

A CHARACTER SKETCH

John McCrum

Hey, Fred. What'll you have? Oh. I dunno. The Blue Plate isn't bad today. Sound like a winner? Okay—HEY, RUDY! A BLUE PLATE WITH HASH BROWNS AND A COFFEE! Huh? Oh, that picture up there? That's a coupla my ol' high school buddies, Ziggy and J.B. They were the best of friends, those two. You'd always see 'em clowning around in the halls, punching on each other or makin' faces, y'know? Sorta like Abbott and Costello or Laurel and Hardy, except Ziggy was short and puny, an' J.B. was tall and muscular. Ol' J.B., he flexed more muscles gettin' a drink of water than I would in a tug o' war! What an ox!

Yeah, I guess when they say that opposites attract they musta had Ziggy and J.B. in mind. Ziggy talked fast, and was always usin' his hands to show what he was talkin' about. Just to look at him, you'd think he was one of them deaf-mutes.

It wasn't that way with J.B., though—he was a real low-key guy. J.B. did everything smooth, y'know? When he ran, it was like watching a thoroughbred run the quarter. You've heard of natural athletes, haven't ya? Well, this guy was the dictionary definition. Effortless coordination. That's why it was so funny to see those guys stroll down the halls together. Ziggy would flap up and down like a banty rooster, while J.B. would sorta ease his way through the crowd. Guys in a group would let J.B. pass like some foreign ambassador. Ziggy just bounced off everybody like a human pinball.

Yeah, they were a sight, them two. I can see 'em now. J.B. in his short blond hair and big red letter jacket, followed by Ziggy with his hair flying everywhere at once, dressed in a shabby ol' Navy pea jacket that the Salvation Army probably gave away.

Ziggy was a real wisacre. He could crack anybody up. *Anybody*. Like when he stuck those rubber tubes down Mr. Bundy's pants pockets in chem lab and turned the water on. Right during a lecture. It gushed down his leg and Ziggy yelled, "Hey, look! Bundy's had an accident in his pants!" What a card, that Ziggy! Bundy was screamin', "MISSter Zickgraf, I believe MISSter Weeks"—that's our principal, Ducky Weeks—"would like to see you RIGHT NOW!"

So ol' Ziggy, he up an' says, "Well, I'm afraid Mr. Weeks will have to make an appointment like everyone else." The whole class was really goin' bananas by now, expecially J.B. Ziggy could always get J.B. goin'.

Anyhow, Bundy is steamin'. "MR. ZICKGRAAAF!" he yells, shakin' his head like an epileptic. But Ziggy is ready. "All right, Mr. Bundy. Don't get excited. I don't want you to have another accident!" *Everybody* is just dyin' laughin', and Ziggy waltzes out like Groucho Marx to see the principal. Sure, it was kinda dumb to do, I guess, but without Ziggy, I'da never made it through chemistry.

Did he ever get in trouble? You mean for his wisin' off? Well I hope to shout, he did. You don't pull all the damn stuff he did an' get off scot free everytime. Nosirree. I think Ducky—our principal—laid into him a few times, even though Ziggy would blink those innocent blue eyes O' his an' say, "Yes, Mr. Weeks. No, Mr. Weeks. It was all a misunderstanding, Mr. Weeks."

Then there was the time that Ziggy an' J.B. got everybody in drafting class to move their mouth without talkin'. Mr. Fry turned up his hearing aid full blast an' then Ziggy went up an' yelled in his ear, "MR FRY, CAN I SHARPEN MY PENCIL?" Well, Ziggy really got his hide tanned for that! He got away with most everything else, though, 'cause J.B. always backed him up. You'd think a guy like Ziggy would get punched out all the time, but not with J.B. around. J.B. had fists the size of small hams, and made it clear that he would use them on anybody that gave ol' Zig a rough time. Boy, they were just an inseparable team.

Huh? No, you won't see 'em around now. They both left town after they graduated. J.B. got a baseball scholarship to some small college out in California. They say he coulda gone pro if his arm hadn't gone bad. Damn shame, y'know it? J.B. could really throw heat. I think he sells insurance out there now.

Ziggy? Well, Ziggy, he ran off with Sally Tate. Y'know Sally? Reverend Tate's daughter. Nobody's heard from 'em since. They say he probably went out to California to live with J.B., but—who knows? All I know is, we sure as hell miss him. Well, the fellas *used* to, anyhow. We'd be down to the Elks, drinkin' a few beers, y'know, and somebody'd say, "Remember when ol' Ziggy locked the janitor in

the broom closet?" or "That sounds like somethin' Ziggy would do." Nobody remembers him much now, though. Seems like the old gang's thinnin' out. Mostly younger fellas now, y'know? It's kinda sad. They sure were a crazy pair.

Can I get you another cup of coffee?

HOUSEWIFE'S MORNING SONG

Julie Heller

There are thousands of cluttered
 breakfast tables every morning,
 But my heart rises like the steam
 from coffee cups at only one:
 Occupied by this man so un-rare
 it cools my coffee to think of it.
 But this man belongs
 to the corner of this kitchen
 And these jelly jars
 as only this man can belong.

Including Death

Look at your hand.
 Your hand which is smooth and white—
 So young. What can be done?

One day, some day
 Look at your hand:
 Wrinkled and marked—so old
 Everything's been done.