

英語の短編小説

「Hakumon ちゅうおう」に短編小説を掲載して頂くのはこれで4回目になります。いつもコメントを頂き、とてもうれしく思います。さて、人がストーリーを書くのは、もちろんストーリーによって異なりますが、あるメッセージを読者に伝えることがひとつの目標です。あまりうまく出来てはいませんが、今回のストーリーでも、私は「人生」についてのメッセージを伝えたいと思っています。

読んだあと、何か感想や意見などありましたら、私のメールアドレス <gwarren@tamacc.chuo-u.ac.jp>までお送り下さい。どうもありがとうございます。



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Consequences

by Gary W. Cantor

Eric Long opened the door and left the faculty lounge. Behind him, he could hear the voices of the few people who had remained until the end of his farewell party. They were familiar voices, some of which he had heard for ten or even twenty years. But, of course, none of those people had taught there as long as he had.

“Thirty-five years,” he said to himself. Then, a smile forced itself upon his face. As he started down the long corridor, he heard the door behind him open. Jack Larson, who had taught in the classroom next to his for the past two years, stuck his head out the door, and when Eric looked back, he smiled broadly.

“Hey, Eric, how about getting a drink on the way home?” Jack asked.

“No thanks, Jack,” Eric answered. “I think I’ll just be getting home. There’s no point in just extending the goodbye.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. But thanks, Jack.”

With that, Jack closed the door again, and Eric once again started to walk. He moved slowly, and then turned a corner. Then, when he got to the classroom where he had taught for the past several years, he stopped and looked in through the small window in the door. It was a typical high school classroom, with about thirty chairs and desks for students and a big teacher’s desk in the front. Eric’s eyes moved from seat to seat, and then to his old chair, and then finally to the blackboard. And as he glared at the blackboard, he laughed and wondered how many math problems and equations he had written during his thirty-five years as a teacher at the school. Oh well, he thought, what does it matter? “Tomorrow,” he said to himself, “I’ll be a teacher no more.”

Eric turned away from the small window and looked down the corridor. There was something else that he wanted to look at on his way out, and so he ambled over to the big glass display case that stood just outside the principal’s office. It was a case that was filled with all sorts of

trophies, plaques, and pictures, and Eric felt a need to look at it one more time.

He bent down so that he could see the pictures that lined the bottom shelf of the case, and as his eyes moved from one picture to the next he could feel his heart beat just a little bit faster. He knew almost all of the students in the pictures and had taught a good number of them as well. Some of the photographs went all the way back to the first years in which Eric had taught, and he grinned as he looked at the old hairstyles and the long gone athletic uniforms that young men and women, now in their mid-forties, wore.

As he scanned the pictures, it occurred to Eric that he knew very little about what had happened to most of his old students. Of course, over the years, there was the occasional student who stopped by and said hello, and he did see some students at the very few reunions that he had attended. But, for the most part, he knew very little about all of the people who he had taught and tested, passed or failed.

“Don’t think too much,” he said to himself as he straightened up. And he thought that he should just get out of the school quickly and go home. But, he knew that there was one picture in the case that he had been avoiding, and he wanted to take one more look at it. So, he bent down once again, and looked at a picture of a basketball team that had been taken more than twenty-five years earlier. Steven Pillsbury was the figure in the middle of the picture, and he stood out because he was several inches taller than everyone else. As Eric looked at the picture, he felt pressure in his chest and straightened up once again. Then, he placed his right hand over his heart and took a deep breath.

“Are you okay?”

The voice came from Eric’s left. He looked in that direction and saw Juan, the custodian, standing there with a large broom in his hand.

“Yes, I’m fine,” said Eric. “How are you, Juan?”

“Fine, Mr. Long. I just came over to say goodbye to you. I heard that this was your last day and I was afraid that I might not get the chance to say goodbye.”

“Thanks, Juan. That’s very nice of you.”

For a few seconds there was silence, and then Juan started to speak again.

“You know, Mr. Long, there’s another thing that I wanted to say to you.”

“What’s that?” Eric asked.

“Well, you know what I do here. I just clean up and fix things and stuff like that. Well, the thing of it is, to most teachers, and to the students as well, I’m almost invisible.”

“Invisible?”

“Yes. Most people only notice me when I’m mopping the floor and they have to step around me, or when they have to find me to clean up some mess.”

“I see,” said Eric. “That’s too bad. People can be pretty cold, can’t they?”

“But you’re not like that, Mr. Long. Every day that I’ve been here, for the past ten years, you’ve greeted me properly in the morning, and you even talk to me about things. Not so much, but it’s different from the other teachers. Most of them ignore me. It’s almost like I’m dirt or something to them.”

Eric nodded, but he didn’t say anything. Then, he took a deep breath and looked back at the display case.

Juan also looked in the direction of the case and then spoke once again in a soft voice.

“One more thing, Mr. Long. I don’t know if you know it or not, but you were an extremely popular teacher. I know. I always hear the kids talking. Of course, they don’t know I’m listening, but I do hear. And I’ve heard many good things about you over the years.”

At this point, Eric looked back at Juan and nodded. Then, he laughed a short laugh. Then, after a very awkward interval of silence between the two men, Eric once again breathed deeply and then spoke to Juan in a slightly trembling voice.

“Juan,” he said, “I thank you very much for your kind words. But unfortunately, I’m not the man or even the teacher that you think I am. Here, I’ll show you something. And then I’ll tell you something that I’ve never told anyone else. Why not? I’m finished teaching.”

“What are you talking about, Mr. Long?”

Eric bent down and once again looked at the picture of the basketball team. Then, he pointed to it with his index finger.

“Do you see the kid in the middle of this picture? The real tall one?”

Juan bent down and took a look.

“Yes,” he said. “Was he good?”

“Yes he was. Very good. The year that this picture was taken, we were ranked number two in the state, and he was the star.”

“I see.”

Both men now stood up straight again, and Eric, tilting his head back a bit, continued on with his story.

“But he never graduated, Juan. And he never went to college, and he never did what he really wanted to do in life, which was to play pro basketball.”

“What happened?”

“His name was Steven Pillsbury, Juan, and he died. He died. He was seventeen years old and he died when a truck ran a red light and literally crushed his body along with his car. He was still a junior.”

“That’s too bad, Mr. Long. A real waste. But what does that have to do with you?”

Eric closed his eyes and spoke.

“The day that he died, Juan, I yelled at him, insulted him and told him that he’d probably turn out to be nothing more than a ‘tall idiot.’ ”

Juan didn’t say anything, so Eric opened up his eyes. Then, he continued.

“I can still remember that day as if it was yesterday. It’s a day that haunts me, Juan. He was in my math class, and he wasn’t doing well. So, I told him to talk to me after school was over, and at our conference I told him that his work was completely unsatisfactory.”

“And then?”

“Well, as I recall, he just grinned and told me that it didn’t matter because he was going to be a basketball star. And he told me that math was just a waste of his time. So, after a few frustrating minutes of trying to change his attitude, I just exploded. In my anger I told him that he had almost no chance of becoming a professional basketball player, and that he was just dreaming. ‘You’re not so special,’ I said. ‘There are hundreds of guys like you around the country. Maybe even thousands.’ And then, I told him that with his attitude he’d probably turn

out to be nothing more than a 'tall idiot.' ”

“Well,” said Juan, “you were angry. And you wanted him to study, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” Eric said, “I did want him to study, all right. But I had no right to yell at him the way that I did. And I knew very well that he was a darn good basketball player. There weren’t many like him. In fact, at the time, he might have been one of the top ten high school basketball players in the country. But I didn’t tell him that. No, I guess that more than anything else I just wanted him to doubt himself a little bit. I just wanted to plant the seeds of a little bit of doubt in his head... And there’s more.”

“What?” asked Juan.

“I ended our little conference by threatening him. I told him that if his work didn’t improve dramatically in the next couple of weeks I would have him thrown off the basketball team. And with that, he ran out of the room and slammed the door.”

Both Juan and Eric stood silently for a moment, and then Eric exhaled deeply and finished the story.

“The next day, Juan, I heard the news from the principal. Steven Pillsbury was dead, and he had died about thirty minutes after our argument. Thirty minutes. Do you know what that means, Juan?”

“What?”

“It means that he died thinking about what I had told him. And it means that he had died miserably...because of me.”

Juan looked at Eric intently for a moment. Then, he turned away and seemed to be thinking deeply about something. Finally, he spoke in a soft, almost whispering tone of voice.

“And you never told anyone about that day?”

“No,” said Eric. “I didn’t. I almost talked about it hundreds of times, and was so wracked with guilt that I even thought about quitting every now and then, especially in the first year or so after it happened. I mean, what kind of teacher am I, I would think. But then, after a while, I thought about it a little bit less, and then a little bit less, and slowly but surely I was able to shove it out of my mind for relatively long periods of time. But, I never completely forgot about it, and I’m sure that I never will.”

Juan nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“Well, Juan,” said Eric, somewhat sarcastically, “what do you think of me now? Do you still think of me as a great guy? A wonderful teacher?”

Juan stayed silent for a moment and then once again spoke in a very soft voice.

“I think that you’re a human being, Mr. Long. And hearing your story, I believe more than ever that there’s a God above.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Mr. Long, I didn’t know you way back when that boy was killed. And I have no idea what you were like. But I am sure of one thing. I’m sure that that tragedy must have made you a better person. And yes, even a better teacher.”

Eric listened but said nothing in return.

“Sometimes,” Juan said, “feeling bad about ourselves makes us think, and makes us aware of things that we were never aware of before. That day and that tragedy made you suffer. And you

felt guilt. But I also bet that what happened made you a kinder teacher and it made you realize that what you say today you might regret tomorrow. For the record, Mr. Long, I don't think that what you said to that kid was all that bad. But maybe you should thank God that you did."

Eric opened his mouth, but still said nothing. His body was rigid, and Juan placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Mr. Long," Juan said, "can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," said Eric.

"Many years ago, Mr. Long, I wonder. When you were walking down these halls and you saw a custodian at work, did you always say hello? Or did you treat them like they were invisible?"

Eric thought for a moment. Then, he nodded and said, "You know, Juan, you're a pretty smart fellow."

"I don't know about that," Juan said, "but I do know that God works in mysterious ways."

Juan removed his hand from Eric's shoulder and smiled. Then, Eric smiled back and said, "Goodbye, my friend. Take care."

"You too, my friend," said Juan. And then Eric moved slowly away in the direction of the exit. When he reached the door, he opened it slowly and then turned around and waved to Juan.

Juan waved back and smiled. Then, Eric turned around once again and headed for his car.

