

"A New Start"

by

Cheryl Gfrerer, English Instructor

"You're never going to go to college," my mom told me once. The Cs and Ds on my high school transcript agreed. I believed them—everyone and everything that suggested I would fail. After graduation, with no other options, I entered the school of "street smarts," bouncing from job to job, apartment to apartment, bar to bar. I floundered and would have continued if I hadn't enrolled in a night class at Lakewood Community College in the winter of 1988.

It wasn't an engaging course. The instructor's monotone voice droned like the white noise of the fan that lulled me to sleep at night. But I attended every class, turned in my papers on time, took the tests, and completed my first college course—even though I wasn't supposed to be there. At the end of the quarter, when I opened the flimsy envelope holding my report card, the "A" staring back at me suggested I might be a college student after all.

I signed up for two classes the next quarter. This time, my instructors were animated and engaged. I was hooked. Twice a week at 5:00 p.m., I jumped into my 1980 maroon Monte Carlo and raced 40 miles through rush hour traffic to arrive at Lakewood by 6:00 p.m. At the end of the quarter, after arriving late for a final exam, I quit and took a waitressing job, without a bank account and no idea how to pay my bills. I attended classes and then served prime rib and boiled lobster tails to customers in the mouse-infested Coachman restaurant. Afterwards, I'd return home and study late into the night.

I followed this pattern for more than a year. During the day I took classes and worked two minimum-wage student jobs. At night, I waitressed. Although making progress toward a degree, I was exhausted and could barely afford the rent for my 640-square-foot apartment. I ate Spam or macaroni and cheese and filled my apartment with others' discarded furniture.

One evening toward the end of Fall Quarter, I pulled into the Coachman's parking lot. As my front tires bounced over the lip of the driveway, an electrical fizzle silenced the stereo. My car quit and a stream of smoke framed the hood. I turned the key. Nothing. I couldn't afford repairs, and Christmas was two weeks away. I hadn't bought gifts yet. A few minutes after I dropped my head against the steering wheel and cried, tears gluing my hair to my face, another employee pulled up behind me and helped push my car out of the way. He inspected the car and told me that the car's battery had bounced up and welded itself to the hood. A new battery would cost fifty or sixty dollars, more than groceries for a month.

That night, serving meals I couldn't afford, I felt defeated. How could I support myself and pay for college if something unforeseen could go wrong—like a battery? I cleared plates and tried to think. My credit card was maxed out. I couldn't ask my parents for money. My friends were broke. I could take another job, but when? Feeling doomed, I returned home that night and looked at the dishes piled on the Formica table, the furniture covered in cat fur and papers, the mud-brown carpeting strewn with books. I had nothing to sell. There was only one solution left: Tuition for Winter Quarter would be due soon and would more than cover the cost of a car battery. I needed to quit school.

Early the next morning, I drove to Lakewood to tell my instructors and wandered up to the English Department, looking for a friendly face. John Schell's door was ajar. I had met John, with his wild, long, curly gray hair and welcoming smile a year earlier when I had begun working in the Writing Center. Since then, I had taken his Hemingway class, where I had my first original thought about a literary work. More than anyone else, John had whet my academic appetite. The light from his office illuminated the hallway and invited me in. I stopped in the doorway.

He was sitting at his desk, grading, and looked up. "Hi, Cheryl. You're up early." He paused, noticing my expression, then set down his pen. "What's going on?"

"Can I talk to you?"

He slid his briefcase off the chair next to his desk. "Of course. Have a seat."

I sat down and blurted out, "I can't do it anymore," then shrugged and looked at him. He eyebrows puckered, lines folding his face. He asked me what I was talking about. "School. Work." I sighed and ground my palms into my eyes. "I'm tired. Some of us just weren't meant to go to college, I guess."

"But you were, Cheryl. You know that, right?" He nodded at me; I shook my head. "What led to this anyhow?" John's elbows rested on the armrests of his chair as I explained my money woes, Christmas, the battery. He sat quietly while I talked, nodding occasionally and clucking sometimes.

"So, you're broke. You can't afford your expenses?"

"Right. And I think . . ." my voice caught. "I think I should drop out of school."

"Because of the money?" I nodded, afraid to speak. He pinched his chin between his fingers and thumb and sighed. "There must be some solution."

I shook my head. "I can't think of anything, and I've tried."

"What if I loaned you the money? Would \$200 help?" I stared at him, speechless. I couldn't have heard him right. Teachers didn't give students loans. They barely made any money themselves. But he was smiling at me, waiting for my response.

"What?" I asked. He repeated himself, explaining that it might help me sort things out. I was stunned. "You'd do that? For me?"

"Of course," he smiled, and something unraveled inside of me. The weight lightened. It wasn't possible, but there it was: John Schell, my favorite teacher, believed in me. He thought I belonged in school. Maybe I should believe in myself, try harder. Maybe I could find a way.

"You don't know what this means," I said, "but I can't take your money."

"It would be a loan."

His offer was enough. "Why don't I try it by myself first?"

"Are you sure?"

I nodded as he studied my face. "I want to try."

"Okay. But let me know if you need help. And, Cheryl," he paused, "You do belong in school. Don't forget that."

And I never did.