

"Coach," he says. "All right, I'll be your coach. And you can be my player. You can play all the lovely parts of life that I'm too old for now."

Sometimes we eat together in the cafeteria. Morrie, to my delight, is even more of a slob than I am. He talks instead of chewing, laughs with his mouth open, delivers a passionate thought through a mouthful of egg salad, the little yellow pieces spewing from his teeth.

It cracks me up. The whole time I know him, I have two overwhelming desires: to hug him and to give him a napkin.

It is my freshman year. Morrie is older than most of the teachers, and I am younger than most of the students, having left high school a year early. To compensate for my youth on campus, I wear old gray sweatshirts and box in a local gym and walk around with an unlit cigarette in my mouth, even though I do not smoke. I drive a beat-up Mercury Cougar, with the windows down and the music up. I seek my identity in toughness—but it is Morrie's softness that draws me, and because he does not look at me as a kid trying to be something more than I am, I relax.

I finish that first course with him and enroll for another. He is an easy marker; he does not much care for grades. One year, they say, during the Vietnam War, Morrie gave all his male students A's to help them keep their student deferments.

I begin to call Morrie "Coach," the way I used to address my high school track coach. Morrie likes the nickname.