



## In Search of Cool

Jeff Chapman

### *Middle Cool*

Mikey forced his fingers back onto the home keys and dutifully banged away at the drills. a. k. d. l. s. j. a. k. a. s. He realized, joyfully, that he had almost spelled a cuss word. He wished he could tell Laura, but she was in the opposite corner of the room. His attention span for home key drills had expired twenty minutes ago, but he slaved away, filling his paper with unreadable words built into unreadable phrases.

He knew without looking that Laura's paper would be unpolluted by such illiteracy. Her paper was lucky to find itself in the typewriter and held no hope of ever being typed upon. This surprised no one, not even Ms. Kingston. At first she had worn out her days trying to reform Laura, but she started to believe that the daydreamer in the last row had a mind of such power that it should be unfettered by rote exercise. She imagined the day when brilliant Laura would end disease and hatred and rest the credit on her seventh grade Keyboarding I teacher who allowed her mind room to roam. The other kids would not immediately appreciate the iron fist of the typing teacher, but when they were out in the world, wpm might put food on their tables.

Mikey stopped momentarily to crack his knuckles and stretch his neck. He looked to his table partner, Ronald Morris, in disgust. *An uglier kid was never born.* He found himself wondering, though not for the first time, what would happen if he just hauled off and punched Mr. Ronald Morris in the head and then calmly went ontyping: a. k. d. l. s. j. a. k. a. s. If he didn't get beaten up, he would probably at least get suspended. Getting to stay home was a tempting punishment, but the greater purpose would be the sheer coolness of such rebellion.

Then a new thought occurred to him. He played around with it a little. It consisted of standing up with a dramatic air so that all eyes would turn on him. Then he would pick up the cruel master of a typewriter and heave it out the window. He smiled and continued the pounding, but the thought wouldn't leave as quickly as the punch-Ronald-and-type idea had. He stopped typing and stared out the window, entertaining the plan with no actual intention of carrying it out.

Swiftly, the voice of Ms. Kingston shot through the air: "Michael, I suggest you continue with the drills if you expect to learn to type. This may mean the difference between having a job and not."

Reason collapsed and Mikey stood on his feet. Never one for "dramatic airs," all eyes did not turn on him. Even Ms. Kingston had turned away. But there was no going back now. He hefted the typewriter, which turned out to be heavier than previously expected and made his way to the window. At the first step, the machine slipped. Mikey performed some impressive evasive action and caught it on one knee. He pressed on, his awkwardness not sufficiently offset by his determination. On the third step, the cord stretched taut and tugged just enough to land Mikey and the typewriter in a less than dramatic heap on the floor.

Laura missed the entire scene. Ms. Kingston imagined that she was too busy accepting her third Nobel prize, but she was really trying to write Def Leppard on her shoe and couldn't remember how to spell it.

### *High Cool*

Laura was in search of a transcendental experience. She imagined an experience in which the earth around her and all she knew would fade away and she would stand naked in open air, breathing pure truth. Her dad was teaching a course in transcendentalism at the university. He and her mother often discussed such weighty matters over dinner. She took refined bites of food while her mind devoured every morsel of thought simmering in the air over the table. She got to the point where she thought she would die if she had to go into her senior year of high school not having had a transcendental experience.

That's how she found herself naked in a tree, holding her arms out, letting the wind caress her and waiting for the flight of her mind. It didn't come. After an hour, she was still just naked and cold and not necessarily deep enough in the forest.

Mikey was in his bedroom, staring at a can of beer. He had asked his dad what it was like to be drunk. His dad tossed him a beer as an answer. Then he'd left for work in his greasy coveralls

and Mikey was alone with his Budweiser.

He felt like a wimp, but he went outside and poured the beer under the trailer, where the dogs peed. Then he crushed the can and put it prominently on his trash bucket, where his dad would notice it.

### *Undergraduate Cool*

Laura was a Poli-Sci major and lost her student government election soundly. She was an active member of the Literary Club and involved in every activity at her sorority. Mikey was Undecided, having just transferred from community college. He attended Literary Club meetings because Laura did and shared a dumpy apartment with Ronald Morris.

The president of the literary club was Greg Gilbert, a senior English major and a first-class jerk. Everyone became aware of this fact when Laura said, "Greg, you are a first-class jerk." It was not without provocation. Greg had made fun of a poem written by a freshman girl with the name of Muffin. Greg, being an English major, believed strongly that anyone with the name of Muffin should not write poetry.

A Philosophy major with long stringy hair and the name of Dirk added, "Yeah, and besides, Tabasco should be eaten, not worn, preppie-boy." This was a reference to the Tabasco Sauce necktie that was tied around Greg's neck.

Dirk, Laura, Muffin, and Mikey formed a new literary club. They called it The Tabasco: Eat It, Don't Wear It Union of Disillusioned Former Members of the School-Sanctioned Literary Club. Members met in the quad and ate chili-pepper sauce while reading protest poetry. They dressed up a mannequin in a tweed sport coat with elbow patches. Muffin, in her first of many brilliant flashes of insight, named him Professor Dreary Bleak, the faculty advisor to The Tabasco Union. Having no arms or legs did not affect the performance of his duties. It was a little grotesque carrying a torso and attached head around campus, but Dirk was never one to avoid disdain.

A few others joined the club and Laura and Mikey realized that they were part of something Truly Cool. They read

underground poetry that contained plenty of well-used obscenities and social protest. Soon the club had expanded to include fifteen or twenty regulars and the occasional visit from a free-thinking Philosophy or Literature professor. Before a poem could be read, the member had to ask permission of Professor Dreary Bleak, who granted anyone permission to read providing they were willing to do so while dripping Tabasco onto their tongue. They made the campus newspaper and several local newspapers. The evening news came out and taped Dirk reading something tame enough for T.V. while Muffin held the Tabasco bottle over his tongue.

After a few more weeks of Sheer Coolness, Dirk stopped attending. The most influential of the founding members had become disillusioned with the sudden popularity of disillusionment. Without Dirk, the meetings lacked the undeniable air of cool. Mikey and Laura realized something had to be done to save the Union.

They kidnaped Professor Bleak and strung him up over the main entrance to campus. Despite a brief argument over the proper way to tie a hangman's noose, they succeeded in hanging him dramatically over the road where most of the faculty and many of the students would be entering come morning. Then they had to get him down again because they forgot to pour Tabasco sauce around his neck and down the dismembered torso. After raising him again, they broke bottles of Tabasco sauce on the ground underneath him, so that it would have to be cleaned up before traffic could flow onto campus.

Dirk was an instant celebrity. The student-body president called him "a threat to civil behavior on our fair campus." "Save Dirk" T-shirts and web sites sprung up all over. The Tabasco Union, again with their beloved leader, swelled to almost a hundred members. Professors and students all over campus argued over the exact meaning of "The Murder of Dreary Bleak." A few young professors volunteered to replace Bleak as the faculty advisor. Dirk refused to comment on the murder and nothing was ever proven. Copycat vandalism sprung up around campus. Dirk led his herd of social protesters into a greater era of civil rebellion.

Mikey and Laura hung on faithfully for a few weeks, but

soon tired of the homage payed to Dirk for their own genius. They tried to claim responsibility for the murder, but no one wanted to listen. They dejectedly avoided the Union meetings and were drummed out of the Union Leadership Council. Laura denounced her membership and repented publicly. The strong anti- Tabasco faction, led by Greg Gilbert, voted her into student government. Mikey spent more time getting drunk and finally accomplished his goal of punching Ronald Morris in the face.

### *Graduate Cool*

The Tabasco Union died a slow, painful death, but “The Murder of Professor Dreary Bleak” remained a legend after the main characters had graduated and entered graduate school. Dirk, Laura, and Mikey all remained as graduate students, but the new freshmen and sophomores spreading rumors about the Glory Days of the Tabasco Union didn’t recognize them or defer the sidewalk to the people they revered.

Dirk, in a last ditch effort to salvage his Cool, publicized his planned suicide over the Internet. He shot himself on the steps of Social Science, his blood staining the ancient brick. He became an instant folk hero and college students from around the country made pilgrimage to the site of his death. There was unsuccessful lobbying in the state legislature for a Dirk Day to observe his passing.

Laura, interviewed on national television as a former girlfriend of the deceased, again claimed responsibility for the death of Professor Bleak, but she was widely denounced as an attention-hungry lunatic. It came back to haunt her when she tried to run for public office. She gave up electioneering and decided to start a media watchdog society.

Mikey stuck a gun in his mouth out of curiosity, wondering if suicide was the Cool Experience he had longed for. He tasted the warm steel in his mouth, but didn’t taste the sense of freedom from society’s wrongs that he had expected. It seemed Cool had once again escaped his grasp. Even the dramatic phrase, “He tasted the *cold* steel,” escaped him because the gun had been in his pocket too long. He didn’t go through with it and spent the next few

years trying to get Laura to marry him.

Muffin married Ronald Morris and they starred in a successful syndicated daytime talk show. Greg Gilbert continued to be a first-class jerk. Ms. Kingston retired and started losing her mind the night she saw her star student be dismissed as a publicity junkie. Gordon Carruthers, not previously mentioned and certainly not cool, went on to become successful in business and family. He later contributed his quiet success to avoiding the Liberal Arts majors that terrorized his college campus.

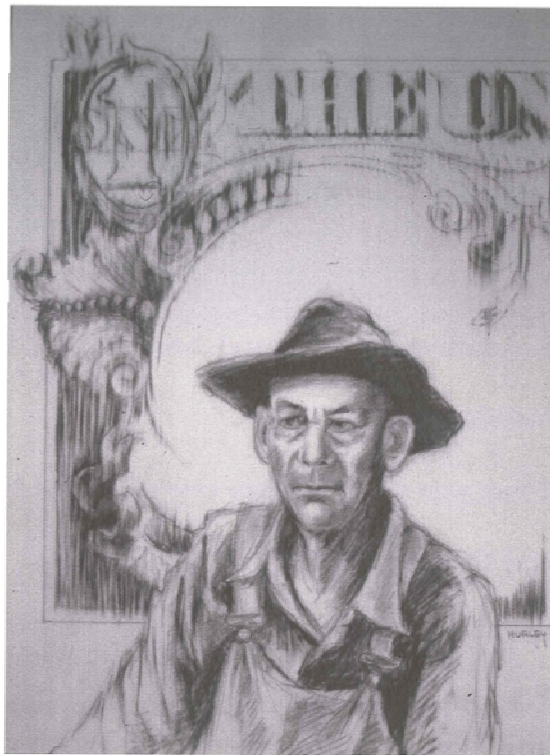


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