

Carolyn Kegel

About Heather

The reason, he reasoned, that he took an interest in Jenny Bancroft in the first place was the hint of flirtation he detected in the Chaucer essay. There was an unmistakable undertone unmistakably directed at him. He was the audience. The *sole* audience. Her *teacher*. And it was not an undertone so much as it was an overtone. The damn paper was washed in it.

He folded the essay in half, deliberately creating a crease, his own message to the pupil that he had manhandled her work. Though it was not really an essay, it was a letter and it was a letter to him. He tucked it in his day book to take home and rethink later.

It was at that moment, precisely, that Russell Barnett acquired a secret, something of his own which he needed to conceal from his wife, from the school. As he strode out to his vehicle in his collegiate overcoat, he was unable to determine whether it was the pleasure of owning a secret, something precious to be locked away and dug up at a later date - or if it was the secret itself, an imaginative little letter written by a curious girl. Or was it the girl, this unique brown-eyed thing of a girl with pale long arms, but weren't they all unique? Of course it was the complication, the layers of it all that cumulatively breathed air into his welter-weight frame and made him feathery, wanting to fight.

They ate a pleasant dinner. His wife was like him – thirty-something, bookish, intense, and gratuitously accommodating in the bedroom. There was simply no problem with the woman except that she was not in any way *indecent*. There was no need to elaborate. Looking over his dinner plate, his eyes lowered, he allowed himself an exquisite second to articulately envision groping Jenny Bancroft's genitalia. How provocative a meal could be. Heather had no idea what she had provided him with – meat, a slab of it to be cut up and devoured. Sauce. A pile of young asparagus with a line of hollandaise drawn like a yellow belt around the waist.

He must add Heather to his equation. She was a fourth dimension, he considered, tapping the fork against his teeth. The secret was waved in the presence of Heather and Heather did not care.

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For a while he felt that was the end of his marriage. Russell carried the essay with him everywhere he went. He took so much precaution not to be caught with the thing, not to leave it in the laundry, opened by the bed, that the daily effort became constant reinforcement of his loyalty to his secret.

He called the girl in for a conference. He was on the telephone when she arrived, boisterously debating the logistics of lunch, a staff meeting, deleted Obama carrying on the conversation as Jenny Bancroft arranged herself, coat over a chair, backpack on the floor, legs crossed and swinging a shoe from her calve.

She looked perturbed. She was taking this all very personally.

"You're looking well," he said, finally.

"Is that appropriate?" she said.

He allowed a pleasant smile. "I think it's appropriate," he said.

"You're looking well."

He returned to organizing his desk, stacking classwork and picking out paperclips from the jumble and dropping them into his drawer. "All right," he said platonically sliding his chair closer to hers.

"Of course it's inappropriate. Anything worthwhile is inappropriate, Jenny." He removed the Chaucer essay from his pocket. "I read it," he said, delicately handing the letter over to her and then he sat there looking at her young face, mildly pliable, like a wet cup to take up in his hands.

"Well, what did you think?"

"I liked it," he said.

"Good."

He sat with his palms pressed between his knees. "Can I keep it?"

She squinted at him. "You are inappropriate," she said. "Here, keep it."

"Thank you," he pressed it back against his chest and stood up.

"That's it?" she said.

"For now."

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It took a month for him to devise a plan. Of course he saw the girl in class and there were the odd telephone messages she left on his answering machine. The thing was simply growing and growing and his

thoughts about the girl were becoming uncontrollable. He could no longer force his fantasies into a shoe box and interact with his wife. So much dishonesty troubled him because he was basically a man of great integrity, and it was so common for undisciplined people to indulge in desires, that he chose not to. He did not approach the girl again. He ignored her probing stares at him. He thought about returning the letter. But that did not in any way solve the problem of indecency.

So the plan was, finally, to invite her back to his office, to insist she be silent as he lifted her skirt up over his head. He would be on his knees of course, clothed. He would not allow her to touch him. Any part of his body would have to be restricted from her in order to maintain the student-teacher relationship. And if she could go for that, well, everything would be fine.

From the safety of his office he pondered the upsetting nature of the universe. This was an incredibly satisfying dilemma for a teacher. There were so many points to argue his position. A smear of violence was always within the revolution. He spread "The Little Pilgrim" open across his desk and looked brazenly over it.

He called in Jenny Bancroft. She was in the hallway, waiting on a chair.

Of course, the obvious solution was to go home immediately and find his wife and provoke her into something submissive. He thought about that, as he watched the girl walk in the room, the novelty of it all, about Heather, and about how he could keep the information from Jenny Bancroft.

Carolyn Kegel has recently completed her first novel. Her short fiction has appeared in a variety of literary journals including *Night Train* and *Emrys Journal*. Besides writing, she has studied painting in San Francisco and Hangzhou, China. She and her husband have two daughters and live in Northern New Jersey.