Mr. Entwhistle
by Jean Little

Mr. Entwhistle was our substitute teacher. He had big shoulders and a mean mouth. He knew, before he’d laid eyes on us, that we were out to make trouble. And he knew how to handle teenagers. Step on them hard, right from the start, and you’d have no discipline problems. He’d show us who was boss the first time one of us stepped out of line.

Looking back, I can see that was how it started. But at the time, I had not gotten around to noticing him, except to see that he was a young man. That’s a nice change, I thought, and went back to attempting to show Sandra Mayhew where she’d fouled up the Math homework.

Mr. Entwhistle had started writing our names on a seating plan. He knew all the tricks. He wasn’t going to put up with desk jumpers.

“What’s your name?” he asked sharply.

I didn’t look up, let alone answer. Sandra was finally catching on. It never once crossed my mind that he was speaking to me.

“I said ‘What is your name?’” he blasted, making a real production out of it. He was closer to me. He had started down our aisle. So I glanced up. I still had not realized that I was the one he was addressing. I sat there, gazing at him,- wondering why he was all charged up. I did not tell him my name.

“All right. That does it!” he thundered. “You can go to the office.”

“Me?” I said in blank amazement.

I was bewildered. Yet he was glaring straight at me. His eyes were greenish with brown speckles. They seemed to be on the point of falling out. He was absolutely frantic.

“Yes, you. Oh yes indeed, you! Perhaps next time you’ll show respect,” he babbled, sidestepping to his desk like a giant crab and scribbling a note for me to take. I couldn’t see what he wrote but Pete Evans told me later that it was something about insubordination. I did see that his hand was shaking. I sat there, stunned. I honestly believed that, any moment now, I’d wake up.

“On your feet!” Mr. Entwhistle shrieked. Maybe it only sounded like a shriek to me. But his voice did seem to get louder every time he spoke.

I stood up slowly. Outside the open window, the sun was shining. Everything was green, beguiling. “Come,” it said to me. “Just come out and away.” I considered it.

At the selfsame instant, some other part of me shouted, as angrily as Mr. Entwhistle could have done, “Fight back, Kate. The bell hasn’t gone. You have your rights. The others will back you up. Fight!”
Then our eyes met and I was that he was afraid. He was just a person. He had made a mistake and now, too late, he knew it. He’d rage and bluster if I stood up to him. He’d have to. All the same, he was wishing he could go back and start over. I’ve felt like that.

“Yes, sir,” I said quietly, and reached out my hand for the note. Nobody moved. Nobody breathed, even. I was waiting for him to hand it to me; the rest of the kids, maybe, for me to start an argument. I often do. Mr. Entwhistle...who knows?

Then it was as though someone said, “Will the real Mr. Entwhistle please stand up?” The bombast went out of him. For one more moment, he hesitated.

“Never mind,” he blurted then. “Sit down. We’ll let it pass this time.”

He tore the same note in half, crumpled it up and threw it at the wastebasket. Even though he missed and the wad of paper landed on the floor, even though I’d won in some way, and he’d had to back down, he looked taller.

Taking my seat I felt a bit taller myself. I shoved my hands out of sight when I saw that they were trembling. Sunlight flooded the room.

“Way to go, Kate!” Sandra cheered in a too-loud whisper. I scowled at her.

“Shh,” I said.