

“I Go Along” by Richard Peck

Anyway, Mrs. Tibbetts comes into the room for second period, so we all see she’s still in school even if she’s pregnant. After the baby we’ll have a sub – not that we care in this class.

And right away Darla Craig’s hand is up. It’s up a lot. She doesn’t know any more English than the rest of us, but she likes to talk.

“Hey, Mrs. Tibbetts, how come they get to go and we don’t?”

She’s talking about the first period people, the Advanced English class. Mrs. Tibbetts looks like Darla’s caught her off base.

“I hadn’t thought,” Mrs. Tibbetts says. So now we’re listening, even here in the back row. “For the benefit of those of you who haven’t heard,” she says, “I’m taking some members of the – other English class over to the college tonight, to hear a poet read.”

Somebody halfway back in the room says, “Is he living?”

But Mrs. Tibbetts just smiles. “Oh yes,” she says. “Would anyone in this class like to go too?” She looks up at us, and you see she’s being fair, and nice.

Since it’s only the second period of the day, we’re all feeling pretty good. Everybody in the class puts up their hands. I mean everybody. I put up mine. I go along.

Mrs. Tibbetts looks amazed. She’s never seen anybody’s hand except Darla’s. Her eyes get wide. Mrs. Tibbetts has really great eyes, and she doesn’t put anything on them. But then she sees we have to be putting her on. So she just says “Anyone who would like to go, be in the parking lot at five-thirty. And eat first. No eating on the bus.”

At five-thirty that night I’m in the parking lot. I have no idea why. Needless to say, I’m the only one here from second period. Marty Crawshaw and Pink Hohenfield will be out on the access highway about now, at 7-Eleven, sitting on their hoods. Darla couldn’t make it either. Right offhand I can’t think of anybody who wants to ride a school bus thirty miles to see a poet. Including me.

The Advanced English juniors are milling around behind school. I'm still in my car, and it's almost dark, so nobody sees me.

Then Mrs. Tibbetts wheels the school bus in. She swings in and hits the brakes and the doors fly open. The advanced class starts to climb aboard. They're more orderly than us. I'm settling behind my dashboard. The last kid climbs in the bus.

And I seem to be sprinting across the asphalt. I'm on the bus, and the door's hissing shut behind me. I wonder where I'm supposed to sit.

I find an empty double and settle by the window, pulling my ball cap down in front. When we go past 7-Eleven, I'm way down in the seat with my hand shielding my face on the window side. Right about then, somebody sits down next to me. I flinch.

"Okay?" she says, and I look up, and it's Sharon Willis.

I've got my knee hammed up on the back of the seat ahead of me. I'm bent double, and my hands over half my face. I'm cool, and it's Sharon Willis.

"Whatever," I say.

"How are you doing, Gene?"

I'm trying to be invisible, and she's calling me by name.

"How do you know me?" I ask her.

She shifts around. "I'm a junior, you're a junior. There are about fifty-three people in our whole year. How could I not?"

She's got a notebook on her lap. Everybody seems to, except me.

"Do you have to take notes?" I say, because I feel like I'm getting into something here.

"Not really," Sharon says. "But we have to write about it in class tomorrow. Our impressions."

I'm glad I'm not in her class because I'm not going to have any impressions. Here I am riding the school bus for the gifted on a Tuesday night with the major goddess girl in school, who knows my name. I'm going to be clean out of impressions because my circuits are starting to fail.

Mrs. Tibbetts puts the pedal to the metal, we settle back. One of her friends leans down by Sharon's ear and says "We've got a seat for you back here. Are you coming?"

But Sharon just says, "I'll stay here with Gene." Like it happens every day.

I look out the window a lot. There's still some patchy snow out in the fields glowing grey. When we get close to the campus, I think about staying on the bus.

"Do you want to sit together," Sharon says, "at the program?"

I clear my throat. "You go ahead and sit with your people."

"I sit with them all day long," she says.

So here I am sitting in these bleachers, and I'm just naturally here with Sharon Willis.

Sharon has her notebook flipped open. I figure it's going to be like a class, so I'm tuning out when the poet comes on.

First of all, he's only in his twenties. Not even a beard, and he's not dressed like a poet. In fact, he's dressed like me: Levi's and Levi's jacket. Boots, even. A talk guy. It's weird, like there could be poets around and you wouldn't realize they were there.

But he's got something. Every girl leans forward. He's got a few loose-leaf pages in front of him. But he just begins.

"I've written a poem for my wife," he says, "about her."

Then he tells us this poem. I'm waiting for the rhyme, but it's more like talking.

“Alone, he says, “I watch you sleep
Before the morning steals you from me,
Before you stir and disappear
Into the day and leave me here
To turn and kiss the warm space
You leave beside me.”

He looks up and people clap. I thought what he said was a little too personal, but I could follow it. Next to me Sharon’s made a note, just an exclamation point.

He tells us a lot of poems, one after another. I mean, he’s got poems on everything. He even has one about his truck:
“Old buck-toothed, slow-to-start mama,”

Something like that. People laugh, which I guess is okay. He just keeps going.
He ends up with one called “High School.”

“On my worst nights,” he says. “I dream myself back.
I’m the hostage in the row by the radiator, boxed in,
Zit-blasted, and they’re popping quizzes at me.
I’m locked in there, looking for words
To talk myself out of being this young
While every girl in the galaxy
Is looking over my head, spotting for a senior.
On my really worst nights it’s last period
On a Friday and somebody’s fixed the bell
So it won’t ring:
And I’ve been cut from the team
And I’ve forgotten my locker combination
And I’m waiting for something to happen.”

And the crowd goes wild. The poet just gives us a wave. People swarm down to get him to sign their programs. Except Sharon and I stay where we are.

“That last one wasn’t a poem,” I tell her. “The others were, but not that one.”

She turns to me and smiles. I've never been this close to her before, so I've never seen the color of her eyes.

"Then write a better one," she says.

We sit together again on the ride home.

"No, I'm serious," I say. "You can't write poems about zits and your locker combination."

"Maybe nobody told the poet that," Sharon says.

"So what are you going to write about him tomorrow?" I'm really curious about this.

"I don't know," she says. "I've never heard a poet reading before, not in person. Mrs. Tibbetts shows us tapes of poets reading."

"She doesn't show them to our class."

"What would you do if she did?" Sharon asks.

"Laugh a lot."

The bus settles down on the return trip. I picture all these people going home to do algebra homework, or whatever. When Sharon speaks again, I almost don't hear her.

"You ought to be in this class," she says.

I pull my ball cap down to my nose and lace my fingers behind my head and kick back in the seat. Which should be answer enough.

"You're as bright as anybody on this bus. Brighter than some."

We're rolling on through the night, and I can't believe I'm hearing this. Since it's dark, I take a chance and glance at her. Just the outline of her nose and her chin.

"How do you know I am?"

“How do you know you’re not?” she says. “How will you ever know?”

But then we’re quiet. And anyway the evening’s over. Mrs. Tibbetts is braking for the turnoff, and we’re about to get back to normal. And I get this quick flash of tomorrow, in second period with Marty and Pink and Darla, and frankly, it doesn’t look good.