

AUTOPOSY OF AN IDEALIST:  
MEMOIR OF AN ENGLISH TEACHER

by  
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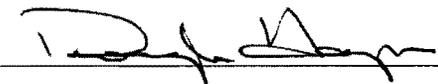
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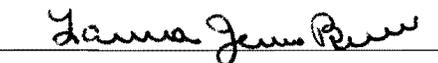
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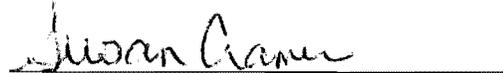
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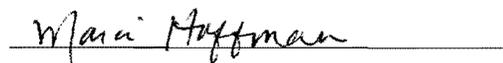
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To my husband Will Olkiewicz who has provided undying encouragement and patience throughout my five year career as a graduate student. This thesis would not be possible without such an unselfish partner who has provided me with not only emotional support but has also cheerfully taken over household tasks in order to give me more time to write, read, and work.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
PROLOGUE- MAYBE NEXT YEAR I'LL QUIT.....	16
CHAPTER 1-PREP WORK.....	20
CHAPTER 2- INSIDE THE CLASSROOM AND OUT OF MY MIND.....	44
CHAPTER 3- POWER.....	65
CHAPTER 4- THE LETTER OF UN-RECOMMENDATION.....	80
NOTES.....	98
WORKS CITED.....	102
WORKS CONSULTED.....	104

## INTRODUCTION

At the national level, education is a hot topic for politicians who promise to make changes for the better. With everyone from politicians to parents to community members weighing in, the power and voice of the teacher is an ever-retreating force in national, state, and local debates about education. Yet, no one argues the important role a teacher plays in education. My narrative nonfiction thesis, “Autopsy of an Idealist,” shines a light on issues teachers face every day and gives a voice to teachers. When I speak with community members, parents, and people in the business community about the challenges and realities of being a teacher, many are shocked. This reaction indicates a clear need for a teacher voice in this national discussion. I hope that telling my story about what it means to be a teacher will prompt people to listen the next time a teacher voices a concern.

### **Literary Journalism**

“Autopsy of an Idealist” draws on both the research and reporting methods of literary journalism, as well as on the personal experiences and memories associated with memoir. Writer Norman Sims quotes Susan Orlean in his book *Literary Journalism*, who describes literary journalism as representing “the dignity of ordinariness.” This seems a fitting description for my project as I attempt to give dignity to the common and ordinary profession of teaching. My hope, as is the goal of most literary journalists, is to allow the reader to empathize with a group of people by telling a true story.

Many writers and works have helped guide both my knowledge of this genre as well as my methods. Ted Conover’s *Newjack*, a book about correction officers at New York’s Sing Sing prison, demonstrated immersion journalism techniques I have attempted to emulate. Conover’s process of keeping a small pocket-sized notebook during his shifts as a correction officer at the prison and his practice of typing up notes immediately after his shifts are both strategies I used to

make my work as authentic as possible. I also admire Joan Didion's detached yet reflective voice in both *The White Album* and *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Didion has often commented on her "fly on the wall reporting" style, and I don't doubt that her personality exactly fits the type of non-descript person who can show up at a trial and blend seamlessly into the surroundings. Her work demonstrates there is a place for hyper-introverted observation in reporting and writing. Didion's chapter "On Keeping a Notebook" was as enjoyable to read as it was instructive and validates my own personal journals I have kept over the years because in her notebooks I saw the possible literary use of such records. Her work confirms that writers need not be abrasive to be effective or intellectually provocative. Before understanding the genre better, I had always pictured investigative journalists as people who got into the faces of others demanding the truth.

Though the works of Malcom Gladwell and Susan Cain may be less likely to be included for reading in a college English classroom, I too wanted to merge their research methods and narrative styles into my own. I found their books to be thought-provoking not only while reading them, but long after I finished. Gladwell's *Blink*, a book discussing how human beings make fast decisions, incorporated everything from how people select leaders, to whether people are more likely to choose Pepsi or Coke in a taste test. The breadth of Gladwell's sources and the depth of his research on his topic made the book not only informational but also very enjoyable. Gladwell not only discussed psychology studies, which would be expected given his topic, but he also drew on media coverage of a police shooting, political outcomes, product advertising, and even military exercises. Cain similarly did the same type of investigative research in *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. Though Cain's sources tended to be more from immersion (from going to a retreat for introverts to attending a Tony Robbins seminar) and interviews, both of these authors demonstrated to me the variety of sources which can and should be consulted in literary journalism. I provide on my Works Consulted list memoirs which I have

read to understand the genre, scholarly articles about teaching, and newspaper articles discussing current politics and policies pertinent to my subject. Though my work leans more towards memoir, it is Gladwell and Cain who demonstrate that a wide variety of sources makes for a convincing and engaging read. Collectively, these writers modeled for me research methods, voice, approach, as well as craft.

I began this project by collecting newspaper articles and lining up interviews with teachers. I got books and scholarly articles about education. Though my research process started out with literary journalism in mind, I soon found myself telling only my own story. I went into interviews with a script of questions aimed at getting responses and answers I already thought I knew. What I soon realized by talking with other teachers was that writing some kind of group portrait was not only impractical, it felt insincere. I felt ill equipped to narrate other people's stories. I feel the only honest thing I can do is to tell my story.

### **Memoir**

Memoir is a form of narrative non-fiction about a person's life experiences. Traces of this genre have almost always existed in literary history in various forms. However, memoir emerged as a specific genre around the early eighteenth century, according to Smith and Watson in their book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. During the nineteenth century, memoir gained in popularity but was also ambiguous. For example, early publications of a novel like *Jane Eyre* would often have "An Autobiography" as a subtitle which would certainly not fit the genre today.

This genre has evolved since Bronte. The readers of this genre now expect true stories from books labeled as autobiography or memoir. Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* is a prime example of this genre in recent years. Her memoir includes exact dates and times which could be independently verified. I found it interesting to note how much research she also

managed to incorporate into her memoir, perhaps an occupational hazard for a literary journalist. Didion's book discussing the year after her husband's death also incorporates medical records, etiquette and information about the mourning process, and many other enjoyable tidbits seamlessly inserted into her narrative. Though I never expected to enjoy reading Emily Post, Didion's use of Post's advice seemed to help Didion explain and navigate her mourning process.

Nevertheless, I have also learned from David Sedaris and Anne Lamott that memoir need not always discuss life-altering tragedies like the death of Didion's husband discussed in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. I enjoyed the sense of humor used in both Sedaris' *Naked* and Lamott's *Traveling Mercies*. In the beginning of the final chapter we learn that Sedaris has called a nudist colony to ask for a brochure. As the reader, I was a little confused as to where he is going with this until he tells us that he has been teasing his brother about being found naked at a job site "due to a recent polyurethane spill." He ends this section of the story with the following paragraph:

I keep at it until he slams down the phone, threatening to cross state lines and kick my ass. This brochure will be just the thing to send him over the edge. It occurred to me later that I should have had it mailed directly to his house in North Carolina. It would have been much more effective that way, but I don't want to call the colony again. They might think I'm a nut.

I think that certain personalities, especially the slightly neurotic (I include myself in this group) need to use humor in order to sound less whiny. If the reader smiles every once in a while, they are probably more likely to attempt to relate to the narrator. At least I find this true of myself as a reader. I have nothing in common with Sedaris, but his sense of humor kept me engaged to hear his story.

Lamott's *Traveling Mercies* is also not a book I would usually pick up since my own early days were filled with condescending religious people who I have since abandoned. However, *Traveling Mercies* was an enjoyable read due to Lamott's frank honesty and sense of humor. In her chapter titled "Forgiveness," I had pretty low expectations and was ready for a holier-than-thou attitude. Instead, Lamott talks about a fellow single mom who helps out in her son's first grade classroom:

She showed up two days later all bundled up in a down jacket, because it was cold and she was one of the parents who was driving the kids on their first field trip. Now, this was not a crime against nature or me in and of itself. The crime was that below the down jacket, she was wearing latex bicycle shorts. She wears latex bicycle shorts nearly every day, and I will tell you why: because she can. She weighs about eighty pounds. She has gone to the gym almost every day since her divorce, and she does not have an ounce of fat on her body. I completely hate that in a person. I consider it an act of aggression against the rest of us mothers who forgot to start working out after we had our kids...  
...I smiled back at. I thought such awful thoughts that I cannot even say them out loud because they would make Jesus want to drink gin straight out of the cat dish.

Lamott demonstrates a few things in this passage. She shows that even things that are important to us can still be mocked with affection (Jesus drinking gin from a cat dish). She also shows me how having a sense of humor when someone ticks you off is more useful than whining because when you employ sarcasm judiciously, other people can actually share in laughing at those who anger you. This is a skill I have sought to refine both as a writer and teacher. These works freed me to use my habitual sarcasm and sense of humor in my own work.

Though the memoirs of Adeline Yen-Mah (*Falling Leaves*) and Jeannette Walls (*The Glass Castle*) discuss topics very different than my own-- both deal with traumatic and

unconventional childhoods-- I find the way in which they structure their narratives to be helpful in organizing my own. They both start their stories in similar ways, and I attempt to emulate this structure in my own "Prologue." Yen-Mah's memoir about being an unwanted Chinese daughter begins her narrative not at her birth, but at the reading of her father's will. This will is symbolic of her family's (in particular her father's) acceptance of her as a member of the Yen family. In the next chapter, Yen then begins her story chronologically and only towards the end of the book does the reader fully understand why Yen-Mah was excluded from her father's will. Walls' *The Glass Castle* begins in very much the same way. Walls set her first chapter in New York City. Walls is waiting in a traffic jam in her taxi and sees her own mother rummaging through a dumpster. Walls then mentions her own guilt at living on Park Avenue while her mother is homeless. Both memoirs begin their stories posing a narrative question for the reader to discover. The reader is drawn on to solve this mystery as to how a scene like this can come about. My memoir is far less dramatic, but I think this structure is worth imitating because it draws the reader in as well as helping the reader develop the narrative arc of the story.

In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson remind us that memoir is more than just a person writing his or her own biography. A memoirist concerns him/herself with the truth more than with facts. A memoirist relies on his/her own *memory* and impressions of events to construct a story. The memoirist is history as it is filtered through a single, but fallible, human being. The memoirist's task is to present an emotional truth with an honest narrative. However, the level of honesty must also be negotiated by the memoirist. In "Autopsy of an Idealist," I tell emotional truths of being a teacher, but I do not fabricate scenes or events for the sake of the narrative. I have, however, at times rearranged the sequence of scenes in order to present a narrative arc. Since the scenes did happen and their actual sequence does not seem to compromise this emotional truth, I feel that I have compromised honestly and effectively.

While the reader can expect the narrator and the author to be one in the same in a memoir, a memoirist is also limited in some ways. A memoirist is confined to writing about and in a contemporary setting. The author does not have the luxury of writing about a person's life in its entirety which can only happen after a person has died. Smith and Watson say that the memoirist must use all the essential tools a novelist uses including, but not limited to, "plot, dialogue, setting, characterization, and so on." However, the memoirist is separate from the novelist because the "'vital statistics' of the author, such as date and place of birth and education, are identical to those of the narrator," according to Smith and Watson. The challenge of the memoirist is to tell a story which is at once true and yet structured as a narrative. This challenge is where compromise between facts and truth takes place.

This narrative uses both memoir and literary journalism to give a firsthand account of the challenges of teaching. I explore power hierarchies in public education, classroom experiences, and I attempt to conceptualize the role of a teacher today. By doing so, I hope to provide a more accurate portrait of a teacher. I'd like to think that if David Sedaris or Anne Lamott decided to teach secondary English, they might write something like this. It is a memoir because it presents my experiences as a teacher. However, the research I have done on education and teaching also makes this literary journalism. I am both spectator and participant in this work. My research was conducted not only by immersing myself in this profession, but by reading about it and talking about it with others who share it with me. These informal interviews happen after school when my fellow teachers and I are too tired to grade, in the five minutes during passing time, and on the weekends as we chat with each other and play soccer in the hallway with the children of colleagues. These informal interviews inform and enrich my research and allow my one story to be more representative of a group of people than it could be without these interactions. It is during interactions like these that I realize many people struggle with distractions in their

classrooms, especially freshmen teachers, which shows up in chapter two as the scene “Read Day.” Other informal interviews and conversations with my colleagues are venting sessions where people share what frustrates them about teaching. During these venting sessions, we often find common ground and realize just how similar our experiences are. I have attempted to tell a story about some of these frustrations, because it is these frustrations which lead to both the disillusionment of the idealist, as well as teachers finally giving up and leaving the profession.

### **Memoirs about Teaching**

“Autopsy of an Idealist” belongs to a small subgenre of memoir written by teachers about teaching. The teacher memoir is a narrative tradition in both print and film. Movies like *Lean on Me*, *Dead Poet’s Society*, *Freedom Writers*, and *Mona Lisa Smile* are all contemporary stories about teachers as much as the written memoirs of Frank McCourt’s *Teacher Man*, Tony Danza’s *I’d Like to Apologize to Every Teacher I Ever Had*, and Rafe Esquith’s *There Are No Shortcuts*. I take issue with almost all of these works’ representation of my chosen profession. Many of them follow the same predictable plot: clueless idealist attempts to reach kids who most adults have given up on. By the end of the book/film, the kids have fallen in love with the teacher. Many times this story is told through the lens of one class period. I understand that this may be a narrative choice to create characters, but I reject the idea of telling a story about teaching through only one class, as if we don’t teach 5-6 classes per day. In my nine years of teaching, I have taught over fifty different sections or groups of students. One section is hardly representative of what I do, nor does it demonstrate the quantity of what I do.

The well-meaning but clueless idealist is also a popular caricature I object to. As a first year teacher, I was a professional who was fully able to not only control a classroom for all sections of the day, but I was also aware of student needs from day one. I’m not saying I was wonderful or that I haven’t learned a lot about best practices in teaching since my student

teaching days, but I do think showing bad/ incompetent teachers injures my profession in the eyes of the public. On Erin Gruwell's (*Freedom Writers*) first day of school she wears a string of real pearls to class. She stands at the front of the room after writing her name in chalk on the chalk board. We see a similar routine in *Mona Lisa Smile*. Both teachers are not aware of how they should be dressed or behave for their position, and chaos ensues during their first class period because they have unrealistic expectations of their students. If you watch a movie about a teacher, this first day of school is as formulaic as a romantic comedy. On my first day of school, I stand outside my door monitoring the hall. I greet students professionally but not in a friendly way. After the bell rings and every student has sat down and begun to try to figure me out as a teacher, I tell them to stand up. "You have a seating chart," I say. Every year, this is a way for me to assert control, power, and order as my first lesson of the day. It doesn't matter how bright or dedicated of a teacher you are if the kids won't shut up long enough to find out. Classroom management isn't an accessory; it is key to student learning. It doesn't surprise me that teachers represented in both fiction and non-fiction don't have teaching stamina. In the first few pages of Tony Danza's teaching memoir *I'd Like to Apologize to Every Teacher I Ever Had*, for example, he does not make the mistake seen in *Freedom Writers* or *Mona Lisa Smile* by being too passive. He instead fills the silence with his own voice for the entire hour. There has to be a balance between student and teacher voices in a classroom.

Though I respect the spirit of Tony Danza's memoir, even he has to admit that he does not have to live on a teacher salary or plan for the future of his career. This includes the fact that he can name the school he talks about and openly discuss administrators, coworkers and students. I do not have the luxury of walking away from my job, bosses, and coworkers after I have finished writing. I feel my authority to speak for teachers is greater than Danza's while my ability to do so is limited by that very authenticity. I did not become a teacher as an experiment or for

entertainment as Tony Danza did. Teaching is my chosen profession, and I believe my authenticity is a feature currently lacking in discussions and perceptions of teachers--especially at the secondary level. This thesis draws on my nine years of teaching English in public schools. I have taught at the middle, high school, and college levels. I have been in positions of leadership and have participated in myriad committees. I have taught in a total of eight buildings in both Arizona and Wisconsin. This information is important because it demonstrates my ability to see beyond one building or even one level of secondary teaching.

Sustainability is the last word I would like to discuss when addressing some of these teacher archetypes presented in teacher memoirs and films. Most of these teachers' lifestyles and workloads (some presented as factual) are not sustainable. The main character, Erin Gruwell, in the movie *Freedom Writers* did amazing things with her class, but instead of continuing her good work, she insisted on moving with her class so that she had the same group of students for multiple years. At the end of the movie, we are told she even moved on to the community college to teach them. Gruwell also gets a second and third job to pay for the things she wants to do with her students. Not only is this not mentally healthy for her, but this is not psychologically sustainable. This type of unsustainable, self-effacing behavior on the part of teachers should not be an expectation. We are human beings who should be allowed a personal life and healthy psyche. It is little wonder that with these unreasonable self-expectations so many teachers leave the field or take personal casualties (broken marriages, non-existent relationships with own children, bankruptcy, etc.). If these are the positive teacher archetypes we are to emulate or expect, is it any surprise that there is so much disillusionment in the first few years of teaching?

I hope to strike a more healthy balance with my story. Unlike most of the teachers in the fictional and true stories we tell about teachers, I have stayed to teach. I have survived; I have also never made the paper with my selfless giving as a teacher either. Those of us who have

stayed deserve our say as well. I am not an upper class idealist who needs an education on the plight of the working class and who feels slightly guilty about her own affluent upbringing, like Erin Gruwell who brazenly wears her pearl necklace in an underprivileged school. Since I have worked in schools with substantial poverty, this distinction is important. I am able to readily empathize with students because I too have had a brother join the military for a better life. I can tell them honestly that they can afford to go to college because I paid my own way. I am an example of what they too could achieve with hard work in school. I don't come from affluent or educated parents, but that doesn't mean I am stupid. Who you are is just as important, maybe more so, than what you know when it comes to teaching underprivileged students. Though I have certainly spent my own money on student needs, I have not done it to an unhealthy or extreme level. And though I have occasionally missed family get-togethers in order to get a stack of essays graded, I still have a healthy relationship with my family. My husband and I have been happy together for the last seven years since we met. I should not have to apologize for this or feel myself less of a committed teacher because my life contains balance.

### **Methods and Ethical Dilemmas**

I conducted most of my research over the school year of 2012-13, however, many of the scenes I relate are from previous years. During 2012-2013, I would often write immediately after school each day to record anything important to include in this work. For scenes that occurred outside the school year of 2012-13, I relied heavily on my detailed personal journals. I have always been a journal writer and have journals dating back to my eighth grade year in 1996. When I entered college, my journal writing continued, but I extended this journal writing to what I did not recognize at the time as memoir writing. I took several creative writing classes in college, some of which were independent study classes. At that time, I called my writing "short stories," but they were actually short memoir scenes.

My journals and notes from 2003-2013 formed the basis for the scenes conveyed in “Autopsy of an Idealist.” I believe the story I tell to be true, but that does not make my story factual. This thesis should not be viewed as pure journalism in respect to dates, places, or people. It is instead a composite of my teacher training and teaching experiences. People I have studied and worked with need not recognize themselves in my stories. No student I write about is a current student of mine. Though all scenes actually happened the way they are described, the place or time may be altered. I do not feel this affects the honesty of what I have set out to do. When possible, I have the characters in my scenes read the scenes for accuracy when it comes to dialogue and action. To obscure the names of schools where I have taught, I give schools the names of famous authors. An occupational hazard of any English teacher is to reference literature, and anytime I am asked to provide a fake name I habitually use authors’ names. Though most of my scenes take place at “Rossetti High School,” this place does not exist. Rossetti High is a composite of the places I have worked. Since I have physically taught in eight different buildings, any of the stories I relate could be set in any of these buildings. My classroom I describe is also a composite, since I have taught in a number of classrooms over the years. The reason for this is to protect the characters I describe. Even a novelist like Jane Austen took the same care when talking about real places and people, so I feel that I am in good company by doing this with my writing. I agree with Amos Oz who said in *A Tale of Love and Darkness* that “sometimes the facts threaten the truth” which was reprinted in Nancy Miller’s article “The Entangled Self.”

Dialogue in this narrative is also approximate at best due to the nature of what I am trying to do. Ethically, I cannot walk around tape recording minors and coworkers. These scenes are reconstructed from my memory, reflections, journals, and notes. In the opening scene, “Maybe Next Year I’ll Quit,” for example, taking notes of the actual student dialogue was easy because I did not speak during student discussions. I also did this after my students were used to these

weekly discussions so that neither my students nor my accuracy were sacrificed. However, no dialogue should be considered a direct quote. Without an actual recording of dialogue I do not feel I could claim this, no matter how good my notes might be. Nonetheless, I chose to include dialogue to develop complex characters—both myself and others—and I believe my dialogue to be an accurate approximation of what was said.

For the most part, I did not make use of composite scenes. My exception is chapter two's scene titled "Read Day." I made this exception because the logistics of documenting a whole class were not realistic. I could not write a transcript of a class and simultaneously teach it. I kept a legal pad on my podium to jot down each interruption while students read. I taught multiple sections of freshmen English and kept this record for the first fifteen minutes of my first freshmen class, the middle fifteen minutes of my next freshmen class and the last fifteen minutes of my final freshmen class of the day. Read days were a practiced routine for my students, and once they were familiar with it, I felt able to jot notes while students read but only for a fraction of the class period. This allows for accuracy on my part without short-changing my students.

It is not my intention to exploit the honorable people I have worked with (teachers, community members, parents, students and administrators alike). I have tried to follow literary journalist Mark Kramer's motto: "I've made it my business to do no harm." In order to do no harm, I do, at times, make use of composite characters. I do this for two reasons. First and foremost, I do this to obscure the identity of the actual person. At times, I change the physical appearance of a character to protect the real people I have and still do work with. I also use composite characters to compress scenes. Describing all fifteen people at a meeting is not conducive to narrative and only focusing on a couple at a time feels more digestible narratively speaking. The characteristics I describe are all actually in the teachers I work/worked with, however, I just rearrange physical descriptions with characteristics in order to protect people's

privacy. You will note with only a few exceptions, I refer to all administrators as Mr. Principal. My idea of how to name people was inspired by Esquith's teaching memoir *There Are No Shortcuts*, in which he too uses false names for coworkers. He generally gives them names which are descriptive of their characteristics. This also simplifies characterization. I have worked with over a dozen principals over the years. Most of them are men which is why I go with "Mr." regardless of the actual gender of the administrator described. I give little physical description of them because they are a smaller pool of characters to draw from and would be easy to pick out. I have worked, without exaggeration, with hundreds of teachers. The smaller number of principals makes representing them more problematic, and I do not feel I sacrifice truth by omitting physical personal descriptions of administrators.

Nevertheless, with all this obscurity in my descriptions there are some facts one could certainly check. The dates I give for my student teaching and subbing are facts. If you went to the real "Kelly's" classroom, you would find it just as I describe it because I actually drove back to her school over summer to get her room right. I remembered the actual room number and building of the college classroom where Dr. Former Idealist gave his memorable speech and visited the room again to describe it accurately. When possible, I took pictures of places I wanted to capture exactly as they are. Most of the "small" scene-setting details are accurate. The night I spoke with Dr. Advisor, for example, it really was sleeting on my way back to my car because that cold slap in the face followed by another one stuck in my mind over the years, and I can still picture the coat I was wearing in that scene. I am also dorky enough to keep many of the essays I wrote in college and even high school, which provides additional details for my scenes. During my classroom observation in chapter one, I really did wear a long wool skirt because I had planned my outfit for my observation day for over a week, and it had been a wool skirt I had bought in England while studying abroad. I had bought it thinking "this looks like a teacher."

The character Kate and I really did live in a building next to a bar where armed police were often called. So while identifying characteristics were changed, no events or conversations were fabricated.

My commentary about teaching and the working conditions of teachers is not meant to target a specific school, district, administrator, fellow teacher, parent or student in any way. My commentary instead is on the system in which real teachers have to function. I believe my story does justice to what it is like to teach today. I write this thesis at the start of yet another school year. I sit at my desk trying to memorize the 150 new student names I will be teaching and mentoring this year. As I look at these names and this work I have written, I realize that the name, place or year feels less important than the job I am attempting to accomplish. I believe teachers deserve to be presented with dignity. The few works which have attempted to shed a positive light on teachers do so from either an outside perspective or from the perspective of a temporary participant. As an active full-time teacher for almost a decade, I believe my perspective offers something unique to the genre of teacher memoir while at the same time represents the teaching experience in general. It is this authentic experience as an idealist who decided to become a teacher that I am attempting to convey with “Autopsy of an Idealist.”

## Prologue

### Maybe Next Year I'll Quit

I drag my body from my warm bed at four o'clock in the morning, head to my cold home office, and carefully close the door so I don't wake my husband. For the next two hours, I will grade essays. I settle in with my students' thoughts and typos in my cozy robe and slippers to keep the cold at bay before our furnace kicks in for the morning.

School starts at 7:43 a.m., and I have to leave home by 6:50 in order to avoid the rush of buses, pedestrians, and parents who use the faculty lot (despite the signs) to drop off their kids. I park my '97 Honda; the faculty lot is a hospice for cars in their final days.

When the warning bell rings, my seniors file in. I teach at a typical high school in Wisconsin, but it doesn't matter what high school you teach in, they almost always smell the same: old wood, chalk, and teenagers. We are discussing *Jane Eyre* chapters 1-15, and my students move their desks into a circle. Ella, an outspoken redhead in the back of the room, and Carrie, a demure-looking blonde, offer to be the discussion leaders for the day. Ella begins.

"Knowing that *Jane Eyre* is a coming-of-age book do you..."

I am immediately impressed with her application of my lecture material, but she drifts off and admits, "I don't know where I was going with that." Giggles briefly follow.

Another student picks up her thread and asks, "How do you think Jane has changed since she was a kid?"

Without pause, Clint--a shrimp of a boy who is often mistaken for a freshman--responds, "I think she's taller."

Laughter again, but they quickly move on. Another student responds, "Do you think her treatment as a child has affected the way she treats her student?" Pause. They consider this possibility. No one really seems to know what to say to this.

Clint changes the subject completely. "I would like to make a prediction," he says as if he is announcing his candidacy for US president. People smile. I enjoy his fresh approach, but he thinks I find him obnoxious. "The way Mr. Rochester wasn't surprised about the fire. I think that means something like this has happened before."

James slides in his comment: "Something's going on with Grace."

Carrie motions to James and whispers to him from across the room: "Why don't you bring *that* up."

James shakes his head. Carrie continues, and now I am curious. James, though soft-spoken, is not shy, so his hesitation is interesting. I look at him in his football jersey for game day and just can't picture him tackling anyone without politely apologizing afterwards.

Meanwhile, the conversation continues. "Jane is being deliberately kept in the dark," Ella says. There is a pause. Students who have read ahead are holding their tongues. Everyone else is at a loss for something to say.

Carrie steers the conversation back and asks, "Why do you think Bronte wrote a plain protagonist?"

"She's more real," Ella says.

Another nods and says, "More practical and relatable."

"If she'd been pampered all her life, she would not be as interesting. She has to develop more internally," says Rachel.

The conversation continues for the rest of the hour. I shake my head remembering parent-teacher conferences and how many parents complain that their teenager doesn't communicate. I get them to discuss a nineteenth century novel intelligently, yet this doesn't prevent people from thinking that if they had attended high school at some time in their life they know how to do my

job and have a right to tell me how to do it better. No one who has once flown in an airplane walks into the cockpit and starts giving orders.

The bell rings, and as quickly as it was created the magical spell evaporates out the door like the steam from my coffee. I would miss moments like this if I left teaching.

During the five minutes of passing time, teachers are supposed to stand in the hallway and monitor students. I wonder if any other professionals have to monitor their hallways. Teachers used to time their bodily functions with the bell schedule since leaving a class unattended is a cardinal sin. However, many high schools are pushing for a faculty presence in hallways for additional safety and supervision. I am considering a catheter.

I wonder if I should have gone to law school. I usually circle back to the fact that I don't have to balance a guilty conscience with volunteer work the way some of my friends do. The first time I thought about leaving the profession was about four years ago. I'd love a job that paid better and allowed me to get up at a normal time without homework. These thoughts usually emerge in April, but they have been creeping in earlier and earlier with each passing year.

Taylor, a willowy freshmen girl, walks up to me and asks, "Why haven't you graded my works cited yet?"

I should have said 'because you turned it in late yesterday, and because I had graduate class last night and didn't get home until late. What gives you any right to make demands when you didn't turn in your work on time?' Instead, I say, "I will."

Mysee, a bubbly Asian senior who is 4'5" and has enough attitude for two people, calls down the hall, "Ms. V don't you miss us?"

"Desperately," I answer smiling. Giggling, she pushes her friends into the classroom before the bell rings.

I close my classroom door for my prep. I have a mountain of grading and 125 emails in my inbox.

A tap at my door. I look up, smile, and say, "Come in."

Christian, a tall blonde, asks me tentatively, "Can I ask you a question?" I am already on my feet ushering him in, carefully keeping the door open. He needs some help in citing and gathering sources on his research paper. I outline the process; he nods and takes notes.

"Ah, I was wondering about another source but..." I know this look. He wants to ask a question but is afraid of looking foolish.

"Tell me what you know about it."

"We might not have read it this year, maybe last year...this guy goes to a castle...he watches a girl die...somehow the castle is destroyed."

"'Fall in the House of Usher' by Poe?" I stab wildly.

"Yes! That's it!" He thanks me and dutifully closes the door behind him.

This job is important to me because I do more than just teach students. Teenagers come to me sarcastic and passive; I catalyze them.

Before my prep is over, I respond to an email from a previous student who is currently a sophomore at Princeton University. We finalize our plans to meet for coffee while she will be in town. Where else could I find that in a job?

The bell rings ending my prep period. I exit my classroom for hallway sentry duty wondering when I would become a sucker by staying but still hoping that "next year will be somehow better."

## Chapter 1

### Prep Work

#### **I Want to Be a Teacher When I Grow up**

If you ask any passionate teacher, she will tell you about a teacher who inspired her. That teacher may not be the reason they became a teacher, but many of us pull out this teacher and measure ourselves against him or her. For me, it was Father Priest at Milton High.

Father Priest called my name. I felt like a townsman in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"; nobody knew who may be sacrificed and who may be spared. Father Priest was tough. He had an extremely dry sense of humor, ran a couple miles every morning (despite being over sixty), and led by example when it came to academic rigor. He talked about the many books a week he read, and I doubted he wasted time on watching TV or movies. We read one book and wrote one essay per week in his class.

I stared at the short green carpet, maneuvering my way to the front of the classroom from my assigned back row. I was used to getting As on my essays without much effort, but this was college credit English; I was in a new league. Father Priest was a professor, not just a teacher. He had a thick head of bright white hair which stuck out in a mad scientist kind of way and a bit of a hunch to his back, undoubtedly from hours of reading.

He thumbed through the essays absentmindedly and dispassionately handed me my essay on *Hamlet* from his place at the podium. Unlike our first work *Oedipus Rex*, I had really enjoyed reading *Hamlet* and found myself relating to the overly-introverted and pensive main character. I wrote my essay discussing the role of Hamlet's insanity, real or imagined, with passion. The white paper stared back at me with a scarlet letter C- in ink at the top. The rest of my paper looked like a blood bath.

It took me several weeks of essays before I finally clambered my way up to an A- in Father Priest's class. However, he provided my ego with a much-needed reality check. There were many kids in the class who were better writers than me. Nevertheless, he consistently called on me during his lectures to offer my unique perspective. Often, when he posed a question to the class of silent students, he resorted to calling on me. I always had an opinion for him, and I think he knew I would never raise my hand to share it. My classmates would often tell me at lunch or during study hall that my answer was something they had never thought of before. I knew this about myself. I tended to see and interpret things differently from other people. I thought this was what made me weird, a misfit. It was Father Priest who showed me that even though I had a lot to learn about grammar and organizing a paper, I had other strengths. He showed me that seeing things differently was not a liability. He was the kind of teacher I wanted to be.

### **Run Don't Walk to the Nearest Exit**

In my junior year of college, I walked into class thirty minutes early planning to select my seat for the semester. The room was a typical, if somewhat dated, public university classroom. The chairs were arranged in a semicircle facing the front of the room, almost like some kind of weird choir class. The room smelled of old wood and an undefinable smell that is typical in old school buildings... maybe it was the smell of dead optimism. The "desks" looked like the same ones you see in pictures from 1950s—the wooden chairs with an overgrown arm rest which was supposed to pass for a desk on one side. It was the first day of class for one of my required English Education courses.

A rite of passage.

One person was already in the classroom sitting in the front row. *Suck up*, I thought as I stood in the doorway trying to decide whether or not I should come back later. I slumped down

into a desk near the wall in the second row and away from the person in the corner who seemed to be too mousy to be an effective future teacher. I glared at her for no good reason. I hoped she didn't want to chat with me.

The loud mechanical clock thudded every minute, and I moved my long scarf from the floor to avoid the puddle forming around my boots as the dirty snow melted off.

I got out a book and pretended to read to discourage anyone from talking to me while I actually watched everyone else come in. I preferred to judge rather than interact with others. One by one, students trickled in. A couple students seemed to know each other and many were familiar faces. I recognized a girl from my short story class. I remembered staring at the back of her head most of last semester since she sat in front of me. She had dark brown hair almost always worn down in what my mother would call a page boy. She seemed unafraid of the intimidating, dry-witted Dr. Grumpy Old Man, and I liked that about her. Dr. Grumpy Old Man was a white-haired man in his seventies who really believed that the only people who needed cell phones were drug dealers. He tended to piss students off with his sarcasm and old school standards. I took every class he taught.

Desks were moved noisily around on the sloppy floor, and we were unsure whether or not Dr. Former Idealist wanted us in rows or a circle. Rows felt safer for a first day.

Dr. Former Idealist walked in nodding at those he knew. He set his bag down and began writing our agenda on the chalk board before turning back to smile at us. He was a kind, gentle man who reminded me of an aging Thoreau, perhaps Emerson. He was the man who introduced National Public Radio to me, and I secretly wished I had someone as educated as him as my father.

He clapped his hands together rubbing off the chalk and began class. He knew many of us by name but started with introductions anyway. We wove up and down the rows with people

stating formulaic information about themselves: name, major, earliest reading memory. It was a reading class for English Education majors, so it all fit.

Jill was blonde, gorgeous, and well-endowed. She sported an impressive diamond ring on a well-manicured, red polished finger and had a habit of pursing her lips and titling her head like a bird when she talked. Hannah, a bubbly blonde with ringlets, shook her head as she told us about her mother reading to her. She reminded me of some type of forest sprite from a children's story. Kara Gillman, who everyone seemed to call by her last name, was a picture-perfect hippie. She was willowy with shoulder-length straight brown hair, unshaven legs, and thread bracelets which probably came from Peru. The brown-haired page boy from my short story class turned out to be Kate Schmitz, my future roommate and lifelong friend. Abby was a mother of three who was going back to school part time. Betsy, a fellow redhead, was taking this class out of sequence due to studying abroad. One thing was constant with all of our stories; all of our parents read to us often and early.

Dr. Former Idealist stood at the front of the classroom leaning over the podium, which was slightly too short for his lean but tall build. He was a poet and walked with a bit of a bent hunch; I saw this same stance when he did poetry readings on campus. His nose was large and red, and just before beginning he pointed a knobby finger at us, his devoted pupils, and began,

“If you can do anything else for a living, do it. You will have to deal with everyone from teenagers to ignorant parents to politicians telling you how to do your job and most of them won't know what the hell they are talking about, but you will have to listen to them, even be governed by them. Nobody will care that you are staying up late to make a lesson or write yet another letter of recommendation. You will not get paid for the extra work people will *expect* you to do. For those of you who still go through with it, many will quit after five years. I think in marriage they call it the seven year itch. This is more like

leprosy. If you do choose to leave, it will be due to politics or administrators; if you choose to stay (God help you) it will be for the kids. No one ever leaves because of the kids. If I don't see you next class time I won't think less of you. Teaching is like falling in love with someone who is emotionally unavailable.”

My eyes drifted to my classmates. We were all leaning forward with a tired but tensed expression, shoulders hunched. This wasn't news to most of us. There was a hopeless, dogged determination on most faces; we were in a march to the death. Was this a test? I could feel a lump in my throat forming, and my heart was pounding so hard I could feel it throbbing in my neck. I wanted to stand on my desk like the boys in *Dead Poet's Society* and have an “Oh Captain my Captain” moment. I wanted to make him understand my unexplainable emotional need to become a teacher.

I now wonder sometimes if I remain a teacher just to prove his pessimistic advice wrong. But nothing Dr. Former Idealist said *was* wrong, and disobeying his warning made those of us who stayed feel righteous in our ideals, martyrs to our cause.

### **Dr. Difficult**

Dr. Difficult was an important and cantankerous administrator in the school of education at the university I attended. She was a bully, and I was dumb enough to tell her she was a bully. The school of education at that time sent out obnoxious emails that only people with small children or elementary degrees would be interested in--like the finger painting event in the children's section of the public library. I wanted to unsubscribe but didn't want to miss out on the important deadline emails also sent out about student teaching. I emailed Dr. Difficult and asked to be taken off the elementary email list. My email was probably a little snotty. I was twenty, and the idealist

in me thought people in positions of power should be valued based on merit, not titles (Mistake #1).

Dr. Difficult emailed me back and gave me a mini lecture on my “tone.” I fired off a response. (Mistake #2). It went something like this: *The last person who has or will have the right to object to my tone is my mother. I had a simple request; I just don't want the elementary children's activities emails. Some of us are not interested in finger painting. I am sorry my tone offended you, but in all due respect you are the last person to comment on something like tone when every email or personal action you have with others is dripping with a condescending malice wreaking of some sort of inferiority complex.* (Mistakes #3-10).

Dr. Advisor-- a soft spoken knowledgeable and admirable woman-- asked me to see her. Dr. Difficult, a jerk who reminded me of Jabba the Hutt, was working to get me thrown out of the school of education. She had started the process and seemed to enjoy every scrap of power she had over others. I had no idea Dr. Difficult and Dr. Advisor were friends.

I left Dr. Advisor's office upset. At that time in my life, I was more interested in ideas than people. I was usually alone, shunned others and avoided making friends. It's not like I walked around in a trench coat, but I preferred solitude to company.

I pulled up my coat collar against the sleet and walked back to my car. It was only five o'clock in the afternoon, but it was already dark. I was going over the scene again and again in my head.

Dr. Advisor had said, “April, you made Dr. Difficult cry.”

Good, I thought. She looked at me with her dark brown eyes full of empathy for Dr. Difficult. I probably shouldn't have had my arms crossed while Dr. Advisor was talking to me, I thought, beating myself up in retrospect.

Conflicting thoughts wouldn't stop parading through my mind as I quickened my pace to my car, and my face became raw walking into the wind. I was out of line, but Dr. Difficult deserved a putting down. In the required interview that the school of education put each teacher candidate through, Dr. Difficult made soft-hearted well-meaning students who wanted nothing more than to teach kindergarten cry. It was common to come out crying after this interview. How could anyone be that mean? What would I do if I couldn't teach? I didn't want to do anything else. How could I live with myself if I didn't teach? After having gone to school for three years already, how could I face my father who didn't believe in college if I took more than four years to finish?

My idealist and pragmatist battled. Shouldn't I only have to apologize if I was wrong? Shouldn't Dr. Difficult get in trouble for being such a bitch in the first place? Nevertheless, I was cruel and that was why in the end I wrote her an apology.

Looking back at it now, I understand that often the right answer is to delete an angry email, and that real wisdom and strength demand kindness too.

### **Working for (Almost) Free**

The windows of my old Nissan, well past its prime, were rolled down as Kate Schmitz and I drove through a small Wisconsin city to find an apartment. Kate was a fellow classmate and student intern. She wore her dark brunette hair in a short bob and was tall with fair skin. We shared a love for Kurt Vonnegut, sarcasm, and Amaretto sweets and had bonded over our dislike of John Milton and our shared inability to find dress pants long enough for women our height. We told Dr. Advisor we both needed internships in the same city so we could room together in order to save money.

Student teaching paid absolutely nothing. In fact, student teachers were required to pay tuition for the experience. But student interning paid about eight hundred dollars (no benefits) a month and required recommendations from university faculty, an interview, and a temporary teaching license. In my program only three of us out of about thirty got internships like we did. Most students work for free. Kate and I, unlike some of the other student teachers, had neither family money nor wanted additional student loans to live on. I looked forward to rooming with Kate and imagined having sophisticated dinner parties like something from *Sex in the City*.

I got a position student interning at the middle school on one side of town while Kate would have a position at the high school on the other side of town. Her experience with drama made it the match perfect, and we were lucky Dr. Advisor knew us both so well as to match us with the right cooperating teachers.

It was hot, and I could feel my shirt damp between me and the car seat as I attempted to maneuver the many one way streets; my car's air conditioning never had worked. I looked over at Kate and said, "I'd really like to live as close to our schools as possible." Her school was on the north side and mine on the south. "Maybe we could get an apartment somewhere between the two schools." I was concerned about missing any school due to car troubles and wanted to be able to walk or bike if necessary. There was no contingency for car problems; the student teaching handbook actually stated that transportation, car insurance, housing, and health insurance were all the financial responsibility of the student.

Kate broke into my thoughts: "What did you think about that last one?" She was looking out her passenger window. "I'm so glad you're driving, I have no idea where we are."

I sighed. "It was ok, kind of far from both of our schools though." She squinted her eyes and cocked her head to one side, thinking. "I'm kind of excited about this next one. It's a house

converted into a duplex. It's-" I interrupted myself, "ahh, here's the street it's on." I turned right. Shortly, we pulled up in front of a beautiful Victorian home.

After seeing the apartment, Kate looked at me excitedly and jumped back in the car. "What did you think about that one!?"

I started the car and squealed, "Oh... my... goodness! The built in bookshelves everywhere, the claw foot tub, the hardwood floors. I loved it!" It was exactly the type of apartment I had envisioned for my first teaching job.

"I could definitely see myself living there," Kate said.

I nodded, "Me too... but-"

"It's over budget."

"I know, we agreed five hundred dollars was all we could afford on only eight hundred dollars a month salary." I hated admitting this.

"But it's only a little over budget, an extra seventy-five dollars a month isn't that much, right?"

"Well let's just keep an open mind," I said. "This next one might be even better. The newspaper ad says it has high ceilings... and it's cheaper."

Kate moved her arm out of the window and into the shade of the car while reading address numbers. "Wait!" Kate yelled, "I think that's the address you said; *is that* the building?" Her eyes widened with disgust. I turned my head. It was a typical old commercial building found in downtown areas. The walls of each building attached to the one next to it. It was two stories high, and the front door stood ajar with weeds at least two feet high sprouting out of it.

There was no parking on the street. As I drove around the block to circle back to the parking lot, I asked Kate, "So do we have to attend all those district new teacher orientations in

August? Since Dr. Advisor stressed how important dressing like professionals is, I suppose we have to dress up.”

I parked the car, and Kate nodded. “We are expected to attend all the trainings and meetings. I don’t have much professional clothing. Did you want to go shopping for some at Goodwill?”

“Sure. “Let’s do that after this apartment today.” Kate nodded.

The building was located at the corner of two busy streets. The string of buildings facing both streets formed a shady- looking, L-shaped parking area behind them, shielding them from the road. The building next to the apartment was the Drift Inn Bar with the back screen door falling off.

“April, I think we found the only ghetto in town.”

“Well it’s in our budget and almost exactly half way between our schools.”

“I’ll remember that when I’m shot on my way out to my car.”

A week or two after moving in to the apartment connected to the Drift Inn Bar, Kate and I were on our way to the grocery store when we saw three uniformed policemen with guns drawn going in the back door of the bar. The armed policemen motioned us out of the way, and we ran to my car.

Somehow it just wasn’t what I had imagined for two young teachers.

### **Observation Day**

I walked alone where the stream of students would soon be flowing down the long outdoor hallway into a cinder block, two-story typical modern Wisconsin middle school with the school colors horizontally painted on the walls. I was clad in a long wool skirt and sweater.

Dr. Advisor gave us a couple of weeks to get settled and comfortable before she would begin her series of four formal observations required by the English Education program. I had been sending her the required weekly reflections and now felt a little more confident about myself. I knew that she would observe me teach an entire class and then meet with me and my cooperating teacher afterward for feedback.

I walked into my cooperating teacher's classroom. Everything about Kelly's busy classroom was cheerful and helpful. Pictures of former and current students filled an entire wall behind her desk. Writing and literature posters covered any remaining wall space. The room was large and bright with light coming in from a wall of windows. Under the windows, bookcases lined the bottom of the wall.

The lesson Dr. Advisor observed was a mixture of individual and group work. I modeled memoir writing on an overhead projector and walked around the room while students were asked to discuss or write. It was the kind of lesson I knew she would like since it included group work and multiple intelligences. Multiple Intelligences is an educational theory which states that students have up to seven preferred learning styles including: musical, visual, verbal, mathematical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Teachers are encouraged to create lessons and projects which allow students to learn in their preferred methods. This theory still exists, but it is no longer in fashion.

Dr. Advisor observed the hour before our lunch, so we had time to chat afterwards; Kelly was giving up her usual lunch hour to meet. I didn't appreciate Kelly as much as I should have. After becoming a full-time teacher, I later understood what giving up a lunch means for a teacher. It is often the only time in the day to go to the bathroom or make a phone call. After my lesson, Dr. Advisor, Kelly, and I pulled together three student desks and shut the classroom door.

Dr. Advisor ran the meeting asking for input from both of us. “Kelly do you have any concerns?” Kelly eyed me.

Kelly was a vivacious mother of three and girls’ basketball coach who oozed helpfulness and knowledge. I can still remember the scent of her perfume which seemed oddly unsuited for her. She seemed like someone who would wear Clinique’s light and citrus-smelling “Happy.” Instead, she wore an almost harsh and spicy scent which lingered after her. She was a natural born leader but didn’t come off as bossy, and I loved working with her.

A couple weeks after school had started, Kelly approached me and said, “April I’ve noticed you have been coming in when the students are arriving. I’m not sure if anyone told you, but you need to be here at, preferably before, 7:00 a.m.”

I had no idea; no one had told me. School started around 7:45, so I figured arriving at 7:15 every day was fine. Teachers were also expected to stay half an hour after the students were dismissed as part of their contracted “work day.” I sheepishly apologized and arrived at or before 7:00 from then on.

I could feel this conversation passing between us. However, Kelly shook her head to Dr. Advisor’s question and offered a few compliments about my teaching style and content knowledge. I was beginning to see the idealism of the university expectations merge with the reality of my chosen profession.

“I understand April has taken on another responsibility called Wings? This is an additional supervision for April then?” Dr. Advisor asked.

Kelly nodded, but I answered. I knew what Dr. Advisor was getting at. “Yes, but it’s just an after-school computer lab where I help kids with homework.” I paused uncomfortably feeling like both a student and teacher. “I like working with the kids.”

Dr. Advisor nodded, eyeing me from the corner of her eye. “This is a paid additional supervision then?”

“Yes. It is,” I said.

I could see her considering this. She looked at Kelly and said, “Legally, student teachers are not allowed to be used as substitutes, study hall monitors, or any other kind of supervising activity without the presence of the cooperating teacher. However, since April is an intern and being paid for the additional work, she is allowed to do this Wings program. Nevertheless, she should not be asked to do any kind of uncompensated supervision.”

Dr. Advisor then looked at me and added, “April, I know you are used to taking on a lot at once, so I will trust your judgment that this is not too much for you.” She was looking out for me. Principals had a habit of using student teachers to cut costs illegally by having them do supervising they were not licensed to do. If student teachers openly complain, they may lose any chance at a job offer in that building or district.

Kelly, eager to make me look good, added, “Actually, April may have saved a life because of her connection to the kids in Wings.” Kelly grinned at me, and I couldn’t help smiling back at her freckled youthful face.

I explained, “It was a young girl who was sharing her writing with me; she wrote about hurting herself. I told Kelly, and she reported it.”

Dr. Advisor’s eyebrows rose, and she smiled. “I’m so glad someone was there for her. In the future, April, as a mandatory reporter of child abuse, you will need to make the call yourself.” She looked down at her notebook and asked, “How do you plan on running parent teacher conferences?”

“We have parent teacher conferences in our own classroom,” Kelly said. “Chairs are set up in the hallway for parents to wait. Since April teaches two of my five sections of eighth

graders we could do them all together and introduce her. She usually attends all my classes anyway.”

“Very good.” It was clear from Dr. Advisor’s detached attitude that she wasn’t really worried about me or Kelly. I was in good, capable hands.

Dr. Advisor folded her hands on her closed notebook and looked first at Kelly and then me. “April I’m glad to see a variety of approaches. It also seems like you know what is going on in the entire classroom. I’m impressed. You teach more like a veteran than rookie and teaching seems like a natural fit for you. I’m so glad you are both off to a great start.”

As we did a little awkward small talk to wrap up the meeting, I inwardly hoped an opening at Kelly’s middle school would come up for next fall, and I could continue to work with her.

### **Swinging and Missing: Interviews as a New Teacher**

In the spring semester of 2005, I was finally a “real” teacher. My internship was complete, and I had graduated with my Bachelors in English. The Department of Public Instruction (DPI)—which is kind of like an IRS or DMV of teachers with a matching customer service reputation—had sent me my official teaching license. I had reluctantly been fingerprinted a number of times because the Department of Justice kept sending back my prints. Every time they were sent back, the Orwellian in me kept questioning if this was the career for me. I didn’t think any profession but teaching was worth that kind of invasion of my privacy. The idealist in me shuddered to think that these fingerprints were taken to protect kids from teachers.

I was finishing a long term sub job in the district where I interned and hoped the district would have a position for me. Since a long term sub position was a good sign that the district liked my work, I was optimistic about a position for the following fall.

Many teachers end up settling down in the district they student teach in because it is comfortable and secure. They put down roots, have children who go to the district's schools, and in 30-35 years, they retire never knowing another district or even another building. In public education, nepotism isn't a dirty word. It's considered to be "community."

Though my intern district usually had a couple of jobs at the secondary English level open each year, only one position opened up after my long term sub job. The secondary English department was contracting at the time. As a secondary English teacher, I was certified to teach English grades 6-12, however, an elementary teacher could teach grades 1-8 any subject. Administrators could save money by pushing all the teachers with secondary degrees into the high schools. This reduced cost and expertise in the middle schools. This meant that the only open jobs were in the high schools, and these were taken by secondary English teachers who were being pushed from middle to high school. I had little chance at a job that year.

I applied and was brought in for an interview for the one open position. Mr. Principal conducted the interview by himself. He was a large, fat man with glasses. He stared at me from behind an impressive executive desk. His gaze was rolling up and down my chest as he asked me questions.

I walked back to my classroom feeling dirty. I had always thought that getting good grades, working hard, and doing my work well would be the road to success in a noble profession like teaching, not cup size.

A few weeks later, John approached me during our shared lunch. I taught on the same "team" and hallway as John, a petite man in his fifties who was gentle and steady. Teams are often used at both middle and high schools as a way of insuring that a group of about 150 students has the same science, social studies, math and English teachers. These teachers meet weekly to discuss student issues in order to better know and respond to student needs. John taught

science and often wore short-sleeved button-up shirts with pocket protectors. He was a caricature, but he didn't seem to mind. His membership on several district committees generally ensured him a greater degree of information than the rest of us enjoyed.

"April," he said, "I'm sorry, but I know that position went to someone else."

I sighed, both relieved and disappointed. "Thanks for letting me know. Do you know who got it?"

John leaned in. "I hear it was Jill. Didn't you go to school with her?"

I nodded, picturing her in her tight-fitting, low-cut dress and spike heels, her perfectly-quaffed blond hair, and her habit of flirting with most of the men she worked with.

"Don't take it personally. Jill is married with children and her husband works in the area," John said.

I nodded; John said. "I know it shouldn't be a factor, but administrators like the idea of settled teachers connected to the community. You'll be fine."

It was time for me to start widening my net for job prospects. I applied for and got an interview for a job only about thirty miles away.

It was March in Wisconsin, which always makes for a less than cheerful outlook on life. March is like a menopausal woman. You never knew when she might be frigid, storming, or unreasonably warm.

It was grey, misty, and cool as I made the pilgrimage on a Saturday. As the speed limit decreased and the population sign came into view, I could see that the town was depressingly small. I was early and decided to drive around a little before the interview. I found a gas station, a couple small churches and a number of bars. That's pretty much the bare minimum for townhood in Wisconsin. I noted that many of the roads, including the one leading to the school, seemed to

be dirt or gravel. The snow had recently melted, but remnants of snow mixed with dirt-lined driveways and parking lots. This contributed to the bleak setting of this one-school town.

Principal Friendly greeted me at the door, opening it for me since it was Saturday and undoubtedly locked. He gave me a tour of the building, and I tried to ask intelligent-sounding questions.

The hallways were a maze, and I soon found out that the elementary, middle and high school were only two buildings right next to each other. Finally, we sat down for the interview. Interviews tended to reflect the size of the district. The bigger the district, the more people involved in an interview. This interview involved just Principal Friendly and a male English teacher.

Principal Friendly rocked back in his large executive chair as I sat primly on a small wooden chair. I felt a bit like Jane Eyre applying for a teaching job. Like Jane, I applied for a job I wasn't sure about in the middle of nowhere. My only goal, like Jane, was to find a new place to work. However, I wasn't small town material at that point in my life. After about forty-five minutes of the typical teacher interview questions about curriculum and classroom management, Principal Friendly leaned forward and inquired, "So what would you do if a student showed up at your home late one night?"

I paused, completely at a loss. I was twenty-three years old and desperate to look and seem like a professional. After all, some of my high school students could be within a few years of my age. I straightened myself up and put my hands in my lap. Looking Principal Friendly straight in the eye, I said, "I would tell him it was inappropriate to be at my home, and I would call his parents to pick him up or drive him home myself." I was proud of this answer and was surprised to see a drop in his face.

I didn't get a job offer. I suppose Principal Friendly wanted to hear that I would welcome any student into my home, drop what I was doing, offer them hot cocoa and an understanding ear.

By April of 2005, I was starting to get anxious even though most new hires happened over summer. My landlord needed to know if I would be staying or moving, and a bad breakup was the motivation I needed to strike out and do something mildly stupid. Fortunately, there was a teacher shortage in the Southwest; I applied in Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico. I was tired of the Wisconsin winters and thought this might be my last chance to do something this impulsive before settling down for good. In my naiveté, I didn't realize what a teacher shortage meant about the quality of the jobs offered.

In other professions when there are shortages, people who fill these positions are well compensated. The opposite is true in areas of teacher shortages. Instructors teach more periods a day and for less money.

Most districts in these areas hired out of state and as a result interviewed over the phone. I sat on the floor of my apartment with all my vital documents in front of me within easy reach. At the end of the phone interview with Sunny Valley, Arizona, the principal threw in, "Oh, I'm betting you want to know what the position pays." I was told to avoid this question in my university trainings on interviews. He continued, "How much are you expecting?"

I stammered out a tentative and conservative guess. "I imagine it will be around 30K."

He laughed. "The pay starts at 26K a year."

A first year teacher in 2005 in Wisconsin could expect about 30K and half the living expense of Arizona.

No wonder they had a shortage. He wrapped up the interview, and we hung up. I was offered three positions over the phone, and Sunny Valley turned out to be the best position, town, and pay of the three. I finally had my first full-time teaching job.

## **Arena**

I tire of hearing people say that teaching is one of the most stable professions. By April 2007, I was at the end of my third year and third school district. Though I was back in Wisconsin, unable to afford to live in Arizona on a teacher's salary, I received a personal visit from my principal to tell me that I had been laid off. Yet again, I had to look for another job.

Several districts had a hiring arena. If this name conjures Christians being fed to lions, you are not far off. It was held a couple times a year. Teachers who were laid off could attend these arenas to pick up positions districts opened up. It was democratic but based on seniority. As I walked in to a neighboring district building which hosted this event, there were tables laden with baked goods set up all along a hallway. Moms and teachers sold beverages and baked goods to their captive and hungry inmates. At the end of the hallway, I was greeted by my union president and the head of each of the districts' personnel services.

There was a sign up that said "Licensed Teachers only." A woman in her thirties with short bobbed blonde hair beamed at me. "Name please?"

"Vandehei, April," I responded while scanning the table they had set up. They had two stacks of papers, one for every teacher in the unified districts in the area; the stacks were several inches tall and seemed to be arranged alphabetically.

The smiling blond handed me my sheet. "Here you go, do you know how this works?"

"Kind of," I admitted and attempted to smile but could feel my stomach tensing.

My union president, a large and kind woman with glasses, smiled over at me and explained, "Your seniority number is at the top here." She pointed at my number. "It's based on the days you have been in your current district. Yours will probably be pretty easy," she said giving me a pitying look. "You'll be at the end."

Thanks. It was worse that she meant well and was just trying to help. I turned left into the gym, my pumps echoing on the floor. Rows of metal folding chairs were set up facing a podium. A large, white pull-down screen was behind the podium. A woman with a microphone was talking, but the din from everyone chatting made what she was saying almost inaudible. A male social studies teacher futzed with the projector, centering it on the pull down screen. All the available jobs listed in the packet we had been emailed last week were projected on this screen.

I scanned the room looking for someone, anyone I recognized. I pulled out my work bag and started rereading *1984*. I disliked Winston, the main character, because of his eventual caving in to “the system.” I saw this as weak; I fancied myself and my ideals far studier than Winston. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the concept of big brother and still find myself saying, “I guess I’ve read *1984* too many times,” when professing a concern which sounds paranoid to others.

I learned later that most of the secondary teachers didn’t show up until arena had started. It was easy to tell the elementary from the secondary teachers here. Teachers tend to take on some of the traits of the level they teach. Elementary teachers squirm in their chairs, talk loudly and excitedly, give big dramatic hugs to their acquaintances and in general are excited about life. High school teachers sit in the back and snicker making snide and caustic remarks about the elementary teachers and anyone else, while suspiciously looking over their shoulders at the administrators.

Teachers had already dismantled some of the neatly arranged rows. I tapped someone next to me and inquired, “Who is the woman at the podium?” The woman next to me responded nonchalantly, “She is a principal in another district.” This woman looked me up and down, narrowed her eyes, and asked, “Where do you work?”

“Right now I’m at Emerson, but I’m laid off next year.”

“Ah,”

I wasn't competition; she visibly relaxed her face.

The elementary principal stood scanning the crowd and pursing her lips. I could see her irritation and wondered how long she spent getting the chairs in perfect rows; I wondered why it seemed to matter so much to her. I went back to my book, but it was too loud to focus. Teaching was already starting to change me, and instead of pulling away from people I desperately wanted to connect with someone.

After a while, I saw Betsy walk in. I waved at her, and she came over. Soon we had a number of Betsy's friends in a circle chatting. Betsy, though she graduated after me, had been working for the unified district longer, so she had more seniority than I did. I tried really hard to pretend this didn't bother me, but I knew I wasn't that good of a person yet. Amid my small talk with Betsy, I informed her that Kate, my former roommate, had left teaching for grad school in another state. Betsy informed me that another classmate from our English education classes had left for grad school in library science. Other classmates had been laid off and didn't return to teaching, including Abby and Hannah. At least one had been fired for sharing an overly personal and inappropriate poem of his own to his students.

Administrators gathered in the back of the room. The nasally woman started to talk into the microphone again. She cleared her throat and began, "Your department is listed alphabetically on the screen above me. It will be updated as changes are made in the back. This may take some time to update after each change. Once we get through the first round, positions will move faster so pay close attention." The room felt heated with the anxiety of worried, laid-off teachers.

I nudged Betsy to get her attention and whispered, leaning towards her, "I can't believe you are here. I figured you'd be safe from this with your time in already." Teachers talked about positions in terms of 1.0 or 0.1. If you have a 1.0 that was 100 percent full time. Every 0.1 was

one semester of one class, but most positions were listed as a full year. One section of English for a year was a 0.2.

She moaned, “Yeah, well they took Marge’s leadership position away. That means she has to pick up a 0.4.”

“So you mean Marge is laid off too?” I widened my eyes.

“Yup,” Betsy declared without taking her eyes off the screen of positions. Betsy and I were affected because we were in Marge’s building and behind her in seniority. Though the union was there to help me, it also reinforced seniority, not a merit-based, pecking order.

Arena had started by calling up the art and business departments. Finally, it was our turn. I got up with Betsy, unsure if I should leave my workbag or not. Betsy left hers and carefully put it on her seat, reserving her seat for the next round. I followed suit. At the front of the gym, there was a narrow hallway leading to a small room where four to six people sat behind tables. When you arrived in this back room, you were required to give them your seniority sheet. They then asked you what district and what position you wanted. They made the change on the computer which fed to the projector in the large waiting room. Before we were allowed into this Holy of Holies, we were required to line up behind an administrative secretary in the order of our seniority. The secretary double-checked that we were in the right order and that we had the rest of our seniority sheet filled in correctly.

We all watched the update screen while waiting our turn to go back to the Holy of Holies. In line ahead of me were Marge, Betsy, June, and Keith. As each one headed back to the Holy of Holies, my heart sank. Marge picked up Betsy’s laid-off position. Betsy picked up a full time position at Austen High. June and Keith each picked up full time positions at Dickens Middle School. Nothing was left by the time I saw Keith go through to the Holy of Holies. I had more

teaching experience than Keith, June, and Betsy. I sat back down in the huge waiting area, crestfallen.

Betsy came back in to check on me and asked, "Was anything left for you?"

I shook my head trying not to look as frightened or disappointed as I felt. "Not in that first round, but I see there was a 1.0 at Rossetti High available. Could I bid on that?" I asked.

She looked up at the screen and back at the packet of job listings in my hand. "It says there is a special note for it." There was a paragraph about what the position entailed and what an ideal candidate would be. "Bottom line here is you qualify. It requires an English 300 certification and a temporary reading license. I think you should go for it."

I nodded while she spoke.

I got in line for round two. I was once more at the end of the line. I kept my eyes on the update screen and asked everyone in line (who would answer me) if anyone was going to pick up the Rossetti position. It was still free when I stepped up to the matter-of-fact administrative secretary. This was the closest I had been to the Holy of Holies yet.

"April, right?" She tried to look at me while glancing at my sheet. "What do you plan on posting for?"

"Rossetti High." Her thick, dark eyebrows went up; Rossetti High was in another district. It was poorly-funded, and people told me that it was full of bad kids who were criminals, sex offenders, junkies, and mentally ill. Picture the high school in the movie *Lean on Me* but without Morgan Freeman.

As she looked at my sheet, she frowned a little explaining, "You were laid off with a 0.8. You can't increase your position by picking up a 1.0. This other district has to make the call if they want to increase your contract to a 1.0." I sighed; nobody was standing behind me in line.

Who else is going to pick this up? She apologized, “I’m sorry April, but I can’t let you go through.”

“Can’t I just spilt up the position and pick up 0.8 today? Let the other unified district decide to ‘give’ me the 0.2 when they see fit?”

She was shaking her head before I finished. “I’m really sorry. Maybe you should talk to an administrator. The good news is that you came today.”

I wasn’t sure how that was good news. I sat back down.

When Betsy came back, she suggested we talk to Mr. Principal. Many of the larger high schools have one head principal and two to three associate principals. We chatted with them, and they seemed confident that I would get the position; they encouraged me to stay.

The night wore on and nothing changed. Anyone I talked to encouraged me to stay, but assured me *they* couldn’t split the position. By about 10:30 we were having another chat with Betsy, Mr. Associate Principal, and Mr. Head Principal. The custodians were stacking the metal folding chairs on carts. It was time to go home. I had spent six hours to pick up a position and walked away that night without a job for next year.

About two months later, the neighboring district finally allowed me to increase my contract and bid on the Rossetti High School position. It had cost me two months of worry and a wasted tense evening to beg for and be granted the scraps. However, I could have been one of the hundreds of out-of-work or underworked teachers in the state. I should have been grateful.

## Chapter 2

### Inside the Classroom and Out of my Mind

#### Why Did I Think This Was a Good Idea?

In 2012, Beth Aviv wrote an article for *The English Journal*, a popular professional journal for secondary English teachers, called “A Billable Services List: Paying Teachers More Like Doctors.” The article is a coy response to the current buzzword of education in recent years: “professional.” Administrators and the public are comparing teachers to professionals and then telling us what professionals do and are. If teachers are supposed to be more “professional,” Aviv writes, then they should be paid as such. Her article includes a long bulleted list of pay for the tasks teachers routinely perform. Some of my favorites include:

- “\$4,962 Differentiating reading assignments so gifted students read 700-page books and struggling students read 100-page books.”
- “\$2,831 Meeting with a father who defends his daughter’s right to plagiarize and who claims it was only eight sentences, so what really is the big deal?”
- “\$27 Gently waking a student who’s too tired to stay awake in class.
- “\$48 Investigating why a student was too tired to stay awake in class: up too late tweeting or texting, trouble at home, working long hours, drugs, alcohol?”
- “\$28 Emailing a counselor about the student who’s too tired to stay awake in class.”
- “\$320 Scribbling hall and bathroom passes; not caring if the writing is legible.”
- “\$600 Teaching Vonnegut’s Harrison Bergeron and discussing how buzzers and pings interrupt Harrison’s thoughts every 20 minutes or so; hope they will connect this situation to the cell phones vibrating every 20 seconds in their pockets.”

When I showed this list to other teachers, most of them nodded silently and occasionally chuckled at Aviv’s witty take on a problem we all understand. There is a lot more to what my job

entails than what meets the eye. Teaching in a high school means being flexible and having a wide variety of skills which are often taken for granted by administrators, parents, and students but are no less complex than the skills a doctor uses to perform his or her services.

I would imagine the general public knows that I lecture, teach, create projects and assignments, assess, and generate report cards. I think the public doesn't understand that it takes me approximately 10-20 minutes to grade an essay, and that I have approximately 150 students per semester. If I assign three essays a semester, with an average of fifteen minutes per essay, that results in a total of 112.5 hours of work outside the school day just to grade three essays for one semester. This does not count the constant daily and busy work high school students need in order to build the skills they need to write an essay. I should have been a math teacher.

All of the planning and most of the grading is probably about fifty percent of my workload. This workload is not seen or appreciated by students, parents, administrators, or the public in part because it happens behind closed doors and outside the school day. I am required to compile four report cards, one for each quarter, and another four progress reports for each and every one of my 150 students. My colleagues and I were promised years ago that when the electronic grade books came out these progress reports would be eliminated, but so far that hasn't happened. If a student earns a D or F, I am also required to give a comment or two, but we are encouraged to give comments on every student. This results in a total of 1200 report cards and an ideal 1200-2400 comments. This does not count the possible 1200+ conversations, arguments, excuses, pleads, and demands about grades. I often feel like my time and work I put into my job is unappreciated in an already unglamorous job.

Perhaps even more hidden are some of the job titles I am expected to live up to in addition to teacher: youth librarian, counselor, discussion leader, homeroom dispenser of important information, guidance counselor, social worker, expert in compromising, child

development professional, teen/student advocate, copier, copier technician, low technology alternative to all planned activities in case of network/power outage, mediator, janitor, listener, writer, parent liaison, benevolent monarch, literary critic, movie critic, expert in conflict resolution, family counselor, nurse, motivator, secretary, attendance and hall monitor, and school security officer. It's too bad there isn't an extra stipend for each of these unofficial titles.

### **Homeroom Room Teacher**

*See also: counselor, special education teacher, mom, juggler, chocolatier, fire safety officer, photographer, survey taker, career counselor, personal finance advisor, and prison warden.*

The bell rang at Rossetti High and my twenty minutes of babysitting, otherwise known as homeroom, began. The teacher in charge of the yearbook kept emailing me with the seniors in my homeroom who hadn't turned in a senior photo yet. After weeks, I was down to just one student.

I saw the email containing Drew's name again and stood up. "Drew, I got another email from Ms. Yearbook again. Stand up." I liked Drew. He was goofy, but exceptionally kind and respectful to me; he looked at me with a question on his face.

"Why?" he asked, but stood up anyway.

"Because *I'm* going to take a picture of you and send it to Ms. Yearbook. Why don't you stand up against that wall. Smile."

He complied, and I snapped the picture with my phone and showed it to Drew. I got the impression he didn't have much money, so I wanted him to like his picture. Rossetti High was not as rough as people had made it out to be and I was glad I had got the position after all.

"Are you ok with that picture Drew?" I asked before hitting send on my phone. He nodded. "If you want to submit another one, I'm sure she will still take late photos for a week or

two, but for now at least, you have a photo for the yearbook.” I walked back to my desk and remembered I had a survey to handout. These surveys were placed in our mailboxes in the office, and this often meant we had to make a special run to get them since homeroom was sandwiched between two teaching hours.

I cleared my throat and accessed my teacher voice, “Folks please have a seat. I have a survey for you to fill out.” That was the purpose of homeroom. To complete inane tasks which had nothing to do with teaching English. Everyone was supposed to have a homeroom, but some teachers were miraculously excused. I saw them walking by as I endured my daily babysitting.

“Here is a list of all the adults in the school. You are supposed to circle the names of the adults you feel care about you.” We did this every year, so I didn’t feel obligated to explain any more unless there was a question.

I handed out the surveys by row and told them to put them on my podium when done. Students read them quickly, discussing teachers with smiles and disgust. This was called a “dots” activity. The official reason we did this was to make sure all students felt like they had a couple adults they could talk to. However, as veteran teachers were quick to point out, there was a large gap between the ideal and the reality in education. Ideally, teachers would spend time teaching, not conducting customer service surveys with teenagers who sometimes didn’t possess the maturity or wisdom to recognize tough love or high standards for what they were. How many professionals would actually want to be assessed by teenagers? Are prison wardens assessed by prisoners who have no choice about leaving the building?

These surveys felt more like a popularity contest; I remembered my first year with Drew as a homeroom student. Drew loudly declared, “Well I’m circling Ms. V because I think she’s pretty cool.” I wasn’t sure how many suicides this type of thing has prevented, but it was data administrators can tout, another popular buzz word in education lately-- data. About a week later,

teachers were emailed with how many students circled his/her name. I went back to my desk to send in attendance for homeroom. Maria was standing at my desk.

She was pacing back and forth, as usual, looking at her cell phone.

“So I have an interview tonight for a job. I’m kind of nervous.”

Maria and I had a small conversation almost every day during homeroom. I wasn’t sure why she liked me, but I looked forward to our chats. She was pretty, despite her acne, had long dark hair and, though she was a little overweight, wore tasteful skirts. She had a habit of absentmindedly playing with her hair and pacing when she talked to me.

I looked up from my computer. “Really? Where?”

She shrugged, attempting to look casual when I could see she was really excited and nervous. “It’s at an Indian restaurant on Main Street.”

“Really? Curry Flavor is one of my favorite places!”

“Where do you want this stupid thing, Teach?” Boris a large student who attended mostly special education pull-out classes shoved a survey about an inch from my face. I took it without saying anything. Boris didn’t move. My room had a narrow entrance way. My desk was pushed up against wall, and as kids entered my room they entered between two rows of student desks. Kids could only enter and exit single file. He stayed in the entrance-way while I continued to talk with Maria.

Maria turned back to me. “You heard of it?”

Just then Boris attempted to unplug something from the back of my computer and realized he couldn’t because our new computers had a “cage” around the back. Instead, he turned off the monitor. I calmly turned the monitor back on.

“Yes,” I responded, “my husband and I go there or get take out from there a couple times a month. It’s one of our favorite places to go.” I stood up making eye contact with her. At this point, Boris turned off the light switch.

“It’s no big deal really, they just need someone to bus tables I guess.” Maria was looking at something on her smart phone.

I nodded at her, ignoring the fact that Boris had started to go through my small plastic post-it organizer which sat on the front of my desk. The small desk organizer had two drawers and a top, and Boris was pulling out each item.

“Everyone has to start somewhere Maria. My first official job besides babysitting was waiting tables.” I interrupted myself, “Boris, put that down, post–its aren’t cheap.”

He put it back but said loudly, “So what? Why should I care?” This was a daily twenty minute battle between Boris and I. Maria was used to talking around him as they both vied for my attention. When I first had Boris his freshmen year, he would make a point of saying “I hate school” or something like that every day, so I started calling him “Sunshine.” Each time I checked his obnoxious behavior, it evolved.

“Really?” Maria smiled. While she was pacing back and forth in front of my door, she looked over at my “I went to college” sign that the principal printed for everyone. She pointed at it. “I’m hoping to make enough money to go to college. What do you think about college?”

I smiled. “College was one of the best times in my life.”

“Whatever,” Boris said, “college is stupid.” I didn’t respond to him, and since he had lost this time, he walked away.

“If I go, I will be the first in my family to go to college. It’s just so expensive.” Maria said.

I sobered a little and looked at her. “Where have you looked?”

She listed a couple public and private colleges. “What do you think?”

I shrugged. “Maria you have to find something that works for *you*.” I said, “but I will share with you a fact. I went to public universities and before I was thirty, I had my student loans paid off. My parents weren’t able to help me much, and I worked my way through college. I was the first in my family to go too. You can certainly handle it.”

Just then Anastasia, Ana for short and a teacher whose classroom was directly upstairs from mine, burst in. I could hear her chunky wedged heels before I saw her, and she was unabashedly walking around my desk to where I sat. She was mumbling, “I need my pills.” She grabbed three dove chocolates from my candy drawer and walked back to her homeroom without saying anything else.

Maria looked a little stunned. “You were really the first in your family?” I nodded my head. The bell rang, and the kids rushed past Maria on their way out the door. She waited for the rush and crossed the stream of traffic to get her bag back at her seat in the second row.

“Have a good day, Ms. Vandehei” she said, putting the strap over her shoulder. Maria paused at my desk.

“Good luck on your interview tonight,” I said, “I’m sure you’ll get the job.”

When Maria and Boris would graduate a year later, I walked my homeroom to the gym for the ceremony. Both of them sought me out and gave me a hug.

### **Task Master**

*See also: ADHD expert, multitasking guru, reading coach, welcoming committee, librarian, mom, hallway monitor, triage nurse, stock clerk, teen comic, compromise warrior, time management expert, and negotiator.*

My calendar for students said “Read Day.” What could be simpler than to have students read a book in an English class? All students already had their copy of the book, and we had been doing this for weeks.

As people and politicians outside my profession seem to think, a trained monkey could do this job.

It was homecoming week at Rossetti High. School had been in session for six weeks. Today’s theme was shine and sparkle. There was a different theme for each of the five days of the week, with school colors on Friday. Some teachers went along with the themes; others didn’t. I wasn’t particularly ashamed about being a grown woman without clothing that shines or sparkles. When I was in college, my fellow future teachers and I would proudly predict that homecoming would make no difference on the rigor of our classes. Several years of teaching had taught me to ease up homecoming week to survive. Kids who were in clubs or band missed class, which meant all of the next week I had to catch up students on what was missed. Some classes came to an academic halt altogether. I compromised by having students write about the main character’s homecoming experience in Laurie Halse Anderson’s novel *Speak* and used that as a way to discuss student expectations and anxieties about their own first homecoming experience. Ideally, rigor would be maintained and instructional time kept sacred. Realistically, I allowed students to end the lesson a few minutes early, so they could take pictures of their sparkle and shining classmates.

Administrators sent out emails reminding us to both keep the kids’ behavior appropriate, and remember the joys of our own high school homecomings, which they assumed were magical treasured memories.

It is usually during homecoming week that a sarcastic teacher commented that it would be so much easier and cheaper to medicate the teachers instead of attempting to reign in the kids.

We had done “read aloud” in class 10-15 times already that year, so students were familiar with my procedure. We were finishing up *Speak*.

In my classroom, reading aloud was extra credit and by volunteer only. We made a “batting order” on the back whiteboard and every kid read at least one paragraph; they were always welcome to read more. This prevented parents from complaining that reading in an English classroom was mandatory (God forbid!) and kept kids who liked to be part of everything (or just squirmy) meaningfully engaged. In a perfect world, every student would read aloud and improve his/her reading skills.

I was happily surprised to see Angelo volunteered. His mom had emailed me the day before worried about his low grade. He was a nice but a quiet young man who genuinely struggled to keep up. A new student showed up at this point, and I quickly found her an empty seat and gave her a copy of *Speak*. I wrote down the long barcode numbers and made a mental note to email the librarian with the number to check it out to her.

Walking back to the seat I gave her, I handed her the book and leaned over and whispered, “Just follow along today. We’ll talk tomorrow about getting caught up.” Kids occasionally just showed up without warning to my class, and I had to find them a seat, a book, and something to do at a moment’s notice. The guidance office didn’t prioritize telling teachers about new students. These were the kids whose parents had decided to move in the middle of the semester. They were often behavior problems from day one, and teachers were given no information about them. Quite often when (and if) you got their previous grades, they were failing. The girl who just walked in would leave the school and district before the semester ended. This is the type of thing teachers are up against.

We started on page 173, and by page 175 it was Harold’s turn. When there was swearing in the material we read aloud, they had an option. They could read it as is, skip it or substitute

it—whatever they were most comfortable with. Harold was a senior retaking this freshmen class and was a lean, handsome Hispanic boy with short cropped hair and a perpetual look of mischief in his eyes. Harold's turn began with "She's a bitch." He said this, isolating and making the word "bitch" a little louder; he paused with a big smile on his face, looking at me. The kids laughed.

"You are just so excited to say that without getting in trouble, aren't you?" I said in my most sardonic voice. He and the class snickered, and we were back on track.

About ten minutes into our reading, three student services TAs (teaching assistants) opened my classroom door. Two of them had passes for my students, and the third kid seemed to just be following his girlfriend around. One TA hissed, "Fresssssshmen!" They handed me the passes and were talking loudly to each other and walked out of the door without shutting it behind them. I sighed heavily and closed the door. I planned to shoot Head Secretary an email and ask her to remind her TAs to be as invisible as possible. I highly doubted she would send three.

Jeremy came up to me holding his stomach and looking pale. He was a small student athlete who lost playing time due to bad grades. His parents seemed to be playing a chess game with him as the pawn. I did battle with him at the beginning of the year over his constant bathroom breaks, which were less about a small bladder and more about a short attention span. "Can I go to the bathroom?" he pleaded. He might have been faking, but there was no way I was going to gamble on this one.

"Go," I whispered and pointed out the door. The reading remained uninterrupted, and as I was listening and reading along, Jasmine, by the window, rocked back and forth on a squeaky chair looking out the window. Just then, she looked around at her classmates, seemingly just realizing what we had been doing for the last fifteen minutes.

She stormed to the front of the room and said, "Can I have a book?"

I didn't bother with 'where is yours' and 'why didn't you bring it today' or even 'how is it possible that you just noticed you didn't have it?' Saying nothing because I didn't want to interrupt the reading, I reached under my podium and produced an extra copy. I kept about five on hand for such occasions.

On her way back to her desk, Jasmine knocked a piece of paper off Hannah's desk. Jasmine didn't notice, but Hannah and Isaiah who sat next to her did. Hannah couldn't reach it, and Isaiah gallantly picked it up for her and put it back on Hannah's desk. I smiled at him and mouthed "thank you."

I made a point of noticing my students doing something good and thanking them for it. Teenagers are much kinder than many people would have you believe. It's important that adults recognize it.

Everyone seemed to have a cold, and I had been running through the facial tissue my students had donated fast. The school administration refused or "couldn't afford" to supply classrooms with facial tissue, and in the same breath, they looked down on teachers who allowed students out of the room for such a basic thing as using the bathroom to blow their noses. A couple years ago, I had offered extra credit to students who brought in a tissue box. I had been buying them out of my own pocket, but to supply 150 teenagers with facial tissue for nine months added up fast, especially during our long Wisconsin winters. I found out after the fact that offering extra credit for purchased items was also strictly forbidden since it put kids with money ahead of kids without. The tissue box was empty; I made another mental note to get a full one when the bell rang. I tried to move as little as possible during our read alouds to cut down on distractions.

I was pulled back to the reading as I heard a kid in a strange repeating cycle of "too. Do you." He said this at least three times before he seemed to right himself smiled and continued. He

read an extra paragraph as if to make up for the earlier misstep. Some of the kids were great readers, and some of them were quite painful to hear reading aloud. Though some were strong and some weak, I took pride in the fact that even weak readers felt safe in my room. Hearing them read also gave me an insight into students' literacy skills and struggles.

It was Hannah's turn now, and I loved listening to her read. She not only followed the pauses of punctuation correctly (including question marks which many kids read through in a monotone), but she also put feeling into what was being said. Though Hannah was a strong reader, she read leper as leaper. I didn't want to interrupt to correct her and let it go. Every year as my students and I have continued to read *Speak*, however, I have had to laugh at one particular error students consistently have made. Early in the book, the character talks about being a candy striper. Students have always read this word as *stripper*, and I've corrected them by saying "striper... big difference" in a dry voice. This always has made kids laugh.

It was now Isaiah's turn to read. Isaiah had dumped glitter in honor of the homecoming week theme into his short cropped, curly black hair that would retain this glitter for three weeks. There was also a glitter puddle around his desk.

He had lost his place, and I supplied, "Middle of page 183, 'I didn't call.'" He stopped because it didn't make sense to him.

Pete leant over and said, "She's writing a letter, but then stopped."

Isaiah smiled with understanding, "Oh ok," and he continued. Just then, I heard a loud thumping of bass from someone with a stereo cranked up; I knew: Mr. Unprofessional. My classroom had two neighbors: Mr. Unprofessional on one side and Marge on the other side. Ana was above me. When students talked about Mr. Unprofessional their conversation usually ended with "How does that guy still have a job?" When teenagers could so accurately assess the situation, it angered me that he was allowed to continue teaching. Nevertheless, we were all

subjected to the “act like a professional” lectures we got in staff development. I looked up his extension and dialed quietly while my students paused briefly in the reading.

The phone rang at least five or six times. When he finally answered the phone, I politely asked him to turn down the music.

“What music?” he asked. I heard a whisper in the background, and the music had been turned down because the thumping stopped at the same time that the phone was answered.

“We could hear some loud music,” I said looking back at sixty freshmen eyes trained on me. I continued, weighing my words, “My students are trying to read.”

“I’m not playing any music,” he retorted. I was stunned and just hung up. Hanging up on people when you are in the middle of a teaching hour was really not the dramatic faux pas it might be other places.

I couldn’t believe he would lie to me like that, though. After hanging up, the music went back up. My seniors who were in his class that hour confirmed my suspicion later that day. There was no point in complaining to my superiors, nothing would be admitted or proven as far as they would be concerned, and it was a misdemeanor in their minds. I, however, couldn’t imagine why a teacher who disrupted the learning of others was not punished.

We were now up to page 186, and Melinda and her friends were talking about a guy who was notorious at the high school for being a sexual predator. One suggested they give him chemical castration in his orange juice and then another character asked the name of the drug. The character responded with “Dipro-something.” Kyle, who was always interrupting with questions, asked “Is that like Viagra?” I paused to think. If I didn’t answer, it would be a bigger deal and bigger distraction.

So I answered briefly, “Viagra does the opposite.”

Kids who felt themselves very grown up for knowing what Viagra was and what it did nodded knowingly. Most seemed to know it had something to do with sex but would probably look it up on their phone when they had a chance. Nevertheless, my answer seemed to have avoided more discussion.

Kyle butted in again at the end of the next paragraph: “Hey I want to read.” I told him to read the next paragraph. If he wanted extra credit, he could have spoken up when he had ample time to do so.

Just then, Jeremy returned, and I walked quietly over to his desk and inquired, “Do you need to go to the nurse?”

He shook his head, looking less sick. “No. I’m ok now.”

We were at the end of the batting order now, and I cut in after the last sentence. “Thank you everyone who read today. I’ll take it from here.”

I continued the reading; I didn’t rehearse or practice. But the kids loved it when I took over. I was a practiced smooth and good (not great) reader. I listened to audio books and attempted to read with a sense of what I was saying. I also wanted my errors and faults to be genuine and organic. I reminded my students continually that I am not a perfect reader, but I have become better from practice. I read on high speed, racing the clock. Just as I completed the final sentence of the chapter, the bell rang.

“Perfect timing,” I said aloud, as another part of me let out a sigh of relief. As the kids filed out, I singled out Angelo and said, “I’m so glad to see you read today.” He smiled quietly, and I knew what it was like to be a quiet kid in the room just hoping the teacher both ignored and noticed you at the same time.

“Jeremy, are you doing better?” I asked as he passed me on his way out the door. He just nodded and kept going; Jasmine set the borrowed book down on her way out; I had two more freshmen classes to teach.

My mind goes back to the old adage I frequently hear from family members, parents and community members, “anyone can teach.”

### **Conflict Resolution Ninja**

*See also: overdressed janitor, human relations representative, impotent facilities director, & caustic sunshine committee chair.*

It was late February in Wisconsin. We’d had one snow day already, and this day should have been our second. The roads were already bad at 7 a.m. when I pulled into my usual parking spot. I heard on the radio that we only had sunshine for four of the twenty-eight days in February. I somehow stumbled through my day and finally emerged at the final hour. I looked forward to this hour every day because I liked my seniors. They were fun, smart, and interesting to spend time with; it was also the only hour I had seniors instead of freshmen, so I was not super picky.

My room smelled like farts and vanilla air freshener as my last class of freshmen left and my seniors started to filter in.

Ethan beamed at me as he walked in. “Your room always smells good Ms. V. How do you do that?”

I was glad students could look (or smell) on the bright side. Most teachers did not use air fresheners, and those of us who did had “good” smelling rooms while everyone else’s room took on a strange combination of old wood, vinegar, farts, BO, and whatever type of body spray or lotion was popular among teenagers at the time... usually overdone and too strong for the size of the room. That didn’t include a couple times a year when someone burnt popcorn in the faculty

lounge (triggering a call to the fire department), a stinky unit the science folks do, or the culinary delights and horrors of the cooking lab. Even with these expected possibilities, I still ended up emailing the facilities secretary about three times a year with new smells. Recently I told her my room “smelled like a basement/bathroom.” Turns out the chemistry class was making urinal cakes, and it was drifting through my vent.

She emailed me back with a smiley face and said, “So you were pretty accurate.” Like it was supposed to make me happy about having a classroom which smelled like a urinal cake.

“Would you stop touching me!” a tall zit-faced boy yelled as he walked in quickly with a larger senior clinging to his backpack like a monkey. The hitchhiker was pulling on his backpack, and the boy was being whiplashed from the resulting collisions between bodies.

“It’s too hot in here,” James said staring accusingly at me.

I sat looking at my cold coffee mug. Lethargically, I looked up and responded, “Do you really think I have a say in the matter?” Now that he mentioned it, I realized my cardigan had been abandoned on my desk chair all afternoon. I was always cold so being comfortable in short-sleeves during the winter was a little rare for me. Another senior slumped into his desk complaining that his desk was bent and uncomfortable. He was right, but I had no say in that either unless it was actually broken. The desks in my room were particularly poor quality; they were too small for students to actually work on, and the poor design ensured that everyday someone tipped one or a whole row of desks over with an alarming bang.

The backpack grabby pair finally made their way back to one of their desks. On the way back, they knocked over a desk with someone’s drink on it. The desk hit the floor with a loud bang, and no matter how many times a day this happened, I almost always jumped.

“Thanks a lot Al!” Fiona said with her hands on her hips and her glasses slipping just slightly down her nose making her look like an angry librarian. “I went to Starbucks on my break for that!”

“It got on my bag!” Mary said.

“I got some on my white shirt!” James said. The perpetrator, Al, put his stuff down and ran out of the door towards the boy’s bathroom.

Another student went over to my tissue box. “No!” I yelled across the room, “I have paper toweling.” I banged my knee on the chair that should have been moved last hour. I threw Fiona a roll of paper toweling. We were both on our hands and knees (me in a skirt and heels) as students were moving desks, backpacks and other items to facilitate our clean up. Luckily this happened with seniors who actually helped. Freshmen generally would just stand around staring until ordered to help. I waded back out from the spill sideways in the narrow student rows, which were quite literally six inches apart, and I snagged my nylons on the Velcro on someone’s backpack while trying to walk back to the garbage can at the front to toss the coffee-soaked toweling. Just then, Al walked in with a handful of brown paper towels hastily removed from the bathroom.

“Nice timing dip shit,” a friend of Al’s said. Only a friend of his would have got away with that.

“I was trying to help!” Al said. I brushed off the dust on my nylons and put the paper toweling away.

I turned around to see Dave, one of my freshmen, still standing by my desk. When he made eye contact with me he said, “Ms. Vandehei, can I have all my missing assignments from the beginning of the semester?” He had been standing in the doorway scared of my seniors and waiting for me to finish.

“What do you mean all of your missing assignments?” I asked across the room.

“I was on your online gradebook,” he started, “and I want all my missing assignments. Can you make a list for me?” He just stood there expectantly. When I entered student grades and assignments electronically, parents and students could access this information online.

Exasperated, I replied, “If you were on my online gradebook, then *you* can make the list. You know most of your writing assignments are posted to my website anyway; you can just print them out.”

“Oh.” He looked around still expecting me to jump for him. My seniors were now watching this exchange with interest and amusement.

“Dave,” I said, “I have a class to teach.” He didn’t really get the connection between me teaching and me being unable to magically put together a semester’s worth of work for him at a moment’s notice.

Ken in the back said, “Ms. V, did you know someone tied the string on the window shade to the heater?” My pull-down window shades needed a rope attached to each one so that someone no shorter than myself can reach the rope when the shade was completely up. While he said this, he finally liberated the cord and pulled it up, allowing the bright afternoon sun in from my west-facing windows.

“Close the damn shade!” Al said squinting. “Can’t you see she has the projector on?”

“Are we really getting more notes?” John whined, knowing that I use my projector to put up powerpoints or word documents with notes.

“Is that on the calendar dumb ass?” Mary said. I smiled and took my place at the podium. This class was supposed to be my mental dessert of the day. These kids were the best and the brightest my school had to offer an English teacher.

It had been snowing since early this morning, and my seniors told me the roads were terrible. They all knew this because most of them decided to leave campus for lunch. This fact somehow did not contradict their consensus that today should have been a snow day. Ken closed the shade.

John raised his hand asking, “Seriously Ms. V can I move... my chair is so hot right now.” I didn’t need to go over and assess this fact. The row up against the windows also had the heater built into the wall. The size of my classroom dictated that I had to use this wall for student desks regardless of this fact. I knew how warm these desks got because I occasionally ate lunch in the ones close to the heater for that very reason.

“Yeah, just find a place where you won’t get yourself into trouble John.”

“Ah Ms. V,” he replied grinning, “When do I ever get into trouble?”

He was smiling way too much not to already be plotting trouble, and I said, “I remember something about the comment you wrote on Mary’s essay.”

He smiled wider. “But I did that from my assigned seat, and I was quiet doing it.”

I sighed. He was right. His talent for being naughty far outweighed my talent for seating arrangements. I doubted real college freshmen English class needed to have seating arrangements. Of course college professors were not also burdened with the fact that most of my students knew each other well (for better or worse) and had been in school together since kindergarten.

“Alright,” I finally began, “Does anyone have any questions before I get the documentary started for today?”

Ethan smiled up at me in an overly childish way for a young man of eighteen. “How was your day?” Something about this young man reminded me of a kindergartener. He had a round face and was boyishly chubby. He was also smart, ironic, and responsible, but when I looked at him I couldn’t help seeing him as a five year old who just wanted to make his teacher smile.

“I need more coffee, and my freshmen are driving me nuts. How was yours?” I leaned onto my podium and reached for the water I was supposed to drink all day and hadn’t touched since about eight due to constant distractions.

“What did they do this time?” he asked.

I knew this was a stalling technique because I was fairly good at it myself when I was in middle school, but the movie clip I was going to show them today was only 40 minutes, and I know I had a little bit of time to fill anyway, so I answered him.

“A study hall teacher of one of my freshmen emailed me today. I had emailed her previously to let her know a student of ours owes me an essay. She said she’d be happy to motivate him during study hall since he usually just sits there. So, she told him to start working on his essay today. He told her that he had never heard of me and wasn’t currently taking an English class.” Every student had to take an English class every year they were in high school. My seniors knew this. I could see faces starting to twitch and glances being exchanged. They wanted to laugh but weren’t sure if they should. I chuckled, giving them permission. “Where do kids come up with stuff like that?”

Mary, who was already planning on being a teacher herself and possessed the right combination of bossiness tempered with a friendly can-do attitude piped up, “I never would have said that to a teacher or thought that that could work!” She was appalled. I was mildly amused at his creative problem solving. This was the type of thing college education classes should cover.

I looked at the clock and knew we needed to move on.

“All right, you each have the half sheet of paper you picked up as you were walking in. Be sure to answer those three questions during or after the documentary I’m showing you today.” A couple students who did not see the note on the board sheepishly got up and grabbed the half sheet. I pressed play, and the documentary began. I took my seat at my desk with the remote.

In an overly whiny voice, Fiona asked, “Can we do something about the heat?” Ken got up and opened the shade again to the communal annoyance of the class. It took him and Al to jointly open the window and provide a bit of cross ventilation. What was sad about this was I knew Ana’s room was probably around sixty degrees while mine was probably close to eighty.

“Nice job Ken!” John piped up, “I can’t see the movie!”

I got up from my desk and went to close the shade on my classroom door to shut out some of the glare and said, “Aren’t we all in a great mood today!” There was a general smirking which soon turned into muffled giggles. They settled into the documentary and focused while I mused about what teaching an actual class of college freshmen English would be like.

## Chapter 3

### Power

#### Parental Controls

I walked out of Rossetti High's guidance office slowly. I didn't feel like crying as I looked at the linoleum hallway in front of me. The bell had already rung, and the halls were starting to thin out, which meant I had about a minute to get to my next class. The show had to go on, and my feelings weren't relevant. I would have to put up with teenage pranks and attitudes. I could not react with annoyance or anger.

Tom was an athletic, but short, young man with short curly blond hair who never made eye contact. He had been in my first hour senior class and seemed to struggle. He scored low on the quizzes I gave each week. He also began missing class 2-3 times per week.

When I checked with the attendance record online, they had him as "present" for the days I knew he wasn't in class, and I had marked him absent.

"Why does his attendance record show him as present?" I asked the secretary in charge of attendance.

"His mom called him in for an appointment," she responded without looking away from her computer screen. "When it's excused, I change the record over to 'present.'"

"Why? That doesn't make for an accurate record does it? Aren't there other options? I mean if he is physically not in my class shouldn't the record reflect that?"

She looked at me blankly. I found out later she was new to taking care of attendance and had not yet figured out that an excused absence was still recorded as absent, not present. But I was only a teacher. How could I aspire to understand the greater intricacies of her job? I gave up.

In schools there are two groups of people who have the power to make your life miserable: secretaries—guardians to information—and custodians. Never piss them off. I usually make it a habit of leaving a chocolate bar or treat of some sort with a thank you note within the first week of school to let them know I appreciate their work. This usually means my room is cleaner than most and my classroom requests are taken care of.

As the weeks went by, Tom predictably did worse in my class. He also neglected the work he had missed with his frequent “appointments.” I contacted guidance counselors to no avail. In my training as a teacher in college, this type of problem was never acknowledged to exist. How were you supposed to tell a parent to grow up and stop enabling her child to legally skip class?

Just before Christmas break, I gave a difficult assignment. Each student was required to memorize one speech from Shakespeare. This, I told students, was to help them better understand Shakespearean language. I had been given the same assignment as a student and couldn’t believe what a difference it made in my understanding of Shakespeare. To set a good example, I too memorized a speech from *Hamlet*. Some students did very well, others struggled. Almost all did the assignment, and I was pleasantly surprised how well my students did overall. A couple kids even tried the longer “To be or not to be” monologue from *Hamlet*.

Tom had an unexcused absence for the speech days. I expected this. His best grade all year in my class had been a C, and as his absences grew, it soon sunk to a D. Now missing a major assignment, it looked like he would certainly fail the semester. He was a senior, and this would involve doubling up on English next semester or not graduating on time.

By Christmas break, I had assumed he planned to double up on English the following semester. I had contacted Mrs. Supportive, his guidance counselor, to let her know Tom was in danger of failing my class. She met with him, and I thought after this meeting everything was

resolved. Mrs. Supportive was also capable of addressing his credit concerns in the privacy of her office. He did not ask questions in or out of class, and despite my recommendations at parent-teacher conferences, he did not contact me with concerns or questions.

High school semesters generally end the second or third week of January. It was now the beginning of the third week in January. Though the next hour was my prep, I was giving it up to meet with Tom, his mom and Mrs. Supportive.

Tom and his mom showed up after me, and we sat in an uncomfortable silence until Mrs. Supportive called us all into her office. This meeting was pointless. I knew that, and I think Mrs. Supportive and Tom knew that. It was days to the end of the semester, and he was going to fail.

Mrs. Supportive started with the usual pleasantries that we “are all here to help Tom.” Mom glared at me, and Tom stared off blankly, used to Mom fighting his battles. I pictured him still living in her basement at the age of thirty.

This meeting wasn’t about Tom; it was about his mom. She didn’t bother looking at me when she started talking about me.

“I would like to know exactly why this woman,” she pointed at me, “is allowed to fail my son. I mean last year whoever was teaching seniors didn’t make students memorize a speech, and then when Tom contacted her she said she could help.”

I was tense; I could feel my heart pounding, but I tried to look calm and unemotional when I said quietly, “Saying I can help is not the same as guaranteeing he will pass.”

Ignoring me, she continued, “I mean we transferred him from private school in a neighboring district because I figured he should have no problem passing classes here since public school is such a joke. I mean how is she even allowed to assign a speech?”

Mrs. Supportive said nothing, so I had to respond: “Actually the curriculum allows for the teacher to decide what activities are done to achieve the skills and objectives listed. Assigning a speech in a communication class was well within the guidelines--”

“Well I don’t think that’s right. I mean this isn’t a speech class. Tom took that last year and then had to take it again online because he has a problem speaking in public. So you’re saying because this woman assigns a speech, my son doesn’t graduate on time? You’ll be sure Mr. Principal will hear about this.”

Mrs. Supportive actually stepped in. “I see from Tom’s report card that he got a D- at the end of the first quarter. That means that he was in danger of failing this class well before this assignment.”

His mom sputtered, “Tom was ill on the day he was supposed to do the speech.” Actually, Tom had an unexcused absence, and sometime in the days that followed, Tom’s mom had called him in for a retroactive “appointment” to cover his ass. My guidelines were clear (because I had written them with Tom specifically in mind): he had to present on the day he got back, and since he had actually attended and been marked present for every hour of the day except my class, there was no reason he shouldn’t be able to present on the day he “got back.”

Mrs. Supportive looked at me hopefully. “Alright, can we have Tom do the speech tomorrow then?” I perked up hoping this would be an amicable solution.

Before I could answer, Mom cut in and said while looking at Mrs. Supportive, “Actually, Mrs. Supportive, I had emailed this woman asking for an alternative assignment, and she did not respond to me.”

I leaned over and said to Mrs. Supportive, “They both emailed me over winter break.” I turned to Tom and looked him in the eye. He avoided my eye contact, but I spoke to him

nonetheless. “Tom I emailed you twice over break. And Ms. Denial, I am not required to work over winter break, but I responded anyway.”

“I had a daughter graduate from private school and she did not have to memorize a speech. What irritates me the most is that you were out to get Tom from the beginning!” Mrs. Supportive cleared her throat, and for a moment I thought she might mediate the situation, which was starting to escalate.

Mrs. Supportive said nothing.

I took a deep breath. “That is not true. Can I schedule Tom to recite the speech tomorrow or later today?”

“What? We offered for him to write an essay or make this up in some other way. I don’t see why he should have to recite a speech for this class. I have heard from Tom what this woman is like. She is out to get students and enjoys seeing them fail. She is unwilling to help Tom pass the class.”

I was baffled; could she really not see her role in this farce? She was the one calling him in for all those “appointments.” I said none of this and instead responded, “I am certainly—”

“Exactly how long have you been teaching here? I’ve never heard of you before.”

Mrs. Supportive cut in: “I don’t really think this is constructive.” Tom was actually in danger of failing a few other classes which meant even if he passed my class, he still might not graduate on time. “Perhaps we should put Tom in an easier English class next semester or he could double up on English classes to allow him to graduate on time.”

Ms. Denial was already shaking her head. “Tom doesn’t need an easier class. He needs a better teacher. One who actually cares and wants to help students. I want Tom out of her class and put into another teacher’s English class.”

Mrs. Supportive sighed. “We can’t do that; it needs to be a level issue. If we take him out of her class, we have to move him down a level.” The blaming and berating continued, and I sat there passively. I was relieved to hear the bell ring and excuse myself, saying I had a class to teach. Mrs. Supportive nodded at my exit.

Tom’s mom was good to her word; she emailed Mr. Principal. When Mr. Principal asked me to explain her angry email, I responded with a twelve page document including the emails sent back and forth, the assignment outline and rubric, and a copy of all his assignments/grades in my class. Mr. Principal’s lack of reply to me was my only indication that I was right. Had I been wrong, more meetings and brow beatings would have followed.

My only fault was attempting to be fair, consistent, and maintain high educational standards, and for that teachers feel punished with meetings like this. What good are ideals or standards when people who are neither professionals nor experts are allowed to ridicule and dismantle teachers without just cause?

My face was hot as I rounded the corner to my next class, and I could still feel a lump in my throat. I stopped at the bubbler to get a drink. The cold water helped. I took a deep breath, and I walked in; the kids were loudly talking. Fiona approached me with a favor. She gave me the sheet guidance hands out to kids for letters of recommendation and said, “I filled out all my information already; do you think you’d be willing to write me a letter of recommendation?”

I smiled at her and numbly took the paper, hearing myself say, “Sure.” I made my way to the front of the room with a dry, but slightly flushed face, and began class suppressing the lump in my throat. There were always other kids who needed me.

**A Little Guidance Please...**

It was early in the school year, only the first couple weeks had passed, but Sandy, an English teacher, sent out an email asking us if anyone would be interested in talking to guidance about course expectations for English classes. Sandy was a short round woman with thinning gray hair and a chaotic energy about anything she was passionate about. The subtext which she did not include was that she was unhappy with the kids they had put in her classes. More than a couple dozen emails flurried back and forth; Ms. Grump, unhelpful guidance counselor, shot down each date. However, after involving an administrator, we finally nailed down a date and time.

I arrived early and nodded at people as they came in; guidance counselors sat on one side of the table, one administrator was present between the two groups, and English teachers collected around the other side of the table. I noticed Ms. Grump hadn't even bothered to show up.

Gathered were only two of the five guidance counselors. The entire English department had shown up. People sat uneasily shuffling papers; we all knew that this meeting was called because there was a problem.

"Alright," Sandy began, taking a deep breath and easing her chair up to the table. "I think we all have a copy of the email attachment I sent out, right?" There was an empty space in front Mrs. Supportive, which Sandy noticed. "No? Here's another copy, I brought a few extras down with me."

Sandy droned on for about ten minutes outlining what kinds of kids (low, regular or advanced) belonged in which classes.

Becky, the guidance counselor I actually liked, looked like an angry Muppet with dyed orange hair that was supposed to pass for natural. She wore the same style chinos every day and varied her tops with bulky sweaters in the winter and nondescript shells (sleeveless shirts) when it was warm. Everything she wore could be described as beige.

The problem with this meeting was that guidance counselors and teachers are technically equals but both were perfectly capable of pulling rank with the little power we had over the other when ruffled. Most teachers found the guidance counselors ineffective at best. When we found a student did not academically belong in a class of ours, they often did nothing until we carbon copied an administrator.

Becky was the exception to the rule. Becky tried, and unlike the rest of the guidance counselors, she actually responded to my emails regarding student concerns. Becky knew all of the two hundred students assigned to her by name. Sandy continued on down her two page, single-spaced list.

Becky finally erupted. “I don’t understand why we are not running some of our older semester-length English classes.”

I spoke up: “Other district high schools do not run semester-length English classes for good reasons. Putting kids who already struggle with English or who may not go to college in two English classes in one semester is begging for students to fail. We still have year-long classes for students who are essentially undecided about whether or not they want to attend a university.”

Sandy nodded, but Becky had another problem, “We used to be able to put students who weren’t ready for Senior English in those semester classes. I don’t understand why they suddenly aren’t being taught anymore.”

Sandy cocked her head in her typical fashion, nodding as she talked. “Becky that is actually a mistake.”

“If you read the district course description,” I continued where she left off, “the semester-length English classes are actually denoted as rigorous. I don’t know what was done before I got here, but we have to follow what the district has laid out in the course descriptions.” This was a lie. I knew exactly how these courses were taught. However, the woman who used to teach them

had since retired along with her slipshod approach to courses which were always supposed to be rigorous.

“Well, we really need an easy English class for students who might want to go to college. Senior English is too hard,” Becky said. I shook my head thinking what an oxymoron. An easy college prep English class. There was some more back and forth between Sandy and Becky and the rest of us looked like spectators at a tennis match. The meeting dragged on for half an hour now, and the five minute warning bell rang. We all had classes to get to before the first hour started. Scheduling a meeting before school though, as inconvenient as it may be, had the upside that there was a certain end to it.

Everyone got up, and Ana and I walked back to our rooms. I grumbled to Ana, “I’m not really sure if that got us anywhere. They will continue to put kids into the classes the students want to be in based on the schedule and who is teaching them. Students should be placed in classes that are at the level in which they need to be supported yet challenged. Why do they call their office ‘guidance’ at all? It should be ‘customer service’.” She nodded and we split off each to our classroom to start the morning class.

A week later I emailed Mrs. Supportive to tell her a student getting an F in my rigorous class should probably be moved to an easier class. Instead, the student stayed in my class until the semester ended. The student failed and lost the opportunity of earning half an English credit.

## **Political Pawns**

### *Starfish*

I have known many teachers in my career of over nine years in eight different buildings and three different cities. Being a teacher is more than a job for many of us. It’s part of our identity and how we see the world.

Anytime I ask colleagues why they became teachers, no matter how jaded or sardonic they are, they will usually say they wanted to make a difference. The more jaded teachers will say this with a bit of an apology in their voice, eyes averted, unwilling to admit they were once idealists. In fact, many of us could paraphrase Loren Eisely's "Star Thrower" from *The Unexpected Universe*; for me the words of this essay are so familiar they feel more like an oral incantation to the mythology of teaching. It's like the creation story of the first teacher.

There was a young woman walking along a shoreline. As the waves lapped, and the tide went out, she noticed the shore was littered with starfish. They had come up during high tide and were now stranded. If they did not make their way back into the ocean, they would die. As the young woman looked in front of her, she could see a man gently scooping up one starfish at a time and throwing them back into the ocean. This seemed to be a useless task. There was no way the man could get all the starfish back into the ocean before they died.

The young woman approached him and asked, "Why are you doing that? It won't make a difference in the long run. Don't you see the tide is still bringing in more yet?"

As she said this, the man picked up another starfish and tossed it back into the ocean and gently said, "It made a difference to that one."

Mr. Principal stood before us at the beginning of a new school year. He looked fatigued. Though it was only August, the remnants of the previous year's challenges were still evident in the lines on his forehead. Education is cyclical and is subject and victim to politics at the national, state, and local levels, and last year it felt like all three were making changes at once.

He held up a greeting card with the picture of a starfish on it. He chose this starfish story to share with my colleagues and me for our annual faculty welcome back the week before school

started. When he repeated this story to us, he asked us to “put it [a starfish card] on your desks to remind you of our mission here,” I could see a few of us fighting lumps in our throats.

“The Star Thrower,” though cliché, is in the heart of every *dedicated* teacher. It is our mantra. We are idealists disguised as realists, and most of the time it doesn’t matter if others understand why we care so much; we will continue with our self-appointed missions.

These missions are as varied as the teachers themselves. Some teachers barely passed high school due to undiagnosed learning disabilities, and they have now become special education teachers who work tirelessly to reach students who in their day were lost in the shuffle. Other teachers, sometimes emotional messes themselves, make it their mission to help students who are homeless or come from families who are emotionally or financially incapable of properly caring for the children they produce. You find these teachers working with the “at risk” population. Teachers who coach often provide students who never would have considered college an opportunity in the way of a scholarship to drastically change the course of a life.

A teacher at Rossetti collected formal dresses every year to give to girls who can’t afford to buy a prom dress. Others volunteered for after- school supervision in the library from 3:30-5:00 to all students who needed a quiet, safe, and warm place to read or work. Teachers showed up to chaperone dances without pay just because they wanted to see teenagers enjoy themselves at a clean, school-sponsored event.

I have witnessed teachers walk up to a student they don’t know who has tears on her face. Teachers will stop and talk to the student for as long as needed and offer any help they are capable of giving. Hell, teachers even give their literal blood at the biannual blood drives as we encourage our students to become “gallon grads”.

Good things happen when teenagers are surrounded by adults who truly care about their entire (not just academic) lives. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that teachers quietly

make the world a better place, one student at a time. If you have ever attended the funeral of a teacher, you will see this in the number of people there whose lives were impacted by a single person doing what he or she felt was their self-imposed mission.

When I went into teaching, I had no expectations for dramatic moments like the kinds you see on films about teaching. In all honesty, some of those fictional teachers were not worth emulating anyway. They made teachers too emotionally needy or dependent on the love and dedication of their students. Real teachers give not take. I did not go into teaching to be loved by the masses. Instead, I thought that in teaching I would be able to be honest with myself and my students about life. It wouldn't be a glamorous life, but it would be a noble one. I wanted to make a difference in the world by making a difference in the lives of my students. If they were hurting, I wanted to ease their pain. If they were struggling, I wanted to sit down next to them and work through the problem with them to show them what they were capable of.

However, waves of change began to wash over my career the longer I taught, included national and state educational policy changes and pay/ benefit cuts that impoverished my morale. And if I no longer had the emotional fortitude to be always giving, always self-denyingly helping students, why was I teaching at all?

### **Trapped**

It was records day: the half-day that followed finals week. From 12:00-3:30, I was supposed to get all the late work which was turned in that day graded along with fifty senior exams, eighty-nine freshmen exams and eighty-nine freshmen essays. I also forgot to get all the write-ups which were due that week graded, so I had those to grade as well. I didn't bring a lunch and desperately wanted to spend some time bitching about work. I invited a couple teachers out to eat, but several of us ended up with students hanging out completing exams and late work so no one

could really “go out” to eat. We opted for a compromise. One of us picked up and brought back lunch. We set up in my room because I didn’t have any students.

We talked about work, complained about students, coworkers and bosses, and lowered our voices so passersby couldn’t hear actual names. We judged teachers who had already left even though it was only 12:30, and we all had large stacks of papers to grade, not to mention planning for the upcoming semester. My phone’s push notification went off. I had downloaded the application of the local newspaper onto my smart phone, and it sent me text messages about traffic, weather, safety, and political events in the area.

I glanced at my phone screen and noted our district’s educational referendum didn’t pass. I sighed audibly. We had desperately needed to buy new materials in order to provide students with a meaningful education. The public had voted against that. Ana looked up thinking it was just a text from my husband.

Instead, I flipped the phone around so she could see what I had just read. She put her fork down and picked up my phone. She made a face and said, “Great. I guess that means we are screwed.”

“Yep. Seriously why do we do this? We are all going to be killing ourselves all weekend to get grades in by Monday and for what? To have the public tell us we don’t deserve to be funded properly?” I said.

“Seriously,” Yolanda piped up, “it’s too late for me, but you two should get out while you can.” We both nodded our heads but actually had no intention of leaving.

“What the hell would I do if I left teaching?” Ana said.

I wondered this myself. I have an English degree. Wasn’t that a synonym for unemployed? What could I do with an English degree outside of teaching that would provide an income and stability?

“Anything,” Yolanda replied, “Just look at Kim.” She was a woman in our department. Sometime in October we saw her job posted and found out that she had put in her resignation. She had a job lined up for herself at a large and lucrative area business; she even left in the middle of the semester. This never happened when I first started teaching. Teachers died or retired. They did not quit, and very few were fired. Now, experienced teachers of over ten years were leaving.

The first question people usually asked when they heard this was, “What are they doing? Where did they go?” What they really wanted to ask was, “How can I get out too and still make a living?”

Ana said, “I don’t even know where I would look; I mean, who would hire me?”

“I know,” I replied, “We have all the skills for a great secretary or administrative assistant, but seriously after all our education? What are we fit to do?”

Ana agreed. “It’s not that easy either. I mean being a teacher isn’t just my job, it’s a part of who I am.”

That made political stuff hurt even more. Losing a referendum often feels like a vote against believing in the work teachers do. The problem was we made just enough to feel guilty about giving it up for something else, and we also made just enough to survive which made us terrified of jumping into something new at an entry level again.

“Did anybody see the paper the other day?” Yolanda asked.

“You mean the paper with everyone’s salaries printed? Yeah,” I replied. “So what does Mr. Principal make anyway, I’m curious.”

“I think it was about \$100,000 with another \$30,000 income, not including his retirement and benefits. I didn’t see yours published.” Yolanda said eyeing me.

“I read the fine print. They only printed ones \$50,000 or more. I don’t make that much.”

I said.

Increasingly, I saw what other people my age had for lifestyles, and I’d be lying if I said it didn’t bother me. I worked as a CNA in college. Nurses went to school for two years, and they made more, worked fewer hours, got signing bonuses, and never had to bring home a stack of papers to grade. Quite a few RNs work three twelve hour shifts and are paid for forty hours. If they had anything like that for teachers, there would be riots.

Teachers have very little voice inside our “profession,” and that includes the power to leave.

## Chapter 4

### The Letter of Un-Recommendation

**Dear Young Idealist,**

Over almost ten years of teaching, I have been privileged to write a couple dozen letters of recommendation for students to get jobs, scholarships, and college admission. As teachers we have this rare power of our one voice to help one person at a time. Providing this type of help was what I got into teaching for. I had thought when I started teaching that my idealism, my vision for making the world a better place through teaching, would be rewarded. I had accepted that this reward would not be money or glamor. I had thought that my idealism would be rewarded by the respect of my superiors, students, and parents. I have learned the hard way that idealism and even ethics are not always welcome, and sticking to your ideals may cost you not only your idealism, but may even put you behind others who drop their ideals in pursuit of other comforts. I am writing this letter on behalf of Teaching to un-recommend the profession to other idealists. Though I highlight five reasons below, I am only citing a few examples; many more reasons and examples can be provided upon request.

**Reason #1:**

*After let downs and trials, you are expected to always be a true believer; a committed parishioner, even a martyr to the cause; your head will realize this before your heart will admit it, and the result of that war will be your future career.*

I don't know any other profession which requires of you commitment beyond a paycheck like teaching—perhaps the priesthood or the military. As I moved through the ranks of my English education, almost every class wanted education students to rededicate themselves to the

profession, the calling, of teaching. Professors and administrators wanted to know I was a “born again teacher,” a true believer, there for the right reasons, and every other cliché you can imagine. In fall 2003, yet another English education class required me to write yet another essay describing my philosophy of teaching. It was not my first essay like this, nor was it my last. However, the first and last paragraphs of this essay really seem to encapsulate what I did, and in some ways still do, believe about teaching:

Teaching has always been something I knew I would do. From sitting my teddy bears in a row talking endlessly to them, to giving my little brother homework assignments, I have always loved teaching. It’s exciting watching someone catch onto an idea that was previously unknown. Teaching is giving the greatest gift—knowledge. As teachers we should be life-long learners and an inspiration to our students. We should also center our instruction on the students....

...Teaching is so much more than one philosophy. Teaching is a way of life. It is the absolute need to instill knowledge and insight in the minds of young people and yet have the patience to do so. The skill I want my students to take away from my class is critical thinking. I don’t care if they know Hamlet’s motivation, or if they appreciate Eliot’s metaphor when he said “measuring out their lives with coffee spoons,” though I secretly hope they can recite Hamlet’s soliloquies and “The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock.” My main goal is to produce thinking individuals who are intellectually capable of defending their opinions. As Malcolm Forbes reminds us in a familiar quote, “education’s purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one.” Teaching is more than a job; it is a calling. It is demanding yet rewarding, and I can’t imagine a better way to employ my creativity and energy.

While I was teaching in Arizona, I used to go out for a very early breakfast on Friday mornings with another teacher who I had befriended. In the booth behind my friend sat four big wigs from “downtown.” These were high level administrators in the district. They didn’t know who I was because they rarely came to the high schools to talk with teachers. They were discussing how to get teachers to do more work. The problem was that they didn’t have the budget to pay the teachers for this work. One of the administrators shrugged and said, “Just tell them it’s what is best for the students. You can guilt teachers into stuff like that.” My friend and I sat frozen as their chuckling filled the room. Teaching turns an idealist into a cynic.

**Reason #2:**

*In teaching these days, you will be required to reason with unreasonable people who may not be aware of the fact that they are unreasonable. You will have to put up with being belittled for no reason, and no apology will be offered. You will be trying to teach your student something noble, and for that, you will be the one punished with an unpleasant scene.*

It was after school in my classroom. Though it was early May, it was still fairly cold outside. Sunlight drifted in my large classroom windows, and my seniors had left for the day. Amber walked in holding a piece of paper and said, “Ms. Vandehei, you never gave me this sheet to fill out, and now I can’t get these thirty points?”

“Amber, I gave you that sheet to fill out when your research paper was due... four weeks ago,” I replied while looking at my full email inbox. “You just turned in your research paper, and I didn’t even take off the half credit for it being late.” All classwork was due on the previous Friday. I should not have had to deal with any more late work during finals week.

“But,”

“No Amber, you have waited this long to finally get me your research paper to grade, and it’s not fair to be asking me for more points when I am already doing you a favor.”

At that point Ella, one of my seniors, walked in and asked, “Ms. Vandehei, can I have our presentation slides back?” I went over to where all the senior presentation envelopes were on my desk and pulled the slides out.

“How about we make a copy of it so I can still have a copy for the packet?” I asked Ella. “Actually, we can walk down right now and get this done right away for you.” Amber was still standing in my room, but I was done with that conversation and found walking down to the copy room a welcome break.

“So I guess a freshman broke my jump drive,” Ella said, “that’s why I need another copy of the PowerPoint. I have to make the presentation all over again before tomorrow’s presentation.” We took off walking down the hallway to the copy room.

“Oh my! That really stinks,” We dodged students in the busy after-school hallway traffic. “I can’t believe someone would just ruin your jump drive, though. But, I am glad I make you guys turn in a hard copy before the presentation date.”

“Yeah, that would be a lot worse.” Ella nodded. I ran the copy, and she zipped out of the copy room. I headed to the women’s bathroom because I had taught three classes in a row without a break. When I came out of the bathroom, Amber was leaning against the lockers facing my classroom. It felt like I was being hunted the way she looked at me.

As I completed some filing, a girl who must have been my height (5’9”) or taller and had at least a good sixty pounds on me strode in.

“I understand you won’t let my sister fill this sheet out,” she said. She didn’t bother to ask me if I was busy or had time to talk. She didn’t introduce herself. She didn’t even say that she’d like to discuss Amber’s research paper. She had the research paper in her hand. I knew

nothing about this girl. She might have an emotional behavior disorder and be possibly prone to physical aggression.

“I’d be happy to discuss this with Amber.” I nodded out to Amber who lurked in the hallway. Big Sister brought Amber in like a dog with her tail between his legs. I think Amber had planned on having his sister “take care” of this with me. As uncomfortable as it was to confront people, it makes things less confusing, so I took the direct path.

“Amber you are welcome to fill this out. I will certainly give you feedback on it. I won’t, however, guarantee any points for it.” This was what was legally obligated of me. I had to give feedback; point values were my discretion.

“What is the point of doing it if you are not going to get any points?” Big Sister said. She was wagging her head and her hips while she said this.

“I would imagine the point of doing it is learning.”

“You have to give her points.”

“I do not. She turned this in four weeks late.” I turned to Amber. “You know what I have done for you on this grade is more than fair.”

“Well, why can Rick turn his in for points?” Big Sister demanded. She must have thought this was a selling point; it was more like nails on a chalkboard. No teacher likes to hear this type of thing because we are all supposed to be meeting kids where they are, individualized differentiated instruction, that’s the expectation.

“This is not about Rick, and I will not comment on other students,” I said.

At this point, Amber was in tears. Her face was red and puffy and streaked, and she was on the verge of hyperventilating. Her breaths came in gasps. She had done little to nothing for the last two months of school. I, the writing coach, the at-risk supervisor, the guidance counselor,

study hall teacher, and the dean of students had hounded her to get this done. Her tears, however, seemed to be making her sister even angrier.

“I think maybe we are all too upset at this point. Let’s plan on meeting about this tomorrow.” This was a tactic I have used before. It almost always works. If a kid sleeps on it, they usually slink in the next morning and realize I was being reasonable and they were not.

“You are not putting me off,” Big Sister retorted.

“I’m talking to Amber.”

“Well you should be talking to me,” Big Sister said.

“Actually, I should be talking to your parents. Amber, can we meet tomorrow before/after school or maybe during lunch or something—”

“My parents are out of town, and I am Amber’s guardian when they are gone.”

This girl was a bully, and she was practically shouting at me. Teachers can’t discuss another student’s academics with anyone but the student and his or her parent.

“I’m not going to have her do it if he isn’t getting any points back on it.”

She was blocking the door, and I couldn’t get out. This went back and forth for about twenty more minutes. I kept hoping someone would stop in to see if I needed any help.

Between hysterical hiccups, Amber said, “I--don’t—want—to fail—your class.”

I saw a way. “Amber, I have already run a preliminary report card, and you will pass. It will probably be a D-, but you will pass. I can give you five points back on this Amber if you do it.” This was essentially a way for me to placate her yet not really give up my position. Five points would not make much difference. Amber started to nod, but Big Sister would not have it.

Her arms folded, she said, “Well you know a week before the semester ended I had a D-, and I ended up getting a C in the class. She is not going to get a D- in this class.”

In shock, I replied with a regrettably unoriginal, unhelpful, “You are not the teacher here.”

Amber recovered her voice and said, “Big Sister leave.” I thought I was getting through to Amber. I nodded at her. It would be better if the two of us sorted this out.

“I’m not leaving her with *you*.” Big Sister glared at me.

I sat down at my desk and rubbed my eyes sore from grading papers. “I have had enough of this, please leave. Amber and I can deal with this tomorrow.”

“Well I’m not leaving,” said Big Sister.

“Fine.” I strode quickly out of the room and down the hall saying, “We can continue this conversation in the office.” I shook with anger about the entire situation, and I knew that if this girl was in fact special education or had any kind of deviant (criminal or otherwise) record, Mr. Principal would know. I am a fast walker and was nearing the end of the hall when I heard Amber pleading with her sister to just leave. I arrived in the school office well before they did.

I tapped on Mr. Principal’s office door and walked in. “I’m sorry to bother you Mr. Principal, but I have a couple upset students coming to the office behind me. Could you help me out?”

Big Sister and Amber walked in; Big Sister was already talking before she got to his office. I held back. I’ve found in situations like this it’s best to let the kids do the talking for two reasons. First, they will generally hang themselves. Second, I can’t get in trouble for what I don’t say. Big Sister gave a fairly accurate description of the problem; she added to Mr. Principal that I got “cocky” with her. I saw him hide a smirk at this annotation, not because he thought she was right, but the idea of a teacher getting cocky with a student was absurd.

One of the secretaries who was working late pretended to work while she listened to this exchange. After each one of Big Sister’s long diatribes full of her own reflections, Mr. Principal

looked at me for confirmation. I told him when the assignment was due, what was done, and that I was willing to give feedback and even five points. Mr. Principal looked a little puzzled, failing to see the problem here.

“That’s not good enough.” Big Sister said with hands on her hips. My eyebrows went up, but I said nothing.

“Who are you?” Mr. Principal asked. He looked from one to the other. I could tell he wasn’t sure who this was actually about. I stepped in.

“This is apparently Amber’s Big Sister. I have Amber in my freshmen class.”

“Why am I talking to you about this? I should be talking to your parents,” Mr. Principal asked Big Sister.

“My parents are out of town. I am acting as guardian.”

“So you have papers signed to be her official guardian?”

“I don’t need them.”

“The law says you do.”

“I know the law and—”

“Ok, we’re done here,” he said. He held open the door of his office. She knew this was final coming from him. He could call a police officer and have her escorted out.

“I will be calling the school board about this,” Big Sister threw back over her shoulder. Big Sister exited his office in what could only be described as a huff. Amber wordlessly trailed out the door after her.

Mr. Principal and I just stood stunned. I said nothing, but Mr. Principal shushed me. He closed his office door. We both said nothing, listening.

“I think they are gone,” Mr. Principal finally said.

Dazed and still shaking, I started to leave. Maybe he wanted to give me a moment to cry, but that's not my style. I would cry at home, big wet angry tears, but not here.

"I'm so sorry you had to deal with that," I said, looking at Mr. Principal. I thanked him again for his time and walked back to my classroom. As I approached my room, I saw Yolanda coming out of her room. She looked packed up and ready. I was so glad to see she was still there.

"What was that all about?" Yolanda asked, "I think Ana wasn't sure if something was up when she walked by your room earlier. Are you ok?"

"Oh... my... goodness," I let out a big sigh. "I really don't want to talk about it. Can I walk out with you?" I still felt wobbly on my legs.

We headed back into my room, and I heard over the intercom: "April Vandehei please call the office." I hit the speed dial and a secretary told me that the mother has just called Mr. Principal, and she was on her way into the school. So much for being out of town.

"I can't stay for this. I have an appointment I am already running late for," I said.

"Sounds like a good plan; I will pass that on," She didn't say it, but the subtext was "that's why I called you, so you can escape." I took that as a warning and grabbed my purse and bag and almost ran out the door.

I was still in shock. I silently thanked Mr. Principal. That could have been so much worse. It was easier to side with parents instead of supporting teachers.

I turned to Yolanda and said, "I'm actually meeting up with some students who graduated in 2010 when I worked at another school. They are such great kids. I see a couple of them every summer and every Christmas break. I love hearing about what they are up to."

"Good deal! You deserve that." We were out by our cars by this point, and Yolanda wished me a good night. My hands were shaky on the steering wheel as I maneuvered out of the

parking lot. I darted my eyes from side to side looking for the family marching into the school, feeling like a hunted animal.

I found a parking spot not far from our usual coffee shop, filled up the meter, and rushed in.

“Sorry I’m late girls,” I sighed, “I got held up with some stuff at school.”

### **Reason #3:**

*The longer you teach, the harder is it to leave. It’s kind of like any destructive addiction. It’s just too bad there isn’t a patch for it. Your fellow teachers will see you as blasphemous and your superiors will see you as a traitor to the cause. In the end, it is your own sense of guilt and mission that will keep you coming back long after you’ve lost your ideals.*

I down-shifted, stopping for a yellow light in my ten-year-old Subaru. My mom and I had been running some errands together while my dad and husband worked on the house. I had been complaining about work again.

“I don’t understand why you don’t just quit,” my mom said. She said this to me every time I complained about teaching. I didn’t bother pointing out the fact that it was she who told me I was destined to be a teacher when I wanted to be a lawyer in high school. She had only got as far as her LPN (licensed practical nurse), and though she liked the idea of an educated daughter, I’m not sure she could have dealt with a lawyer daughter. Teacher sounded friendlier, more humble, more feminine. I sighed and rolled up my window to prevent the rest of my hair from blowing into my mouth.

“Mom, it’s not that easy. Do you tell a pastor to just quit?” I knew this would get her, “Teaching is more than what I do, it’s part of who I am and how I function as a human being.” I could hear my voice starting to rise. Human being. That was what I had

mentioned to a friend who also happened to be a counselor. When I had lamented the decade I had “wasted” teaching, she challenged me to think about what teaching had provided for me.

“Humanity, people skills,” I had answered. Teaching had taught me a myriad of social skills and an appreciation for others. Teaching made me a better person. In some ways, teaching had rescued me as much as I had helped others. I was no longer that angry young woman mouthing off to a professor.

“Besides, what can I do with an English degree?” I gestured dramatically despite being behind the wheel.

“What about editing?” I was even impressed with this suggestion. It was the first time she has suggested something that would actually make use of my English degree.

“Mom, I’m no good at editing, and I think I would rather put something sharp in my eye than spend my time doing that.” It was true; my grammar sucks, and I only started improving it when I got to grad school and embarrassed myself on a number of occasions.

After a pause I admitted, “I have thought about publishing.” I hated the idea of selling anything, but I felt I could probably sell books. After all, I convinced teenagers to read books all the time.

“Ok, publishing, why not?” she said.

“The problem with that is that I would need to move to a bigger city. It’s kind of like fashion, mom. Nobody really makes their living in high fashion in Wisconsin.” Mom would get that too; she liked fashion. “I’d need to move to a larger publishing city. Even then, I’m sure job competition and cost of living would be a challenge.” I didn’t tell her that what I kept coming up against was finding a job that paid as well as teaching at the entry level so I didn’t take a financial hit. It wasn’t like teaching had paid enough for me to acquire any kind of financial security or a

large savings account to try that kind of thing. It paid just enough that I'd feel guilty taking a pay cut for peace of mind, or foolish for abandoning my ideals only for a smaller initial paycheck.

**Reason #4:**

*If you no longer find personal succor in teaching, you still must lie and pretend that you do because if you don't love it and continue to teach you are a fool. You must tell yourself you still love it, and this forcing you to lie makes a former idealist feel like a hypocrite.*

It was my morning prep hour in March, and I was the last one into Yolanda's classroom room. The student desks were set up as if for a debate, with the students positioned on one side of the room and all of the adults lined up for the panel discussion on the other side of the room. Yolanda, who taught seniors, was doing a panel discussion about career choices and had emailed the entire faculty to collect victims / volunteers to discuss our personal experiences. I took my seat at the end of the row and faced the students all looking at me. I had volunteered. I thought it might be interesting.

Yolanda got things started: "Now students, you have come up with some great questions for our panel. I encourage you to use them to keep the conversation going."

The panel members looked a little uneasily at each other. There was still an awkward silence, but as teachers, we were less ruffled by it than others might be.

Finally, Yolanda spoke up again. "Why don't we start with where you went to high school and what year you graduated."

Each faculty member answered the question down the line we were in. Students became a little bit more brave and finally started asking questions on their own. A young woman asked a question about who our heroes were growing up. A boy asked about the careers we had in the past, BT (before teaching). The older teachers had colorful stories to tell. I had typical middle

class answers and decided I'd rather not answer than answer and sound boring. My dad was a union member machinist; my mom a part-time licensed practical nurse and school bus driver. My childhood was comfortable but not surrounded by educated people; this always made me feel like a misfit with other teachers who tended to come from homes with university degrees and more affluence.

A science teacher started: "I remember working in Texas with my brother on an oil rig one summer. I was making a lot of money, but the hours were awful." He shook his head remembering something he didn't say. "My brother still lives and works out there. He is a manager now. He is pretty well off with a really nice house, but he is divorced too." This connection of too much money and personal failure seemed a mantra of many teachers. Teaching is supposed to be family friendly, or at least it used to be.

Then, from the back of the room came a question I had not prepared for and dreaded.

"How did you decide to teach, and would you do it again?" Yolanda glanced at us. A couple years ago, I had a feeling she would have said, "Let's have everyone answer that one." Today, she knew better. We were bruised; we were no longer the hopeful idealists we were. We were no longer the true believers in the nobility of our profession.

"Um," Kim started us off. At least this meant we would not have to go down the row answering this since she was in the middle. "I had actually planned on becoming an engineer. My mom was a kindergarten teacher, and I guess I was rebelling a little and didn't want to follow in her footsteps. After a while at college, I found the math and science too difficult. English just came easy. So, in a roundabout way, I did follow in her footsteps." The following year Kim left our department for the business world.

Mr. Principal looked at Kim while she was talking and picked up the thread after her. "I actually started by working at the Boys and Girls Club, at group homes. Someone suggested that

maybe I should get my teaching license and work as a special education teacher. I did that for a couple years, and now I'm an administrator and spend most of my day getting yelled at." Poor Mr. Principal. He was exceptionally good at his job. He related well to the kids and had the perfect mixture of stern discipline tempered with kindness. He sighed heavily, shoulders stooped a little from his heavy load, "I know my experience of Rossetti High is different from the real Rossetti High." Kids smiled; they knew what he meant.

Bob cleared his throat. "I came to the profession later in life, but I can't imagine doing anything else." Though he was probably one of the oldest people in the room, I almost snorted at how green he sounded. There was an uncomfortable silence. Just five years ago, we would have heard inspiring testimonials which probably would have prompted a couple students in that room to pursue teaching for themselves. We cared too much about the students to lie to them like that. We wanted them to have a better life than us.

I remained silent.

**Reason #5:**

*If you can't leave, you run the risk of over-staying your welcome and becoming the cynic your young idealist self would be appalled at.*

The monthly department meeting for some reason was always held in Ana's room. Kim (before she left us for corporate America) had shown up on time for once. Yolanda and I locked eyes and noticed her punctuality. For the last six to seven months, Kim had consistently shown up at 4:00 for our 3:30 department meeting. She never had an excuse or an apology. Kim was a petite woman around five feet tall and probably under one hundred pounds, generally clad in an amazingly short skirt considering her height, spike heels, and perfectly-styled smooth dark hair. A former track star, she still found time to participate in triathlons throughout the year, and rumor

had it she got a paid day off to compete in them. She looked like she was ready to go out on the town in a place like New York City, not teach horny teenage boys.

People looked around the student desks which had been rearranged into a circle. We were all mentally checking off people to see who was missing.

Sandy: "Let's start with how the reading test went." She was referring to a reading test all district students in every grade must take each year. These tests are supposed to be used to provide data to drive student learning.

Kim: "I think it went well, though I'm not sure if all my students are up to grade level yet."

Yolanda: "Has anyone got them back from downtown yet?" Heads shook around the room.

Ruth: "How are we going to RTI the students who are not proficient?" RTI stands for response to intervention. I only knew this because I leaned over and asked Yolanda. Meetings in education feel more like bizarre wheel of fortune games if you are not in the know with the current acronyms and trends. There should really be an answer key.

RTI also stated that eighty percent of students should be able to master what was taught in the large group classroom. About another ten or fifteen percent will need small group instruction, and the final five percent needs one on one help. It was a model for student mastery of skills.

Me: "I don't think we have time for that this year yet."

Ruth: "Ideally, students need to read at grade level before they should move on." Ruth was always well dressed with flashy clothing and oversized jewelry which was supposed to make her look wealthy. She had a way of speaking which almost immediately alienated people. She spoke as if she constantly smelled something disgusting. Silence.

If no one was going to say what we are all thinking, I opened my mouth: “I think we all know what the ideal is. The reality is that we have no mechanism to RTI that. We have no reading specialist lab, and we are running out of time in the school year.”

Yolanda shuffled some papers on the student desk she sat at and attempted to get us on a more constructive vein. “So what kind of data do we want to compile on these?”

Sandy: “I think all teachers should make a chart as to where their students’ reading levels are.”

Me: “I would push to postpone additional data collection requirements for teachers while new assessments are being considered.

Sandy: “Data collection is really important.”

Me: “Why? If we are gathering this information on this year’s group of kids, what impact can it possibly make on student learning?” I could feel my heart beating faster, and I attempted to sound measured and professional as I warned, “We can only do so many things with excellence. The thinner we are spread, the lower quality instruction will be provided. That’s just reality.” Martha, a special education teacher, smiled almost with admiration. She seemed to be saying “thank you” with her eyes.

Sandy: “Wait. Who said we don’t have a reading intervention program next year?”

I shrugged. “Who told you that we did?”

Other department assessments were discussed, and the discussion moved on as Bob our current department chair took the floor.

“Um... I want to encourage you all to... ah... go in for the sneak peak meeting with Mr. Principal to see the new curriculum. Those of you who were on the committee are of course not expected to go. It will mean some pretty significant changes. It will, of course, require us all to spend a couple extra hours a day prepping.”

Janet who had been passively listening, sat up suddenly interjected, “Wait! Did you say a couple extra hours a day!” People silently nodded. Years ago Janet had been department chair and something had happened to her while doing it. I didn’t blame her for giving up; she was the walking dead of teachers. Sarcasm and nonchalance were her armor from reality. Like others her age, she felt stuck.

Janet reminded me of Winston in George Orwell’s *1984*. At the end of the novel, Winston, the protagonist, has gone against the government known as Big Brother and lost. After Winston suffers a long time of torture and intimidation, the book concludes by saying, “He [Winston] loved Big Brother.” This line still haunts me. Winston had to sacrifice his ideals in order to survive the system. He wasn’t cut out to be a martyr; that is what real, not idealistic, people are like.

At the end of the meeting I leaned over and told Janet, “I think I finally get you now.” She smiled. “Welcome to the dark side.”

### **Hamlet, Winston, and Sisyphus**

In conclusion, I would like to un-recommend teaching as a profession to any young idealist. I would encourage you to consider being a human-rights lawyer or go into higher education if you would like a profession where your ideals may be less at risk of being trampled. They will certainly be challenged, but you will not be forced to give them up and then smile at the parent, community member, politician, or administrator who has just robbed you of them.

And yet, teaching has provided me with a great deal. It has been my livelihood, but it has also taught me some much-needed humanity and people skills. Before teaching, I lived in a world inside my head in an eccentrically introverted kind of way. Now, I not only enjoy other people’s company, but I actively seek out others to work with and compare notes with as a way of

learning. I am now better at empathizing and have a greater appreciation for multiple worldviews and diversity. However, functioning at my job has required me to bite my idealist tongue a number of times. I am left with the option of giving up my ideals or quitting a job I still believe in. This is a lose-lose situation every time.

Dr. Former Idealist was right when he said that teaching is like falling in love with a person who is emotionally unavailable. Each little scrap of meaning I get from my job makes it that much more difficult to walk away from it. Even after all these years of giving emotionally and intellectually with a small return on these investments, the small shred of idealism which remains in me sustains me. What if it is better next year? If I leave, who will be there to care the way I do?

Young idealist, do not take on this sisyphian task. Both Sisyphus from Greek mythology and Winston from *1984* realize that in the end, the gods and Big Brother cannot be circumvented. The individual will be sacrificed on the altar of the machine whose objectives are neither noble nor fair. At the end of *Hamlet*, my favorite piece of literature, Hamlet seems to know he is going to his death by participating in the duel his murderous uncle has set up for him. Horatio has been Hamlet's only loyal friend throughout the play. Unlike some of Hamlet's other friends who were summoned to spy on Hamlet, Horatio is steady and selflessly cares for Hamlet. Nevertheless, Hamlet goes saying, "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come', if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what isn't to leave betimes? Let be." I implore my young idealist: be Horatio—who survives to tell the sad story but is not sacrificed—not Hamlet.

## Notes

1 WRITER NORMAN SIMS: This quote comes from Sims and Kramer's *Literary Nonfiction* and appears on page 4.

3 HOWEVER, MEMOIR EMERGED: This is a paraphrase from page 2 of Smith and Watson's *Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*.

4 THOUGH I NEVER EXPECTED TO: Didion includes a passage from chapter 24 of Emily Post's 1922 book of etiquette on page 57 of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. There are other quotes from Emily Post and other such writers throughout the book, but the excerpt on page 57 especially seems to explain some of Didion's internal conflicts.

4 IN THE BEGINNING OF THE FINAL CHAPTER: This sentence is a paraphrase of the incident related in Sedaris' book *Naked* on page 251-252. The long quote is from page 252.

5 IN HER CHAPTER TITLED "FORGIVENESS": This scene and the following quote are from pages 130-131 of Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies*. I skipped two short paragraphs in between which had less to do with Lamott's voice and was more or less moving the narrative forward. These two paragraphs I left out did not alter the meaning of what I had quoted; it just made the quote more concisely serve as an example.

6 IN READING AUTOBIOGRAPHY: The following paragraph is a paraphrase of Chapter 1 of their book titled *Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*.

7 SMITH AND WATSON SAY: This can be found on page 7 of Smith and Watson's *Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*.

7 HOWEVER, THE MEMOIRIST IS: Smith and Watson say this on page 8 of *Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*.

8 MOVIES LIKE LEAN ON ME, DEAD POET SOCIETY, FREEDOM WRITERS AND MONA LISA SMILE: *Dead Poet Society* and *Mona Lisa Smile* are both fictional storylines.

However, *Lean on Me* and *Freedom Writers* present themselves as “based on true stories.” Each of these movies takes place in different places or times. *Lean on Me* is supposed to be based on a real principal in New Jersey in the 1980s. *Freedom Writers* is after the 1994 race riots in Long Beach, California. *Dead Poets Society* is set at a boarding prep school from the late fifties to early sixties, and *Mona Lisa Smile* takes place in the early nineteen-fifties around Wellesley College, which was an all-girls school at the time.

12 I AGREE WITH AMOS OZ: This quote was reprinted in Miller’s article “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir” which appeared in the *Modern Language Association of America* periodical in 2007. This quote appears on page 538 of Miller’s article.

13 I HAVE TRIED TO FOLLOW LITERARY: This appears on page 27 of Kramer’s chapter entitled “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists” in Sims and Kramer’s book *Literary Nonfiction*.

16 WE ARE DISCUSSING JANE EYRE: *Jane Eyre* is a novel written by Charlotte Bronte in the mid nineteenth century. The protagonist is a young woman of ideals who finds herself working as a governess in a house full of secrets. This book originally had the subtitle: An Autobiography, but this subtitle was dropped in subsequent publishing when the story as nonfiction could not be authenticated.

24 I WANTED TO STAND ON MY DESK: In the movie *Dead Poet’s Society*, a teacher is fired, and as he collects his things, the class who loved him so well repeats back to him his favorite line of poetry by Walt Whitman: “Oh Captain my Captain.” They then stand on their desks as he had urged them to do at the beginning of the year in order to get a new perspective on life.

36 I FELT A BIT LIKE JANE EYRE: *Jane Eyre* is a novel by Charlotte Bronte which features a young woman who is left an orphan and educated to be a governess, the only occupation for a “lady” of the Victorian Era. After Jane’s close friend and mentor Miss Temple leaves Lowood

School, where they both currently teach, to be married, Jane puts an advertisement in the paper for a new position. She secures a new position in another town and encounters several miscommunications about her position in the house.

39 I PULLED OUT MY WORK BAG: *1984* by George Orwell is a dystopian novel which explores many themes such as the role of propaganda, the nature of war, and conformity. Orwell wrote it in 1948 as a warning for the future and simply inverted the numbers to get the year of the title.

42 PICTURE THE HIGH SCHOOL: *Lean on Me* is a heartwarming movie about a principal named Joe Clark, played by Morgan Freeman who displays tough love in order to shape up a high school and improve not only the test scores of his students, but their quality of life as well. It is supposed to be loosely based on a true story.

44 SOME OF MY FAVORITES INCLUDE: This article titled “A Billable Services List: Paying Teachers More Like Doctors” appeared in the *English Journal*. The first quote is from page 100 the middle ones from 101, and the final one from page 102.

51 I COMROMISED BY HAVING STUDENTS: Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* is a young adult novel about a high school freshmen named Melinda. Melinda was raped at a party the summer before her freshmen year of high school. She calls the police after her rape, but she then leaves before the cops show up. No one but her rapist, who she now goes to school with her, knows why she called the police at the party. She is now an outcast her freshmen year as a result.

I love reading *Speak* because Melinda’s dry sense of humor strikes the perfect tone for my real life freshmen who may also be struggling to adjust to high school life.

74 IN FACT, MANY OF US: This is a paraphrase of Easley’s chapter titled “The Star Thrower” in his book *The Unexpected Universe*.

81 **HOWEVER THE FIRST AND LAST PARAGRAPHS:** These paragraphs came from an actual essay of mine from college. I performed only minor editing on these excerpts to allow it to flow with the narrative around it and to correct any grammar problems.

81 **I DON'T CARE IF THEY KNOW:** This poem by T.S. Elliot appears on page 655-659 of the third edition of *Seven Centuries of Verse English and American* and is edited by A.J.M. Smith.

81 **AS MALCOLM FORBES REMINDS US:** In my original essay I had this documented as a quote by Mark Twain. According to several websites including "BrainyQuote.com" put out by Book Rags, Malcom Forbes instead said this.

96 **AFTER WINSTON SUFFERS:** This quote comes from page 245 of Orwell's novel *1984*, and they are the final words of the novel.

97 **NEVERTHELESS, HAMLET GOES SAYING:** These lines appear in act five, scene two and in lines 233-238.

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