

CASE MANAGING

— AARON SOMMERS —

Hendrix is overrated. He was more theatrics than craft, and nothing Clapton can't do without the histrionics." "You're kidding, right? Ask *anyone*, they'll say how influential he was."

"Most people are seduced by theatrics. Overrated, I say." Arguing with Paul, our school's music teacher, I had attracted a small crowd. I enjoyed watching him so animated as he defended his precious rock gods and exposed the false idols of others. He was one of the few faculty members who ever *did* get animated, although this usually required provocation. Tonight I didn't have the energy to refute his claims, and let him ramble on about why some music matters and others did not. Instead I nodded and pretended to listen while letting

someone next to me start in. She asked him a question about jazz, and I decided to get some more food.

The Italian sauce smelled delicious.

I'm a "case manager" at a local high school here in Monroe, Michigan. An unremarkable town, flanked with large smokestacks wrapping the town in cloaks of soot. I work with small groups of students ("Divide and conquer," says our principal, unofficially of course) who have special needs. Usually they come into my room in bad moods. Last year a young lady came to my class in tears—one of her former friends said she had a hairy back. Another hated being considered special, and wanted to be normal, though as he said this his lip piecing garbled the speech.

It's a madhouse. This school, with old teachers who wear colorful suspenders, and others with holes in their shirts and freckled bald heads. Borderline nuthouse, really. In my room with my students, things run like clockwork. Some of them might say I'm a good teacher, privately to their friends, but the school administrators would disagree. I'm a case manager, understand? That's a title of someone with orders to clean up stuff—so that things look pretty for the others—and then manage the "special" cases.

"Look, I'm just telling you; it's got to be concrete. *Down to earth*, I say." The man was expounding on a step in my house in February of 1997, telling me how to teach. He kept going: "These students today, they need to know the ground rules, the basics, before anything else. I mean, do you think they have the *thought processes* for the Big Ideas?"

I shrugged, about to say something, but he wasn't finished. Rather, it seemed he was getting warmed up. He put down his paper plate and leaned forward.

"They ask: find the area. I say teach them what a meter is. Before that, teach them how to measure something, and before you even do that, *what* they should look for." He paused, not for my response but for the start of it. I began, while he sipped his beverage.

"Well, that's one approach and—" Then he started in again, barely taking the time to swallow his drink, which was infused with one type

of alcohol or another. The houseplant next to me withered under the ether of his breath.

"I'm not saying educators, and this isn't any criticism of you, have *shifted*," he said, emphasizing the last word with a hand gesture, "to the wrong areas. But there's too much focus on how we can help these kids, many of whom I say are unhelpable. They don't seem to care about respect. Don't care much for the rules. Do whatever they want and it's okay because they're *special*." This last point was accompanied by a twinge of his voice.

I was about to tell him how his views were ill-informed opinions, inconsequential observations based on the fact he had no experience in a classroom, and his broad viewpoints presented him as a person who is bitter about education, blaming easy targets. Because as a philistine those are the only ones he aims for, but at that moment I noticed his fly was down. Two young women standing across the room had just noticed too. My wardrobe-challenged acquaintance was about to say something to me but I stopped him short, put a hand on his shoulder and said, "If you'll excuse me."

"Sure." He sipped his drink nervously, beady blue eyes darting around the room while standing unsteadily by himself in front of a large picture of a smiling boy hugging a beagle.

The party at my house was not a retirement dinner, nor a sports function, nor one of those lame holiday events. It was a spaghetti dinner, a fundraiser for a courageous student of ours who had recently been diagnosed with cancer. He was about to start treatment with an experimental drug. Each round cost twice the value of his father's car.

There were about fifty people at the house. It was blustery outside, one of those God-forsaken Michigan winter nights, and travel was difficult. My wife had been worried she brought out too much food but within an hour only one small bowl remained. She knew her cooking wasn't *that* good. People we hadn't seen in years came. Old friends, new friends, a carpenter who had built our deck when we first moved in, an electrician who wired our laundry room, acquaintances, colleagues, even people we had never met showed and paid twenty

dollars a head. All in all we raised enough for one course of treatment for the student. No cars had to be sold in the process.

I can't remember the name of the cancer, but there were real long words, three of them in fact. Does it matter? What mattered was the dreaded C-word, and I always had the impression that the longer the name was, the worse off the patient would be. cursory research on the Internet confirmed my fears. No one had expected the disease would progress as fast as it did; even the doctors who specialized in the field were shocked at the rate it coursed through his tiny body. It started, as far as we noticed, the evening he collapsed on his side while reading at our dining room table.

The night he got sick he was reading an illustrated volume of Blake. He was halfway through his book of poems—I can still see that tattered, yellow covered copy on the black table—when he fell. For such a small guy he made quite a loud crash. The next couple of days at the hospital were full of uncertainty, and when the diagnosis came, people were relieved. We finally knew. Faces come to me now as expressions; lips pursed, teeth gnashing, and condescending grins. The rabbi and friend of the family brought self-deprecating humor with him one day, and there always seemed to be C-SPAN on the TV. Maybe the morphine drip made our democratic process more interesting when it is televised. Still, the prognosis was never good, though the “team” of doctors said there were always possibilities. Had they just started reading Kierkegaard? His mom felt time was lost on conflicting treatment options, risks, and potential benefits.

Everyone cared about the experimental treatment option, which had just passed clinical trials that year. The local newspaper published a piece on his struggle as well as the school's reaction. The treatment interested the patient the most, so that's why the people who cared about him cared about it. He told me he wanted to try it *not* thinking it would work but instead to see if it could help others who were sick years from now after it had been tested and tinkered with.

I think he knew how sick he was before anyone had told him. He never seemed depressed, though, except on the morning when a doctor came in and saw him there on the bed, emaciated, pale, bald, large

dark rings under his oxtail-brown eyes, and lied cheerfully: "You're looking better today!" while sliding open the shades. That physician was one of the discoverers of the experimental drug, apparently made from the branch of some obscure plant in the Amazon. The treatment began one month after his diagnosis; three injections twice a day. I have his journal right here with an entry for every day of 1997, and little pictures that accompany the days he had treatment.

He died a year later, never able to enjoy being a kid. He could never build a tree house, run on the beach again with his dog, kiss a mysterious girl, or play hooky from school and watch TV all day. It's been well over ten years, and I'm sitting here remembering his big smile and those large brown eyes. He was my son and the best student I've ever seen, though that's only coming from a case manager. An old and crazy one at that.