

# MINT CONDITION

(An excerpt from a story)

By Richard Lemm

Tony stands in the doorway of his first period class and scans the scene. He's punch drunk from a late night of marking reports, and his brain's translating the tumult of sound into a visual of geysering voices, pubescent energy spouting from most of the desks. At the quiet desks, a couple heads have fallen asleep on pillows of arms, Fertig and Whyte have no doubt smoked up on the way to school and slouch into their merry jane stone, his four native girls whisper softly in the back of the room, and a few others are withdrawn into early adolescent misery or, amazingly, studiousness or even a love of learning.

Most mornings, Tony clears his head in the doorway-- whether from marking and class prep or sipping a single malt in front of a ball game or late night movie-- and realizes that he likes every kid in that room, or nearly all of them except for the one or two who'd hung themselves the day before with the rope he'd given them. And he would like them too again by the end of period, if they smartened half-way up.

At first, his students thought it was weird, the way he stood in the doorway, leaned on the doorframe, and slowly panned the room. Now, they're used to it. The kids x-ray all the new teachers for their rituals and eccentricities, and anything goes as long as it's harmless to their vulnera-

ble egos and social well-being. They've decided that Mr. Brancato is good-natured enough, that the hint of orneriness or resentment at the corners of his mouth and the occasional sarcasm in his voice have nothing to do with them.

With their finely-tuned antennae, they can detect some uncertainty about whether Tony really wants to cross the threshold and do this, face thirty-five kids whose interest in history is mostly confined to who wore what to the party, who lost a tooth in a hockey fight, and who felt up or put down whom. But they can also sense his own love of history, and they respect that. Too many teachers don't love their subject, they love the job, the salary, the status and power. Mr. Brancato doesn't seem to give a shit about that, Fertig and Whyte have told him, the status and power, that is. And they can sense how much he wants to want to be in that classroom, how he tries to leave whatever bugs him behind in the hallway and enter the fray a laid-back, caring kind of guy. Dedicated, that's the word he would like to hear-- think-- about himself. Not to the job, not just to the subject, certainly not to that dry-walled abstraction 'education,' but to the students.

He helps himself cross the threshold by thinking about certain students. Not only the lovers-of-learning, like Nora Broadmore who's immersed herself in Medieval and Renaissance Europe as if she's been called to the historians' priesthood. But also Duncan, smart-ass hockey thug and grade ten repeater, whose brain came alive writing a report on the '72 series with the Russians and Paul Henderson's goal. Or the native girls who did a group report on their tribal history. Or Grace Dombkiewicz, who was roused from her stupor when Tony told the class he'd seen Joni Mitchell live in concert. Most of the class yawned or groaned. But Grace came up after class and asked to do her first report on Mitchell. Grace even wrote Joni a letter full of questions, and received a helpful reply from Mitchell's agent, and a photo of Joni personally autographed to Grace.

"I hear you're getting your Canadian history students to write reports on hockey players and rock stars," the principal asked Tony in the staff room, his tone part curious, part waiting for a reason to disapprove.

"No. They're researching famous Canadians and their nation-building achievements, some of which happened after the age of fur and canoe. Why, is hockey not a worthwhile achievement?"

Tony knows you're not supposed to sound sarcastic to your principal during your first year, when you're on probation. The part of him which is disappointed with himself for winding up a junior high teacher in Grasmere is behind that sarcasm. A part which wouldn't mind being let go