

From

Saving Tyler Hake

By Meredith Sue Willis

Tyler Hake didn't go to college and become a lawyer or a doctor or an entrepreneur. He went to the army, as many of our young people do. He came back with training as a machinist, got a job at McKinney Heavy Equipment, and married a MacDowell girl. They have twin boys and a baby girl and live just down the road from Sunshine. Given how things looked for Tyler at one point, this is a happy ending.

Some of us give part of the credit to Geneva Burden.

Every school year, when I look out at the tenth graders, I see faces from families I've known all my life: MacDowells and Crabtrees, Crookshanks, and Ransoms. Smiths, of course, like my husband. This county is named after his family. I've lived here all my life too, but my parents moved here for teaching jobs after my dad got back from Vietnam. Sometimes, looking at the kids, some particular student will make me feel a little tremor in time, and it will be twenty years ago, and I'm not the teacher but one of the students, and the kids around me are Peggy and Sally and Geneva and Tyler's father Mason.

This year, it was Tyler who threw me back in time. He's darker than the Hakes, more like the Ransoms, but he's built like his father, slight and wiry with a lot of contained energy. Mason Hake left Smith County to fight in the Gulf War, and when he came back he was full of trouble. Personally, I think it's too easy to blame everything on PTSD. I don't mean it doesn't exist, just that there are a lot of other reasons, usually combined together, for a man to do what Mason did. He drank and was usually out of work as there are limited jobs for people who don't want to leave Smith County. What I'm saying is that Mason had been messed up for a long time.....

The Hake kids came back to school on Monday. Tyler was in my first period class, so he was on my mind, but so were a lot of things, like my daughter's college essays. I was considering giving the kids a writing assignment using a college essay format to get them thinking about the next couple of years of school work, when Helvetia Purdy burst into my classroom. She's a big girl who thinks of herself as a representative of her class. She doesn't run for office, but she likes to run everything else. She placed her body in the door way, and her friends peered in around her.

"Mrs. Smith!" she announced. "Here comes Tyler!"

My response to drama queens is always to lower my volume, which in Helvetia's case sometimes backfires and encourages her to ramp it up. I said, "Come in, Helvetia. Take your seat."

She stayed where she was. "Mrs. Smith, you don't understand. Tyler is bathed in blood!"

The faces of her entourage squeezed in around her, nodding. I started walking to the door. I could hear the rest of the class coming.

I said, "Is he hurt?"

"It's a bloody shirt," she said, "but it's not Tyler's blood."

“So he isn’t hurt?”

Helvetia leaned forward. “They say it’s the shirt his father shot himself in. Blood– and bullet holes!”

The tenth graders pushed in, filled the space with their big bodies. They were all trying to tell me at once.

I said, “Take your seats. Sit down!” They began to drag toward their seats, and I turned to Tyler’s football and basketball friends. “Bobby Frank, where is he?”

Bobby Frank Manley is Peggy’s son, tall and wide shouldered like Peggy. “He’s coming, Mrs. Smith. Mr. Fox is bringing him.”

Everyone moved away from the door to make room for Chauncy Fox, the Assistant Principal, who had a firm hand on Tyler’s shoulder. Tyler’s eyes were rolled up at the ceiling lights, and he was wearing a wide flat smile or maybe more like a weirdly fixed grin..

Chauncy stopped Tyler’s forward motion and beckoned me with his free hand. Now the kids were totally quiet. I said, “I want every behind in your assigned seat and I want it now. There’s a to-do on the board.”

They sat down, but no one looked at the board. I stepped out in the hall with Chauncy and Tyler.

“Mrs. Smith,” said Chauncy, “I understand Tyler is with you this period.”

“Yes he is, Mr. Fox” I said. “English Ten. Tyler, I’m sorry for your loss. How are you doing?”

Tyler’s weird stretch didn’t fade, and he didn’t say anything. I made myself look at the shirt. It was a faded plaid flannel, and the front of it, on both sides of the buttons, had brown stains spread like continents. And holes, lots of holes. All I could think was, how did Mason manage to shoot himself in the chest that many times? And then thought, Oh, it was a shotgun.

Chauncy said, “I just wanted you to know Tyler isn’t absent, but I’m taking him to the nurse and see about settling him down. He can come back later if it all checks out.”

What checks out? I thought. I realized that Chauncy was himself shaken up, and he was giving me a chance to agree or object.

I said, “Well, Tyler, you certainly can’t wear that shirt to class. Do you have a tee shirt underneath? He could just take it off, Mr. Fox, and let you hold it till after school.”

Our kids– especially the boys– don’t go around smiling all the time. Tyler’s smile was more unsettling than the blood.

Bobby Frank had gotten up from his seat. He’s good at talking to adults, having a teacher for a mother. He said, “Excuse me, Mrs. Smith, Mr. Fox. He can borrow my hoodie.”

Chauncy frowned. My instinct was that the best thing for Tyler was to get everything normal as fast as possible. He had made the effort to show up at school, so at least part of him wanted normal too. If you make it look normal on the surface, there’s a chance that what’s underneath will fall into place.

I said, “Thank you, Bobby Frank. That would work. Mr. Fox, do you think we could let Tyler stay in class? We have a quiz on the short story we’ve been reading, and I don’t want Tyler to get behind.”

The kids who could hear us muttered: they weren’t expecting a quiz and of course I hadn’t planned one.

Chauncy gave Tyler's shoulder a little shake. "You hear that Ty? Mrs. Smith wants to give you a chance here. Let's just take that thing off."

Tyler nodded and said, "I'd rather not," he said. That's not the way Tyler talks. It tickled my brain: almost something from literature that I should recognize.

Bobby Frank was way ahead of us teachers here, because we had to deal with caring about Tyler and at the same making sure school discipline wasn't violated. Bobby Frank only had to think about Tyler. "Hey Ty," he said. "Just for the day, right? You'll give it back, won't you, Mr. Fox?"

Before Chauncy could commit himself, I said, "Or, I have another idea, Tyler. I've got a plastic sack on the desk. We could put the shirt in there, and keep it in the office until the school day is over, and then you can have it back."

Helvetia Purdy and a couple of others had started creeping back towards the door behind Bobby Frank. She said, "Tyler you *have* to hide it. You know some of the girls will just throw up their breakfast if they have to look at that thing in class."

Tyler kind of blinked around at everyone and crossed his arms over his chest like he was getting ready to hang on.

"Okay, Ty," said Chauncy. "If you're not going to cooperate, you'll have to go to see Mr. Phelps."

This would be bad. Principals in general, and our Mr. Phelps in particular, like to avoid trouble when they can. Phelps is so lazy that when he actually has to take action, he goes completely disciplinary, and I had this vision of Tyler suspended for what I was pretty sure was really just some kind of twisted grieving for his father. I had a premonition, too, a mental flash forward, an image of Tyler suspended and getting farther behind and dropping out— he was already a year older than the others— and getting in all the same kind of trouble his dad had, and ending up like his dad, with his own shirt bloody, dead on the ground.

I said, "I have one more idea, Mr. Fox. How about if Tyler puts the shirt in my tote, and he can keep it with him today, but he has to promise not to show it off."

"Eww," said Helvetia.

"Helvetia, go back to your seat. What do you think, Mr. Fox? Could we let him do that?"

Tyler had finally focused his eyes. He was listening.

"Well," said Chauncy. "The problem is. We have to find out about that shirt. Where he got it from."

"I found it," said Tyler.

"Right," said Chauncy. "That's what you said. I have to make a few phone call about that. But listen here, Tyler, Mrs. Smith is trying to give you a chance." Chauncy didn't want to disturb Mr. Phelps either.

I said, "Bobby Frank go up to my desk and get my Wild Wonderful West Virginia tote."

"Let me let me" called out about ten other voices, and I heard them scrambling, but I kept my eyes on Tyler. There were running feet, and then Bobby Frank snatching away the tote and handing it to me. There was even a plastic grocery sack inside from one of my lunches last week.

"Okay Tyler?" I said.

Gently, Bobby Frank helped him off with the shirt. Tyler closed his eyes while it was happening, and kept his fist in the left cuff, not quite letting go of it till Bobby Frank shoved the

shirt and fist both in the plastic bag and then in the tote. There Tyler was in a little gray tee shirt with his wiry arms, one hand shoved in the tote like it was a huge bandage, the other arm clutching it to his chest.

Chauncy released him, and Bobby Frank led him into class. Chauncy made a chin motion to me, and I went out, closed the door. Let the kids get Tyler settled.

“The thing is,” he said, “I don’t mind it being in there if you don’t mind, but we don’t know how he got it. What if he stole it?”

“He just said he found it.”

“Yes, but found it where?”

“Was it missing?”

“Damned if I know, Robin Sue. I never heard a thing about a shirt. He just showed up like this and got all the kids in an uproar.”

“Did you call his mother?”

“Dorea Hake.” Chauncy made a disgusted sound. “They say she’s been drinking ever since it happened. I’m going to call the Sheriff’s office first and find out if it’s missing. If it’s not missing— well, then we can treat it like school business.”

“That’s a good idea.” I was mostly just happy to have Tyler safe inside my room where I could take care of him, for an hour anyhow. “Let me know what you find out. And Chauncy, can you let the other teachers on his schedule know about it?”

He nodded, but he was still thinking. “Even if he didn’t steal it, he may have been tampering with evidence. Or withholding evidence.”

“Evidence of what, Chauncy? Mason shot himself to death. Nobody’s claiming anything else.”

Chauncy brightened up. “If he didn’t steal it, I can hold off on reporting it to Phelps. Maybe I’ll make a written report he won’t see for a few days.” He gave a little nod to himself. “Okay, I’ll tell the other teachers.”

“I’m pretty sure he goes to Peggy next,” I said.

It wasn’t an easy period. I gave them an essay question quiz on the reading, and let it be open book because most of them hadn’t read it. All the kids kept watching Tyler with his bare arms and his hand finally out of the tote, but holding it on his lap keeping his thighs closed like an old lady in a bus station. He stared at the ceiling, still stretching his lips.

Near the end of the period Chauncy came by to tell me the Sheriff’s office didn’t know anything about a shirt. Mason wasn’t wearing the flannel shirt when they found him. Chauncy wondered if maybe Tyler had been the one to find the body and took it off him.

“That sounds like something he’d do,” I said. “But I don’t think it’s illegal.”

Chauncy shrugged. “Well that part isn’t school business, anyhow. Let’s just go one day at a time on this.”

I sat watching the kids write, or not write. Tyler, of course, didn’t even put his name on the quiz. I asked him to stay after class, and his friends waited at the door. He stood in front of me, and I wanted to say Please Tyler wipe that horrific thing off your lips, but I said, very politely, “We have to ask you not to bring the shirt to school tomorrow, Tyler.”

Tyler nodded, but it was a nod like he either heard and agreed or heard and didn’t agree. I tried to make it a request, not an order. I said, “You know, you could put it in a safe

place at home, under your bed or something.”

He said, “She’d find it and throw it away.”

I said, “Well, maybe you can have a neighbor keep it? You don’t even have to say what it is, just someone you trust? And then, tomorrow, you could wear something else of your father’s, if you wanted to. Something clean.”

Tyler said, “Maybe Mrs. Burden.”

For a second I didn’t know who he meant, and then understood. He was talking about Geneva.