

Alvin's Swing

The teacher Alvin would later try to ruin was a fat, balding man with a reedy voice and a single lazy eye. Mr. Rowles taught history, and the only good thing that Alvin could say about him was that he had a remarkable ability to make the subject not only interesting, but relatable as well. As he lectured about Bismarck and the *Kulturkampf*, he spoke with such emotion and passion that all of his students, most of whom preferred science and math and other right-hemisphere subjects, found themselves participating and enjoying. Rowles would often dress up as historical figures pertaining to the material, and the entire class would, for a little while, *believe* that their teacher had become Charles Darwin or Herbert Asquith or Marx. Alvin supposed that, had it not been for *It's Academic*, he could have been one of many who loved Mr. Rowles.

Alvin Felton had joined his high school *It's Academic* team in his senior year. Until recently, he'd been a poor student who had neither the interest nor the drive to get grades that he had previously thought unimportant. His mother and father had driven him to work harder, to study, to *try*, but nothing worked until 12th grade when, for almost no reason, Alvin began to work harder, to study harder, to *try* harder. And with the new effort came positive results. The grades soon turned into A's, people began to respect him more, and the teachers, including Mr. Rowles, would often single him out and congratulate him on test scores in front of everyone, something Alvin never objected to.

And as a kind of final measure of a new look on school and work, Alvin joined the team. Olivia Burnett had been the first to tell him about it. She was in Modern European History with him, and as the class began to pack up for the day, Olivia approached Alvin and told him about the club.

"It's basically like *Jeopardy!*" she said. "You'd be really good at it. We meet here every Monday after school. Why not come by?"

Alvin immediately agreed to. He liked Olivia. He liked the shape of her face, how she was almost as smart as he was, and, perhaps most importantly, her lack of pretention. He had never seen her answer a question incorrectly, and yet she never boasted or gave off the impression that she thought herself superior to others. Alvin hated pretentious people. To him, there was nothing worse than someone who didn't know how unimportant they really were. But Olivia was smart and pretty, and that worked for him just fine.

That day, he went to his parents and told them of his plan to join the team. They approved completely, and both gave him incredible amounts of attention that week. Almost every time he saw one of them, they'd say praise his commitment, his newfound confidence, his ability. Alvin would smile and thank them.

The following Monday, he entered Mr. Rowles's classroom after school and found a team of seven boys and Olivia. His confidence broke through his skull. None of the other boys looked like much. They were quintessential losers, all wearing thick glasses and pimples that had grown from dirty, unwashed faces. He, however, was clean and impressive.

"Happy to see you here, Alvin," Mr. Rowles said. He pulled up his chair and passed out the buzzers, one by one. "Olivia, would you tell him how it works?"

Olivia proceeded to explain to Alvin how the rules worked, how the questions were to be asked and answered, how this and that was going to play out, but Alvin wasn't really listening. He was too busy staring at her breasts to notice what was coming out of her mouth. Both breasts were tiny, but that wasn't a problem. That probably meant that no boy had ever really approached her to try for a date. As a result, she was most likely self-conscious and shy, an easy target.

"You're smiling," she said, "so I guess you understand."

"Yep, that's right," he said. He understood everything he needed to.

The next hour and a half went well. The questions came and Alvin's answers always got laughs. Mr. Rowles was seated at his desk, reading from an open quiz booklet and constantly coughing and wheezing into his arm. His questions made little sense to Alvin, but he found his place quickly. He was, in his mind, the destined joker of the group. He'd get a correct answer every now and again, but his real purpose was to ease the serious mood of these one-track minded intellectuals.

Mr. Rowles would drone on with, "This African American, the first to become a Supreme Court Justice, was—"

And Alvin would buzz immediately, show off a grin, and answer with a resounding, "Morgan Freeman."

His teammates always laughed, and laughed hard. But Alvin was only interested in Olivia's reaction. He never got one. Each time he buzzed in and gave his answer, and each time the others brayed and slapped their desks, he would turn to see Olivia's stony face that refused to be read. It always looked cold and neutral.

This went on for about two months, and Alvin found himself getting angrier each time he showed up to practice and failed to get a reaction from Olivia. As a result, his jokes become more and more frequent. Now, just about every time Mr. Rowles asked a question, Alvin would buzz in, relishing the sound the beeper made and gazing at the flickering red light that shone each time he pressed down on the button.

"This body of water, located in Utah, is so-named because of its enormous deposits of this chemical sub—"

A beep followed with, "Crystal meth!"

Round of dispersed laughter.

“The Battle of Austerlitz was a major victory scored by Napoleon’s troops in 1805, where they successfully routed the armies of Alexander I and Francis II, leading to the end of this empire, which lasted for almost a thousand—”

A ding followed by, “Purple!”

No laughter.

Alvin again shifted his eyes to Olivia, and again he was disappointed. She wasn’t even looking at him.

Three weeks later, after another Monday practice, Mr. Rowles cut Alvin from the team. He did it on a particularly cold March afternoon, as icy rain began to splash and die against his closed window. The practice had ended, and as everyone began to leave, Rowles asked Alvin if he would stay behind and help him put away the buzzers.

As he placed the buzzers back into their boxes, Alvin thought only of how he had again failed to see some emotion in Olivia. He supposed he had once been interested in going out with her, perhaps to take her to someplace quiet where he could talk to her. He believed thoroughly that she would be able to not only understand him, but engage him in advanced conversation. He wanted that. He thought about this so heavily that when Rowles, who had been talking the entire time, asked Alvin a question, he flustered and blurted out a weak, “Huh?”

“That’s the problem, Alvin,” Mr. Rowles said, his jowls hanging down to his Adam’s apple. “You don’t listen.”

And now Alvin saw for the first time a different Mr. Rowles. His eyes were sharper, darker, and more severe. His hands were bunched into meaty fists, and he no longer looked overweight. Now he looked wound up and tight, like a spinner ready to drive away if given the chance. He did not resemble someone ready to jump into a Marx costume.

"What do you mean?" Alvin asked.

"You're playing around, and it angers me very badly. I take this club very seriously. I want people to have fun, but when you're antagonizing everyone with your *bullshit*, something's got to change, bud."

Alvin's mouth hung open for a moment, and he lost his ability to even murmur. Had he never noticed this before? Had he failed to realize that, as he made all the others (minus Olivia) laugh at his wit, Mr. Rowles sat in his desk, waiting for it to end so that the practice could continue? No. He hadn't. But he realized now that it was all over for him here.

"Truth be told," Mr. Rowles said, "I don't like your swing."

Alvin left and never went to another practice.

He soon realized that having Mr. Rowles as an enemy made class almost unbearable. He would almost never be called on to answer a question, his tests and homework would have less positive comments on them, and overall, he was totally ignored. But the worst part was that Olivia was constantly called on, was consistently praised *in class*, and paraded around by Mr. Rowles as if she were a rare specimen. And why? Because she answered all the questions? Because she kissed his fat rear? Because she had no personality and made no attempt to produce what could be called humor?

It eventually all made sense to Alvin. Mr. Rowles had used his discretion. He hadn't liked Alvin's "swing." There was something so excellent in how Rowles had described the issue. There were no politics involved, no emotion, no sentiments. It was as simple and crisp as any situation could ever hope to be. He just did not like Alvin, did not like his demeanor, did not appreciate his tone, did not like the swing. And so he had acted on that and basically said, "Why don't you just get out?"

And once he came to that conclusion, Alvin began to think about how he might embarrass Mr. Rowles in front of everyone. It would be difficult, especially seeing how the teacher had complete command over everything in Modern European History. Rowles had and would continue to clamp down on Alvin's ability to do anything.

Eventually, after the problem became the only thing Alvin ever thought about (to the detriment of his work), a solution came: he would correct Mr. Rowles's every mistake, to the point where his credibility with the students was dead. Then he could move on from this.

Alvin began to study the material intensely. He focused on reading the textbook again and again until he could recite whole sentences without reading the source. They were studying WWII-era politics, heavy stuff, but nothing he couldn't work with. And the idea of seeing Mr. Rowles embarrassed, his round turnip face shifting into bright red until it actually *resembled* a turnip, it all would bring Alvin such immense satisfaction that the studying became almost a drug in itself. He began to *need* to study WWII-era politics, to look at the pictures and practice the sentences in his mind. He fantasized in AP Biology not about missense mutations but about saying to Mr. Rowles, "Sorry, but that's just about as wrong as wrong could be, *bud*. That's not how it works, *pal*. I sure am not liking the ol' swing there, you fat piece of lard."

On the first day of May, Alvin got his chance. Mr. Rowles was talking about the circumstances behind the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, going into great detail on how the Japanese by December 7th had almost no choice *but* to send the planes in.

"As you know from you're reading, Japan felt itself constricted by the oil embargo placed on it by the United States. At that point, the Japanese were forced to rely on their oil fields in the Philippines, but they couldn't stay on them for long. So Japan began to..."

At first, Alvin did not take advantage of the mistake. He noticed the blunder almost instantly, but was unsure of how to correct it and embarrass Mr. Rowles at the same time. He

fidged in his seat, worried that someone else would steal his chance away as he sat and stewed.

Why don't you just raise your hand? He's talking about nothing. He's already made his mistake. Just raise your hand and expose him.

He wanted to badly. He knew he must. But for whatever reason, Alvin could only sit and tremble as he watched Mr. Rowles continue with the lesson. By the time he gained control of himself, Alvin realized they had moved on to America's declaration of war. If he made his comment now, it would be seen as random, late, and perhaps a little immature. Much too late. Much too late.

Class ended as usual and everyone left in a group. Alvin got out of his seat and, waiting for everyone to leave the class, approached Mr. Rowles alone.

"Excuse me, Mr. Rowles," he said.

"Yeah," the teacher replied, not looking up from his computer.

"The Japanese were relying on their oil from French Indochina, not the Philippines. The Japanese didn't conquer the Philippines until after the attack on Pearl Harbor."

Now Mr. Rowles looked up. His faced was less tense, but his eyes remained sharp and focused on Alvin.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll remember that."

Then Alvin left the room.