly do our homework. Spanish would not be the language of the high school principal or the high school teachers or the high school counselor who would talk to us without enthusiasm in our junior year about the possibility of attending the local state university upon our graduation from high school.

Whenever a carload of us would pull up to the Trio Rebel Drive-In for a coke, someone was sure to order a cherry coke. And the Hispanic carhop, always female, was sure to read that portion of our order back to us as a "sherry" coke. Depending on the people in the car, this pronunciation was sure to elicit howls of laughter, sometimes once the window was rolled up, sometimes even before it was. I would cringe at such behavior, not because I knew anything much about the acquisition of languages or about the development of native intonation or even of racism. Such behavior, I'd been taught in the home, was rude, boorish, was not up to the standards of a gentleman. The carhop, I knew, had feelings. What did I do about an insult such as this—since it offended not only my sensibility but surely her as well? Probably little more than to say something like, "Shut up, asshole," to that person in the car. I knew too little about languages to make a more elaborate case, and I knew far too much about ethics—the Golden Rule, for example—not to have done far more than I did do to rectify the wrong. Today I think of Rita Dove's poem "Parsley" when I think of those carhops. I think of what Dove taught me about the relation of language and human behavior through this one poem: twenty thousand black people were capriciously murdered on October 2, 1957, by the order of Rafael Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic, because they could not pronounce the letter "r" in the word for parsley in Spanish—"perezil."

After I graduated from college and then took a Master of Arts degree in English Language and Literature from a university in Central Texas, I took a teaching position at a university in

South Texas, a land that was entirely new to me, although I had lived in Texas all my life. The first-year students I taught while I was working on my M.A. in Central Texas were almost all white and from upper-income families; they had high SAT scores across the board, and most of them, it seemed, were headed, or so they thought coming in, to med school or law school. The majority of the students I would teach in South Texas were Hispanic, many from lower-income families, and would need help with Standard American English; they saw college as a way of bettering their financial circumstances.

The department chair from my M.A. program told me that the department chair from the university in South Texas called him to ask about me. She wanted to know if I had standards when it came to grading. Could I give the low grades if necessary? He assured her I could because we had a strict departmental grading standard at the university where I had taken my M.A. and served as a teaching assistant for two years. He told her about the time he and I switched a batch of student papers during the department-wide grading swap. I recall that Carol—my best writer in one of my two classes, my most fluid writer, the student whose prose was graceful and logical and interesting and concise—received a grade of “F” on her paper from the department chair because of five or six comma splices and for no other reason. According to departmental standards, each comma splice was an automatic ten points off the paper; the same penalty was dealt out for each sentence fragment, each instance of fused sentences. At the bottom of that paper, the department chair wrote words like these to my student: “The comma splices in your paper illustrate that you do not understand the basic unit of the English sentence.” I had done my best, during the first couple of papers, to correct Carol’s tendency to commit the heinous offense called the comma splice—despite the fact that I regularly saw them in great writers—because teaching students how to avoid certain “errors” was, in part, our reason for being. However, I am sure I was probably somewhat generous and rewarded her with points for her graceful style and her trenchant arguments.

Carol would survive the course. She would do very well, in fact. Perhaps she was doing so well because she came from a privileged economic background. I was only three years her senior when I was teaching her, so it’s legitimate, in retrospect,

to think of myself as a member of that generation of students. Much of our ease with the English language was inherited from our parents who spoke SAE with ease. Our parents could provide both financial and linguistic advantages. My parents were both college educated, and my mother was a teacher. Students like me inherited good grades in English class without having to understand the actual grammar of the language. We privileged students would be stunned by how little we actually knew about the workings of language when we took German or French, Latin or Greek. Linguistics would be harder for us than any math class.

After reading my first batches of diagnostic essays at my new teaching post, I was stunned to think that the departmental grading standards sheet was practically identical to the sheet I was expected to grade by at my M.A. institution. And how were we to accomplish this mission? Composition classes were unprofessionally and unethically overcrowded at thirty students per section. Four sections per semester was a standard load for instructors. Recent M.A. hires and teaching assistants staffed the bulk of these composition classes. It looked like the composition classes would be a slaughter of the innocents. In many ways, they were, despite the best efforts of teachers committed to helping the students.

When I think about my connections to the Spanish language, a few related stories come to mind.

I learned a few words of Spanish in kindergarten. Then from first grade through my senior year in high school, no Spanish was spoken in the classroom or taught to the students, unless a student specifically enrolled in Spanish.

A friend of mine with a double major in English and Spanish from college went for a job interview to teach English in a high school in Central Texas. A board member, my friend told me later, asked him this: "Wull, whaddy need Spanish *for*?" My friend exaggerated the last word he quoted; he drawled out this last low note so that I might hear the IQ of this Anglo man plummet to a record low for the human species. The question posed to my friend was no invitation to make a case, no challenge to see what my friend was made of as a potential teacher who might receive such a question in class. It was an unfortunate revelation of prejudice from a man barely literate in his one language.

A former colleague of mine here in Oregon told my wife and me a story from her past one night as she stirred a pan of sauce in her kitchen. In our native state, while traveling with her Anglo husband, my Hispanic colleague received verbal insults from two Anglo males in a cafe where the two had stopped to pick up food to go. She wasn't willing to take it. Neither was her husband. There was a fight. When she stepped in to help her husband who was being attacked, one of the males hit her. I repeat: one of the males hit this gentle woman. She showed us the place in her mouth where the tooth had been broken and replaced. She wasn't burning with bitterness toward Texas. I was burning, though. I wish I could recall the details of her story better than I do, but I was livid that night as I listened to the tale. I was staring at the floor in shame and shaking my head. I know, firsthand, so much about Texas to be proud of. But this, too, was a portrait of the state.

While we were in South Texas, our first son was born. His pediatrician was a Hispanic male. Once, with our child running a severe fever, we were in the pediatrician's office, and the nurse, also Hispanic, spoke to the doctor in Spanish. My wife and I immediately looked at each other. The doctor quickly corrected the nurse: "In English." He assumed, correctly, that we had conversational ease in English only, and he had the professionalism and character to see that we weren't excluded or made to feel awkward or out of touch during that tense hour when we would learn of our son's immediate need for surgery on his ears. It was a simple procedure, the pediatrician assured us. But it was important. Our son would have to check into the hospital right away to get his fever down before surgery. Without it, our son's hearing would be diminished. And one consequence of this diminishment could have been retarded language development. It was nothing we had done wrong. It was just life. And while my job paid me little, I did have some health benefits. I have often thought of the children whose parents cannot afford something so basic. I think about how that can affect these children for the rest of their lives. Our son had the surgery done to both ears twice as a child. Today, half of the way through high school, he excels in academics.

A few days ago at the DMV in Oregon I waited in a room filled mostly with Hispanic men and women to update my driver's license. By my count, half the workers at the DMV were

Hispanic. One white woman standing beside me couldn't contain her disgust over having to wait. She sniffed and mumbled some words to me under her breath. The Hispanic woman helping us had to take a call, and our photos did have to be developed. The DMV employee apologized for the wait when she could finally deliver our licenses. She had a little trouble pronouncing my name; she looked at me and smiled as if to ask, "Is that right?," when she called it out loud. She pronounced the Hispanic names beautifully. My license is now good till the year 2000. I stared at that number on my license. 2000? That sounds so odd. It sounds so far in the future for one, like me, born in the 1950s. The future is upon us.

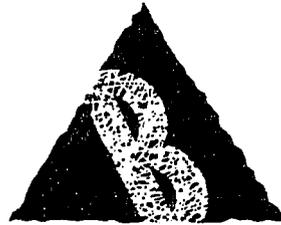
My wife and I pay to send our second-born son to Spanish class after school. We have him signed up to learn Spanish for enrichment. Our hope is that he will excel in more than one language. At the dinner table last week, telling us about his day, he spoke, at our request, a few words in Spanish. Despite the fact that there was no bilingual education for us, we native Texans could hear that he was doing well with his study of Spanish. Those words—his accent—sounded like the real thing to us. It's always surprising how far a child can go if he or she is turned in the right direction and the adult doesn't hold him or her back. Jacob's teacher is a native speaker. He likes her.

But what happened to Johnny Fernandez? Indeed, whatever did happen to him? I can say only a very little about the rest of that story because he wasn't really there when he was there at the end of school party.

I last saw him at the American Legion pool where the swim party was held. I hadn't wanted to see him, hadn't wanted trouble that might mess up the good time I was anticipating. I saw him look at me only once. I saw him smile and yell, hold his breath and jump into the water. That was it. He wasn't yelling at me. He wasn't a threat. Like me, he was just happy that school was over for the year. Within twelve weeks, he and I would both enter a large high school that for the first time in its history would have black students as well as white and brown ones. I don't think Johnny was ever anywhere near Rhonda. I do not recall ever seeing him in high school or anywhere again.

At the end-of-school-year swim party, Rhonda, as we all had hoped, wore a bikini. Before summer vacation had even begun, she was already tanned a sexy brown, with no farmer tan on

her arms and no sock line on her ankles. I heard some teachers say she was too brown, that she was "dark as a Mescan." As dark as she got, that blue-eyed blonde was always a bowl of cream to those of us who desired her. She stood in the water where it was almost five feet deep. She looked over her shoulder at me, smiled, and turned forward again. She spread her legs. I swam underwater and came up behind her, between her legs. I picked her up, and she rode my shoulders as we went into battle with other couples who had done the same. She was light and soft to the touch as she rode me. We bounced, bobbed, and laughed. There was nothing better than those moments when Rhonda smiled at me over her shoulder and I submerged myself and then opened my eyes underwater to see her legs and the blue of her bikini bottom as I moved in and placed my hands on the outer sides of her thighs and pulled my head between her legs and nestled the back of my neck against her crotch. Such intimacies must have seemed safe enough when our parents knew each other from work or church, when all people concerned came from the right part of town, spoke the same language.



**black dirt**

'Only black dirt will do for corn and graves.'

*-Thomas Adel Parsons*

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