TEACHER UNDONE

by

KRISTI BRUCE AMATUCCI

(Under the Direction of Elizabeth A. St. Pierre)

ABSTRACT

A post-qualitative dissertation, this self-study follows the five-year career of a new teacher as she balances competing stresses in, around, and outside the classroom. She transacts with students, fellow teachers, administrators, governmental mandates, prescribed curricula, standardized tests, public scrutiny, the criminal justice system, parents and families of her students, her own family and friends, as well as her desires, histories, and memories. Teaching is not what she thought it was; it overwhelms her.

In an attempt to escape the rigors of life as high school teacher and to examine teaching in America today, she returns to the university to pursue her doctoral degree in education, only to find that her questions about teaching multiply, becoming more complex and muddled than she ever imagined. She finds no answers, only a cascade of conundrums.

The theoretical framework of this study is post-structuralism, and the author relies primarily on the work of Michel Foucault, Helene Cixous, Judith Butler, and Jacques Derrida, among others, to frame her approach. The methodology of this work is a strategy called writing to know, as outlined by Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth St. Pierre. The author writes in an attempt to untangle her multiple teaching selves; yet as she writes, she

finds herself becoming more and more enmeshed, confused, confident, eager, and surprised as she follows the words that pour unbridled out of her.

The work does not lend itself to neat conclusions or prescriptions for future teacher education programs. Instead, it opens spaces in which the enterprise of teaching becomes a problematic, not to be solved but to be interrogated. The dissertation—part autobiography, part fiction, part empirical study—pushes the boundaries of what sort of research is possible after we relinquish the qualitative quest for meaning.

INDEX WORDS: post-qualitative research; post-structuralism; writing to know; teacher education; teacher subjectivity; performance.

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KRISTI BRUCE AMATUCCI

BA, University of Georgia, 1996

MEd, University of Georgia, 2000

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KRISTI BRUCE AMATUCCI

Major Professor:	Elizabeth A. St. Pierre
Committee:	Mark A. Faust James D. Marshall

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

To my grandmothers:

in memory of

Fannie Stowers Crowe,

1905-1995,

who taught me to read,

and in honor of

Lelia Vaughters Bruce,

b. 1917,

who taught me to tell stories.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Chapter One

The How and the Why

Why post-?

> We feel an affinity with a certain thinker because we agree with him; or because he shows us what we were already thinking; or because he shows us in a more articulate form what we were already thinking; or because he shows us what we were on the point of thinking; or what we would sooner or later have thought; or what we would have thought much later if we hadn't read it now; or what we would have been likely to think but never would have thought if we hadn't read it now; or what we would have liked to think but never would have thought if we hadn't read it now. (Davis, 2009, p. 310)

Producing myself as a splintered subject in a world dominated by humanist definitions of identity is the work of this work.

The conditions that enable and reproduce humanist personhood encircle and conscribe me through discursive formations and through culture in all their manifestations: movies, novels, news programs, music, church, family, school, to name only the obvious. These conditions, reifying the discrete, essential self as they do, hound me, demand of me strenuous maintenance—I am produced/produce myself as human. Implicit in that production is a promise of irresistible allure—the chance to be a part of it all. For humanism tells me that I must and do fit in; I play the part as it has been written for centuries, since the Enlightenment, at least.

But the responsibilities of maintaining consciousness, stability, unity, rationality, coherence, autonomy, and knowledge—hallmarks of the humanist individual (St. Pierre, 2000)—tire me out with their requirements of continual upkeep. Still, I do what they insist: I fight hard to hide the cracks in the humanist façade, in the "me" I am told I am, mostly by ignoring them.

These everyday responsibilities tug my shoulders ever closer to my ears, my chest tight and closed in on itself. My yoga teacher, Ruby, always reminds me: pull your shoulder blades down your back, shoulders away from your ears, open your chest so you can finally breathe.

I lived the first 30 years of my life hewing blindly to the humanist ideal of personhood, bothered sometimes by renditions of me that didn't seem to fit, but unaware of alternative epistemologies, body clenched tight, every seam on guard against rupture, every pore afraid of release. Five years later, I still produce myself that way most of the time, even though I now know otherwise. My strange encounters with poststructural, postmodern, postfoundational, postcolonial, post-whatever thought invite me to excavate the cracks I work so hard to hide or ignore, to imagine myself as something other than the rugged individual of humanism, to produce myself as someone other, an alterity, to perform a speaking subject, with surprising abandon, a foreigner to the humanist me, who usually, still, remains quiet, docile, suitable.

During the past five years, I have inexorably collapsed into post-[1] thought. Beginning with the first course of my doctoral program, I voraciously consumed Derrida (1966/1978; 1967/1974; 1967/1992; 1979; 1989; 1989/1992; 1992; 2001), Foucault (1972/1977; 1975/1977; 1976; 1983/1991; 1978/1990; 1977/1980; 1983/1991;1984/1990), Spivak (1974;1993), Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987), Baudrillard (1981/1988), Butler (1990; 1993; 1995), St. Pierre (1991; 1997; 2001), and others. I found myself willing to abandon precepts I considered immutable, eager for the next new idea, in an unbounded rhizomatic quest. I devoured bibliographies, leading me hither and yon, and back again. I was hungry, and the feast I stumbled upon was satisfying. In post- theory I found multiple means for redescribing what I came to see as my multiple selves and the worlds I both inhabit and construct. I learned that humanism only seems normal because it is ubiquitous, hegemonic, the "scene" I am accustomed to seeing. But with post- thought, I began to note other things—lines of flight, sites of rupture, openings, however tiny, exit strategies, ways out, redefinitions of self. And I began to practice a strategy Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) suggested: "To reach not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I" (p. 3). I am no longer myself. I am a fragmented subject ensnared in the rapture of post- theory.

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[1] I use the terms "post- theory" and "post- thought" to indicate the impossibility of delineating between thinkers who use or refuse the labels poststructural, postmodern, post-colonial, post-foundational, post-everything to categorize their work. Since one of the most salient features of post- theory is a healthy suspicion of categorization, definitive definitions, underlying structures, and solid foundations, I use the term post- (with a space following the hyphen) in order to unhinge the taken-for-granted articulation between the concept of post-and whatever term may come after. In my usage, post- indicates a distrust of the tenets of humanist, modernist, positivist, interpretive, and emancipatory modes of thinking. That single empty space is yours to fill.

But falling in love, in this case with post- theory, is always dangerous, for the enamored overlooks the inadequacies of her beloved, as Davis implied in the quotation that opens this chapter. Or, as Butler (1995) explained:

> [T]he question of whether or not a position is right, coherent, or interesting, is … less informative than why it is we come to occupy and defend the territory we do, what it promises us, from what it promises to protect us. (pp. 127-128)

Operating from a post- orientation promises freedom, vitality, movement, imagination, dynamism, as it also offers protection from the tyranny of the ordinary. Post- theory protects me from engagements I'd rather not keep, with those whose worldviews are steeped in humanism. I find myself possessing a sense of superiority, of having seen behind the normative and hegemonic formations of humanism, of being privy to secrets unavailable to the uninitiated. I teeter dangerously close to elitism.

But I must remember, hard as it is to do, that post- thought is not a successor regime, nor does it correct the failings of humanism. And I must heed Butler's caution in what I write: this work obligates me to address why and how I feel alive here in the post-, in the fracture, rather than there in the insipid routines perpetrated by that graying, lingering, insistent humanism.

Most welcoming, I finally discover, is that post- theories furnish me a way to perform aliveness, color; they provide me an alternate means of writing the world(s) and the subject positions available within it/them. Ruptures proliferate.

Post- thought provides these alternate means of inscription through a reconceptualization of language and discourse. Spivak (1974) wrote that "word and thing or thought never in fact become one" (p. xvi). Language cannot correspond to meaning;

slippage between signifier and signified is inevitable (Derrida, 1967/1974). And if language is thus incapable of carrying meaning, systems of language, discursive formations, function not as keys to transcendental understanding, but as Bové (1995) wrote, they exist as "institutionalized system[s] for the production of knowledge in regulated language" (p. 53). The profusion of subject positions and potential descriptions of the world available to post- thinkers are produced in/through regulated language; they do not exist "out there" but are manufactured as a "series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable" (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 100). Nor are the functions of discourse ever innocent.

Within these unsteady relations of power and knowledge, subjects are imagined and performed, reacting to and acting upon the material conditions in which they develop, in which they find themselves at any given moment. But as Butler (1993) reminded us,

> there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely. (p. 126-127)

Imagined subjects are constrained by/in discursive formations, yet they are always open to negotiation, to subversion, to re-articulation. Mutiny is a workable option.

I abandon the innocence that humanism affords and take up my pen (or keyboard, as is the case), allowing touch to lead me into wonder.

As a budding post- theorist, I embody subject positions, one after another, simultaneously, haphazardly, strategically. I become many subjects at once, and those

subjects mingle with each other and the worlds around them, prodding, poking, mangling each other, feeding off each other, poaching from each other. For these subjects are not individuals

> who [stand] back from [their] identifications and [decide] instrumentally how or whether to work … on the contrary, the subject is the incoherent and mobilized imbrication of identifications; it is constituted in and through the iterability of its performance, a repetition which works at once to legitimate and delegitimate the realness norms by which it is produced. (Butler, 1993, p. 131)

This simultaneous convergence and fission, separation and fusion, interlacing and extracting, repeating and subverting is "the contemporary fate of the subject" (Butler, p. 230).

In moments of boldness, those out-of-time, out-of-place flowerings when I unhinge myself from humanist definitions, I am able to produce myself and my writing as if I believe Butler's (1993) words, as if I, too, can sing a post- subject anew.

Post- theory gives me a fluid language for describing these competing and complementary subject positions and the ways in which they are instituted by/in language/discourse. I pay attention to the words now, to the functions they stage, to how they operate in imagined ways, to their mottled articulations, to the juxtapositions, to the interplay; I learn new maneuvers. I enact subject positions with a worldly precision now—consciously, sometimes guiltily (for humanism still haunts)—as performance.

And if these post- subject positions, constituted in language/discourse, permit me to "produce different knowledge and to produce knowledge differently" (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 175), one of the objects of knowledge that becomes different is/are the world(s) we

inhabit, the worlds that invade and inhabit us. Baudrillard (1981/1988) explained how we, in post- thought, conceive of our worlds in this context: "The age of simulation begins with a liquidation of all referentials. … It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (p. 167). Not only are subject positions open to redescription, to liquidation, but "[n]ever again will the real have to be produced" (Baudrillard, p. 167). The worlds that exist around and within us are perpetually ajar, changing and changeable, lively. Re-imagination is possible, perhaps the only possibility, for reality is never a given, but an illusive, slippery dodge.

Hitting this iceberg of post- theory has not grounded me nor sunk me, but as it has torn me asunder, it has also transformed me into a resilient swarming curiosity, eager to work this work, chipping away with myriad new tools, forcing each sentence, and the words that dwell within it, to be ever more confident, more surprising, more daring. With the addition of post- theory, particularly its concepts of language, discourse, subjectivity, and reality, to my epistemological repertoire, I am able to look back on my years as apprentice, teacher, teacher educator, and writer using the theories I've absorbed to recognize, rethink, and rescript my life, which I now see as a series—and an overlapping hodgepodge—of schizophrenic performances. I call on post- thought to help me inscribe my teaching sel(ves) differently, to re-form my divergent performances(s) of teacher. I put post- thought to work, as does St. Pierre (1991), in an effort to examine "how [I] use [theory] to make sense of my life" (p. 143), tampering with past, present, and future, producing mysel(ves) and my teacher subject(s) in new ways. After five years of reading post- theories, new affinities, always in flux, aflutter, abound.

Why fiction?

> I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth. (Foucault, 1977/1980*,* p. 193)

When I want to lose myself for an hour or two, I pick up a novel or a *The New Yorker* short story. I've been losing myself in the words of others for as long as I can remember, supplementing my provincial upbringing with stories fantastical, tragic, mundane. From a three-year-old at my grandmother's house, when I "read" my first Dick and Jane primer, to a doctoral candidate at a major university, where I still manage to read novels amid the demands of writing my dissertation, I find I can hide among the words of others, become someone else, take up readerly subject positions, occupy other places, other times. Forget myself. Disappear. Appropriate bits of others and bring them back to me, to my worlds. Leave bits of myself in those pages, perhaps for others to find, if others choose to read those books after me. This obsession is a tactic that helps me cope with the disappointments of life, the disillusions, the limitations, the stresses, the inadequacies constantly rooting in my bones, rummaging through my dreams. It is one of a few such tactics that works for me. Reading fiction is a "repeatable singularity" (Attridge, 1992, p. 16), an experience that while often repeated, is never repetitive, is always open to new contexts, always freeing, carrying with it a sense, however mendacious, of empowerment.

I don't remember how old I was when it occurred to me that, in addition to reading works of fiction, I could also dare to write them. I have produced myself as writer

of expository texts for a long time, but writer of fiction is a subject position that scared me to death. But lately, I've accepted that just maybe I can occupy this subject position too, with a fearless grace, a childhood caprice I am just remembering how to perform. And writing fiction, I have figured out, can also be a tactic, another way to lose myself, as well as a way to evacuate my body, to get the toxins out. And to leave more spaces within me for a multiplicity of appropriated selves, more room for imagination and reinscription and truth-telling. Writing fiction is like the deep-tissue massage I get from Lou, my massage therapist. I leave her studio feeling lighter, full of vibrating spaces within and among the cells of my body, cleansed somehow, relieved, fully expressive.

When I became an academic and started reading the scholarly work I describe in the previous section, I found it difficult to lose myself in those books and articles. I was unable to read them as I read fiction, even though some employed overt narrative techniques. For post- theorists and researchers, like Britzman (1995), "desire to construct good stories filled with the stuff of rising and falling action, plots, themes, and denouement" (p. 233) in their research. I appreciate their efforts. A compelling story draws me in every time.

Yes, the theory I read was engaging, and it gave me tools to reevaluate my ontologies and epistemologies. Yes, I became excited by the prospects of constructing my life differently, using the theories I read to help me in various transformations and subversions. But I merely *found* my multiple selves through this process (as opposed to *losing* myself, to *disappearing*). I ended up always thinking about what I read, analyzing, synthesizing, absorbing content, as I attempted to put theory into practice. But I rarely felt the affect that was so obvious to me in fiction, the lure of places I could go, others I

could become, that magical emptying of me and the lightness of being that affords. With scholarly work, I labored toward discoveries, I tinkered with ideas, stuffing my brain until it was on the verge of explosion, instead of being whisked away into enthralling dreamscapes, the way I was when I read fiction, when I watched a good movie.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not invested in maintaining the binary between thinking and feeling (Descartes, 1697/1998), but I do recognize different experiences of reading, different ways of approaching different texts. And since I can only work with the language I've got, a language that is always inadequate, a "heritage that includes injunction[s] at once double and contradictory" (Derrida, 2001, p.35), I will say only that my method of reading fiction worked differently than my method of reading those scholarly texts I devoured during the first three years of my doctoral program. For as Derrida (1966/1978) wrote,

> [t]here is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (pp. 280-281)

I learn to trouble the binary between thinking and feeling, knowing that I can never free myself from the metaphysical concepts that structure my ability to think and to feel, to be and to know.

I wrote responses to the scholarly works I read for my coursework, often mimicking the style of the academic writing I was reading. I wrote up conceptual papers and qualitative research reports—interview studies and document analyses. And though I

became quite adept at writing these classic forms of academic prose, demonstrating citational authority, using an elevated vocabulary and a sometimes convoluted, if always sophisticated style, my heart remained with the latitudes of fiction, writing that had provided me solace and escape. I didn't want to abandon dialogue, for example, or character, or even plot. Fiction resonated with me in ways that academic prose did not always do.

And then I started reading Cixous (1975/1994; 1981/1994; 1994), Trinh (1991), Richardson (1994), Lather (1997; 2001), Kohn (2006) and others who were questioning the boundaries of academic writing. I saw texts of all kinds bleeding into each other. And, suddenly,

> I inscribe[d] an additional memory in language—a memory in progress—of what I ha[d] read personally, noticed, retained from a text or a language to the other. And the whole [was] poured back, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, into the river I sail. (Cixous, 1994b, p. xxi)

The fictional and the academic became a swirling pool of indistinguishable ebbs and flows in the writing I produced, in the writing that produced me. I luxuriated in the danger of this writing, the enthrallment, the fear of being pulled under the tow. I granted myself permission to play, to experiment with blended genres, with writing as a method of knowing (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Writing became epistemology, taking on a variety of forms—academic articles, research reports, poetry, pastiche, and, yes, fiction.

But not only was writing knowing, a way to figure out my own thinking, it also became methodology, my approach to the qualitative research I was expected to produce as a member of the academy. For Haraway (1988), Britzman (1995), Lather and

Smithies (1997), and MacLure (2003) taught me that research—qualitative and otherwise—is fabrication, *is* fiction. It can be nothing else: "But like lies, [research] texts are artful, and they succeed when they *persuade* us that some state of affairs, propositions, or argument is at it appears to be" (MacLure, 2003, p. 80).

Lies masquerading as research. Truth hiding in fiction. Research "enact[ing] that there is never a single story and that no story stands still" (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 220). And in the next step of my research journey, the imperative became clear: if all research is fabrication, and the key enterprise in (re)presenting research is to make the "text … [pose] itself as natural and unquestionable" (MacLure, 2003, p. 82), why the impossible demand of "getting it right?" (Lather & Smithies, p. 215). What, after the post- turn, is getting it right? According to whom? How is right even possible? I remember Haraway's (1988) admonition: "science—the real game in town—is rhetoric, a series of efforts to persuade relevant social actors that one's manufactured knowledge is a route to a desired form of very objective power" (p. 577). Despite the reification of "objective" science, another stamp of humanist thought, Haraway suggested that all science is manufactured, just as fiction is.

In refusing the pressure of getting research right, since according to post- thought, such a proposition is not only impossible but undesirable, I become liberated to tell research stories that play fast and easy with the "facts." I become ready to consider seriously Denzin's (1997) injunction:

> [to] invent a new language, a new form of writing that goes beyond autoethnography, mystories. … the language of a new sensibility, a new reflexivity, refusing old categories. . . .poststructural to the core, … personal,

> emotional, biographically specific, minimalist in its use of theoretical terms. … This language will be visual, cinematic, kaleidoscopic, rhizomatic, rich and thick in its own descriptive detail, always interactive as it moves back and forth between lived experience and the cultural texts that shape and write that experience. (p. 26)

This new language, the language in which I will write my scientific dissertation, will act as fiction acts.

But in spite of the newly formulated and floundering post- me, I still can't keep myself from succumbing to the humanist hegemony, to the magnetic pull of binaries—science/fiction, scholarly/trade, the academy/the rest of the world—until Spivak (1974) rises up, loud in my ear, her words jumping off the page and tearing at my throat: binaries must be recognized, hierarchies overthrown, new concepts allowed to emerge, power relationships reversed.

> To locate the promising, marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signified; to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed. Deconstruction in a nutshell. (Spivak, p. lxxviii)

Dare I unleash the undecidable moment of fiction in my own work?

This deconstruction of academic/fictional texts led me to a revelatory technique: I began to read fiction as I would read scholarly work and scholarly work as I would fiction. The distinctions between the two started to evaporate, and I could finally conceive of Lather's (2001) "messy text[s] [that] [say] 'yes' to that which interrupts and

exceeds and renounces [their] own force toward a stuttering knowledge" (p. 218). Such a hesitant, tongue-tied knowledge was suddenly enough.

New worlds opened, new places in which I could lose myself, for I found truth in fiction and fiction in truth, over and over again, until each became shorn of restrictive meaning and each took on an inclusiveness that gave me hope, emboldening me, showing me where to look, how to read differently. I searched out what I grew to call "smart" fiction, fiction that uses theory in ways both oblique and obvious, and I found it in Calvino (1979/1981) and Powers (2006) and Winterson (1992), among many others. And just as diligently, I looked for fiction in academic texts, probing for what Britzman (1995) described as "mov[ement] behind the scenes of … ethnographic work to elaborate the theoretical and narrative decisions…made in producing [scholarly] work" (p. 231). And I found this movement, this fiction, too, in the qualitative research of Stoddart (2001) and Sumara (2002) and Maddin (2009) and others.

So I write my scholarly dissertation in the form of fiction, with dialogue and character and plot, taking the ordinary language of prose and, following Denzin's notion of performative ethnography (2003), I infuse it with theory, implicit, yes, but no less present. I write fictively, capturing the protagonist's (for she is not necessarily me, much as we share in common) attempts to theorize her life, her multiple fractured selves, particularly her relationships with teaching and learning and the academy. And through such writing, I hope to join the phalanx of "[c]onfessional tales, authorial self-revelation, multivoicedness, and personal narrative … designed to move ethnography away from scientificity and the appropriation of others" (Lather, 2001, p. 206). My own fictionalized performances as teacher become a worthwhile object of study, a pursuable kinesis.

Why fiction? Because it's an old friend and a generous teacher in its own right. Because I want my readers to have the opportunity to lose themselves in my writing, just as I lose myself in a well-crafted story, in a Calvino novel or a Richardson poem. I want my readers to talk back to these teaching stories of mine, to appropriate bits of the teachers I present into their own teaching selves. Or not. But I want them to have that opportunity. I encourage them by writing well, working hard to achieve verisimilitude within the common fictional forms that I appropriate and meld with my various discordant voices. I want my readers to trouble the boundaries surrounding fiction, as I did. How—or whether—they do that is of course up to them, for everyone reads and writes their worlds with uncommon singularity.

Because I am writing a dissertation that works as a piece of a fiction works, I advise the reader to approach the reading experience as s/he approaches a work of fiction. I invite my readers to suspend dis/belief at times, to revel in the absence of easy answers and straightforward explanations and linear plots, to relish the sense of suspense, of not knowing everything from the start, of surprise. I hope readers will unconsciously fill in missing information with their own life experiences, their own imaginations, just as when they read Joyce or Eco or Welty. Perhaps they will participate in the making of meaning from my fictional texts. Or perhaps they will make no meaning at all, for post- thinkers have come to distrust the reification of meaning-making. For as Banville (1997) claimed, "The fact is, of course, there is no meaning. Significance, yes; affects; authority; mystery—magic if you wish—but no meaning." (p. 312).

Maybe instead readers will simply lose themselves in my writing, as I have done so many times before, allowing the fiction I write to sweep them away, awash in pleasure, alive in the moment of reading.

Why teaching?

"I am a choreographer. A choreographer is a poet. I do not create. … I assemble, and I will steal from everywhere to do it" (Balanchine, n.d., as quoted on Famous Quotes and Authors).[2]

Over the ten plus years that I have been an "official," state-sanctioned teacher, I have learned that Balanchine's description of choreography holds equally true for teaching—teaching is choreography and poetry and larceny, among other things. Read the above quotation and replace "choreographer" with teacher. It works; I learned that quickly, not as a student in class but through standing in front of a classroom, where the dancing happens.

The performance of teacher is an assemblage, in that it "functions … in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 4). Teachers are thieves, toiling with ideas and strategies stolen from multiple sources. As a new teacher I scoured available pedagogical and curricular materials, memories, and professional resources for ideas and instructional strategies—nothing compares with the fear of going onstage ill prepared. I (sometimes hesitantly) transmitted proscribed curricula and assessments mandated by the state and demanded by the administration. Mostly I stole from other people—fellow teachers, parents,

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[2] I have searched high and low for the original source of this Balanchine quote. Perhaps my inability to suss it out indicates that he never said it. Whether he did or not (and to whom) is not important for, as John Ford wrote in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (Ford & Goldbeck, 1962), "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

administrators, and not least of all, the students themselves. "[Teaching] has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" (Deleuze & Guattari, p. 5).

Teachers poach not only from the interests and intensities of their students and co-workers; they also steal from those who taught them, in an "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975, p. 61). Because of compulsory schooling, every teacher has had years of experience observing her own teachers, learning from them how schooling functions. Thus, the discourses of school are maintained and perpetuated. Everyone has a clear idea of what a teacher is and how she works: "A word such as *teacher* is already overpopulated with other contexts; its multiple meanings can never be isolated from the speaker, the listener, or the situation" (Britzman, 1994, p. 72). The experience of being a student, in particular contexts, typically for 16 years or more, disciplines new teachers, restricting what they become and how they behave within schools. But as Scott (1991) reminded us, "[w]hat counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political." (p. 797). Within this hegemonic grid of school, teachers perform, drawing from multiple sources to inform their practice.

This teaching as "bricolage" (Levi-Strauss, 1962/1966, p. 17) is something I never considered until I found myself standing in front of 32 14-year old students, knowing I was there to teach them. But other than a vague idea of writing words on a whiteboard, assigning textbooks, taking attendance, giving quizzes, I was completely baffled by what I should do or how I should do it, this in spite of my exhaustive training, in spite of having sat on the student side of the classroom divide since age five, in spite of my

family history of teaching. Me, a deer caught in the headlights with 64 eyes staring at me. Again, I turn to Britzman (1994) to explain how I felt in that moment:

> This is the work of carving out one's own territory within preestablished borders, of desiring to be different while negotiating institutional mandates for conformity, and of constructing one's teaching voice from the stuff of past, that is, student experience. The struggle to borrow, to negotiate, to claim ownership, and to take up that which seems already completed suggests the contradictions within which teacher identity is constructed and deconstructed (pp. 54-55).

Me, in front of students for the first time, by myself, with no memory, with primal stage fright, in full blush, mouth open and nothing to say.

The struggle to perform teacher, to construct and deconstruct the subject position, is my object of study.

How did I wind up here?

Teaching tends to be a family profession, which is the easy way to explain my eventual production of self as teacher. My maternal grandfather and grandmother were both teachers in one-room schools during the early years of the twentieth century. They were both attracted to teaching having "undergone the uncertainties and deprivations of lower- and working-class life" and saw teaching as a way to take "a significant step up the social class ladder" (Lortie, 1975 p. 13). My grandmother later "taught" me to read before I entered kindergarten. My mother was a high school teacher in a time when teaching was one of the few professions to which women could legitimately aspire. My sister teaches high school biology and chemistry now. My brother-in-law teaches middle school physical education and health and coaches football and basketball. As a student, I

frequently identify with the teacher more than with peers. My familiarity with "teacher" as a production of self, my seeming destiny to perform myself as teacher one day, were cemented from very early in life and affirmed by family members who care for me. Teaching is comfort, safety.

But though I produced myself as a successful student—from testing high enough to be placed in the gifted program in first grade to a full scholarship to a Research-one institution for my undergraduate degree—and despite my teacherly heritage, I fought this perceived destiny of teacher relentlessly. I refused, refused, refused, and refused to go into the family business until one day, graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in comparative literature, jaded, broke, and bored, I found myself applying for a Masters of Education program, falling back on the known. Two years later I stepped in front of a classroom filled to bursting with teenagers—those 64 eyes staring back at me.

I was armed with educational theories—the writing process (Atwell, 1998; Rief, 1991; Romano, 1995) and reader response theories (Rosenblatt, 1978; Wilhelm, 1996) I had picked up during my Masters of Education program and the student-centered methods that had been modeled by my professors in the college of education—easy at hand. I carried with me carefully developed thematic plans and grandiose notions of how I would help and heal and inspire and engage the students placed in my charge. I had the tools to correct the wrongs that had been foisted upon students by generational poverty and institutional racism. Most of all, I would teach them to love reading and writing, as my grandmother had taught me.

Yet as I stood there in front of my class, I had not a clue as to how I was to enact the job I was hired by the state of Georgia to perform. "What [I had] learn[ed] about

teaching, then, was intuitive and imitative rather than explicit and analytical" (Lortie, 1975, p. 62). This imitative knowledge, along with the more analytically academic approach to teaching I had learned in my Masters program, both failed me. For as Labaree (2004) indicated, "[t]eaching is an enormously difficult job that looks easy" (p. 39) only from the outside.

I entered uncharted waters and managed to stay afloat for five years, relying primarily on the help of those who taught alongside me in my high school. I pilfered from them and from others in what became my extended family, borrowing and stealing whatever I could, both from those who were generous enough to make their goods readily available and by example from others whose demanding lives and tunnel vision didn't allow the mentoring of a newbie like me. I leaned on my co-workers for instructional strategies and materials. "Teaching was more difficult than expected" (Lortie, 1975, p. 65), and I "rel[ied] upon other teachers to prevent loneliness" (Lortie, p. 98). My co-workers weren't just professional resources; they were my life preservers.

But in the usual time frame of five years, dead tired of the grinding life of a high school teacher, I decided to leave the classroom, promising myself that going back to the academy would relieve the sense of frustration and despair that threatened to drag me under for good, turn me robotic, lackluster, angry. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future wrote in a 2003 report that almost 50% of new teachers leave the profession during the first five years on the job, and I became one of the statistics.

If I did not have the stamina to teach high school students myself, if I was not strong enough to absorb the disappointments and belittling I encountered daily, perhaps I

could parlay my own lived experiences as teacher into something valuable for others who wanted to teach. Maybe I could enter the college of education and shake its foundations by sharing with my new students, these young, idealistic, prospective teachers, the "real skinny" of classroom life.

But as with teaching high school, I found this task of teaching future teachers difficult, not only because my students weren't particularly interested in what I had to teach them, but also because, as DiPardo (1993) described it, I felt "forever like a disoriented interloper" (p. 197), straddling the school/academy divide. My students rejected much of what I aimed to teach them, preferring to rely on what they had learned during their own apprenticeships of observation, closing themselves off to a certain "receptivity to [direct] instruction in pedagogy" (Lortie, 1975, p. 66). For teacher educators "are in charge of showing students *how* to teach, which they think they already know, while disciplinary departments are in charge of showing them *what* to teach, which is both a more elevated and an apparently less obvious form of knowledge" (Labaree, 2004, p. 59). I learned quickly that if teachers garner little respect from those outside the profession, teacher educators receive even less, both outside and inside the profession. Or maybe it was just me, thinking what I had to offer, my ways of performing teacher, actually mattered.

But that certain lack of respect from my students wasn't the heart of my continuing dissatisfaction with teaching but merely the ego of it. My difficulties with teacher education stemmed more profoundly from the fact that the more I read post-theories and contemplated their applications to mid-level theories in education, the more I

wrote my way through to the "thinking that writing produce[d]" (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 178), I slowly, but inexorably, started to doubt the entire project of compulsory education.

Which theories pushed me in this direction? For one, Foucault's genealogy of the prison system, presented in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975/1977), particularly his description of "docile bodies" that are correctly trained through the use of "simple instruments [--] hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination" (p. 170). Foucault's docile bodies, produced in the ubiquitous systems of schools, hospitals, militaries, and penal systems, forced me to re-theorize my experiences in schools—as an apprentice, teacher, and teacher educator. I had to rethink my purposes for teaching, my pedagogical practices and the effects such practices produced on my students and on myself(ves). How did an awareness of my complicity in the examination and documentation of student cases make irrelevant the "good" I felt I was accomplishing in schools? Or did it? Was I a puppet in a chain of puppets, manipulated by an always-deferred invisible controlling force? Was I a molded docile body shaping the next generation of docile bodies? And how did my own schooling function in conscribing the boundaries I'd unknowingly set for myself as teacher, and later, teacher educator? These questions and others begged answers, required a rigorous re-theorizing of my life as teacher and of the entire education project. I came to understand that as a teacher, I was recreating middle-class attitudes in my students, "compliance and obedience" (Lortie, 1975, p. 113), not free thought and innovation, definitely not anarchy.

Post- theory helped me radically shift the ways I conceived of schools, students, and teachers. No longer were these innocent categories: no longer were they simply

components in a grid of intelligibility based on a humanist notion of self discipline. I began to discover apertures, points at which I might open up a locked-down system. My questions migrated. No longer was I asking "What does schooling mean?" but, following Bové (1995), "How does schooling function?" And more specifically, how do my performances as teacher function within this rigid system of education? What, exactly, is education? Is that what schools are actually performing? And how might I alter those performances, fracture that rigidity, become overtly political?

I now had the experience of teaching student teachers juxtaposed alongside the reading of post- theory. The seeds of doubt regarding the project of compulsory education were planted. Many of my students thought they already had all the answers. Though most of them were bright, introspective, resourceful future teachers who would be successful in maintaining the status quo within schools (just as I was) and who someday might also encounter the same post- theories that I describe here, there were others who seemed to approach the prospect of teaching precisely as a means to duplicate power relationships that have little to do with teaching and a lot to do with maintaining order—excluding, repressing, censoring, concealing (Foucault, 1975/1977). They marched in lockstep, locked down, disciplinarians in the narrowest, most ominous sense of the word, lords of the classroom castle.

Observing the pre-service teachers enrolled in the program in which I worked, seeing the pedagogical practices they put into place and those they copied and maintained from their mentors and previous teachers, in spite of the methods and theory courses they were required to take, stung my hope for educational transformation. I saw at work Foucault's (1975/1977) conception of power: "In fact, power produces; it produces

reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (p. 194). Introducing nineteen-year-old pre-service teachers to some awareness of the relationships between power and knowledge seemed an insurmountable task, and I was reminded once again that "the apprenticeship-of-observation is an ally of continuity rather than of change" (Lortie, 1975, p. 67). Despite leaving the high school classroom, the challenge of teaching had not gotten any easier.

Yet with all the doubts, all these questions about the structure of education and its material effects on students and teachers, I still produce myself as teacher. Why? It is a question I take most seriously. The subject position that has beckoned to me since childhood is still irresistible, although I can now imagine ways of performing teacher outside of the academy. But I cannot bear the thought of not thinking teacher at all. So I'm reminded of Spivak's (1993) charge "persistently to critique a structure that one cannot not (wish to) inhabit" (p. 284). I cannot not wish to inhabit teaching, and so I must find ways to "do a thing *and* its opposite" (Spivak, 1974, p. lxxviii) at once. Finding these ways to practice teaching and its opposite, performing teacher subjects while using post-theory to deconstruct those very performances, writing this process of theorizing as a piece of fiction—that is the work of this work.

I tire, now, of the telling; I slave over it and no longer do it well. Instead, let me show.

Chapter Two

Prisons

April, 2009

"The first thing I need to tell you. See this tape? Stay to the right of it."

Erica points to two strips of electrical tape running parallel down the length of the narrow hallway's mud-colored, tattered carpet. Dingy yellow lockers line each side of the hall. Once painted bright gold, the school's color, the lockers have faded, look washed out, like laundry left too long on the clothesline.

I stand in a high school halfway house called STAR Institute; it is the Lewis County school district's punitive high school. STAR: Scholarship, Teamwork, Accomplishment, Reward. The name is a purposeful misnomer. Students are not sent here to be stars but because they have committed a variety of infractions in the other two local high schools—physical altercation, resistance to authority, verbal abuse, delinquency.

Lewis County schools are typical of those found in small southern towns: all the black kids sit together in the cafeteria. But because a major state university is located in our town, educational policy is superficially more progressive, fueled by academics and artists who occasionally make their presence known within schools, who are troubled by, among other things, self-segregation. They design initiatives but rarely stay long enough to witness substantial changes. What I see as I look down the long hallway is schooling

as usual—closely supervised maneuvers, scripted instruction, maximum security passing as school.

Five colleagues from the university and I—two professors and four doctoral students including me—arrive early this April morning, parking our cars in diagonal spaces along the front of the low brick school building. After we sign in and affix name tags identifying ourselves and our purpose for being in the school, a uniformed guard leads us up a narrow staircase to our meeting with Dr. Jackie Dale, the school's principal. Dr. Dale is a former colleague of mine from Piney Creek, one of Lewis County's two traditional high schools and the one where I taught literature and composition for five years before becoming a full-time doctoral student. She served as assistant principal there before being promoted to her current position as principal of STAR Institute.

I am here with university professors and fellow doctoral students to observe students, teachers, curricula, and instructional practices and then to discuss possibilities for university involvement in reforming the school, which, according to standards set forth in the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* is deemed failing.

Erica, the director of Student Success and Educational Equality for the school district, is our guide and disciplinarian. She wears a gray suit, and her dark, curly hair is pulled back in a knot. She leads the six of us single file a short distance down the hallway from the main office and into Dr. Dale's office where we take seats around a small, scarred conference table.

Like me and all of the other university representatives, Erica is white. Dr. Dale and the school's teachers, with few exceptions, are black.

"I just haven't been able to figure it out," Dr. Dale says. "Why, in a town with a university this size, is there so little interest or involvement in public education, particularly from the university? I've been wondering that ever since I moved here from Louisiana."

None of us has a good answer. Dr. Emerson, the professor who has organized the visit, mumbles something like an apology.

"Coordination is tough," he finally says. "There are so many departments involved, so much budgetary red tape."

"And such a history of racism," I think to myself. Public schools in Lewis County are made up of more than 65 percent black and Latino students.

"Well at least you could have some of your education students come out to tutor. Offer course credit or something. Then they would get an idea what teaching is really all about. It would be a win-win situation."

Dr. Dale's two-way radio beeps loudly. She presses a button and speaks into the microphone. "Go ahead."

A mangled voice speaks on the other end: "We have a situation downstairs."

"You'll have to excuse me," Dr. Dale says. "But please continue this conversation with Erica. We're very interested in negotiating a partnership."

She smiles at me as she walks out of the overflowing office, brushing me lightly on the shoulder as she passes. "Good to see you, darling. I hope we'll be crossing paths again soon. We could really use you around here," she says.

"Okay. Let's get on with the tour," remarks Erica, no nonsense personified.

We step out into the hallway once again.

"Like I was saying, the students have to walk to the right of the tape line at all times. So while we're here, we all need to model good behavior."

Erica takes an exaggerated step to the right of the tape. "So you guys can just follow me."

"What's the purpose of the tape lines?" Julayne asks.

Julayne, a fellow doctoral student from another state, wants to understand, to empathize. I don't. I feel apart from colleagues and school personnel alike, knowing a little too much, remembering teenagers I taught, disconsolate faces either headed to the prison of STAR Institute or returning from its dull hallways, faces long buried, faces of trapped teen-agers who, I finally learned, never disappear. I get older; they stay the same, an endless, never-changing stream.

"It keeps the students moving in an orderly way," Erica says. "They can't reach out and touch each other as easily. Fewer fights."

The lines on the floor, barbed wire made of black tape, fence us off from the students who walk past us, the inmates, keeping them isolated on the other side of the hall. I pull myself closer to the wall.

"Oh." Julayne's face falls in disappointment. "So the middle of the hall is like a no-fly zone."

"We don't like to think of it that way," says Erica.

I find it easy to stay to the right of the line. Just like driving.

"I didn't mean to sound flip," says Julayne. "I understand."

I walk on the line for a few seconds, my arms out for balance, head tilting from side to side; then I catch a look from Erica, and I contain myself, behave.

A group of eight black and Latino students exits the boys' bathroom. Two of them flick water from their fingertips at each other. Another shoves the tail of his white buttoned down shirt into khaki pants.

Erica rushes over, reaches out, and shakes his limp hand. Looking directly into his eyes, she says, "I like the way you just tucked your shirt in. It's important for every student at STAR Institute to follow the dress code. How can you shine like a star if you're not properly dressed?"

The student shrugs and drops Erica's hand. A tall, broad-shouldered black teacher wearing khaki pants and a polo shirt follows the students out of the bathroom. He couldn't be older than 30, though his size gives him an imposing air.

"Line up," he says.

The students assemble themselves into a ragged line. They take enough time following his instructions to make a point. "We will not be managed too easily," they say without opening their mouths. "We still have a shred of independence. We're not in prison. Not yet."

"We ain't moving 'til y'all line up." The teacher ratchets his command up a notch.

The line finally straightens and begins to move down the hallway, the students' gleaming sneakers staying well to the right of the tape. Our own line of adults moves in the opposite direction. I sip my coffee as I walk, still warm in a stainless steel cup.

"We're going to stop in on Isaac's class next," Erica says. We follow her obediently toward the door of the school's only English classroom. I feel trapped, watched, a rat in a maze. My eyes go the ceiling, looking for cameras.

"Good morning," Isaac says, as we enter his classroom. "Welcome to STAR Institute." A forced smile appears briefly. "Come on in."

We walk into a classroom with high windows against one wall. The building was once home to Crosby-Davis High School, Lewis County's premier black high school before integration in 1970. Around three sides of the room's perimeter are folding tables with brand new desktop computers. Students are seated, facing them. The district has invested heavily in technology, a rigorously researched panacea intended to solve the achievement gap problem.

A female teacher parades back and forth behind the students like a drill sergeant.

"Get back to work, Anfernee," the teacher says. She is stern. No nonsense is epidemic here, among the teaching class.

"What I want you to do now is interact with the students. Get a sense for who they are," Erica says. "Go talk to them."

Julayne, Heather, and Dr. Piper immediately approach students and sit down in empty chairs next to them. The room is mysteriously filled with chairs, at least two for every student. Dr. Emerson and Davis stand by the door, talking to Erica about possibilities for university involvement. The district might be able to fund a graduate assistantship for next year, bring in a doctoral student to run an individualized tutoring program, Erica explains.

I hang back, listening; I know better. Instead of joining the students, I eventually walk across the room to Isaac, who is standing by his desk, flipping through a copy of the young adult novel, *The Outsiders*. He is short with curly brown hair and tired eyes. I introduce myself.

"I used to teach in the district," I say. "At Piney Creek."

Isaac looks up from his book. I am no longer just an interloper from the university; I'm a comrade. Piney Creek is baptism by fire. He salutes me with his eyes.

"So you have an idea what we're dealing with here."

"Yes. I remember what happens 45 days into the semester. After they serve their sentences here and come back to me. Angry kids added to my first period roster. A class that was barely manageable before is now out of control."

"That's our population alright. Angry." Pause. "Angry. Poor. Out of control."

"Fuck you, man! Leave me the fuck alone," a female student says. I turn and see she is talking to Heather. The female teacher patrolling the room descends on the student. Heather silently gets up and moves to a different chair, next to a student who seems half asleep.

"So what are they working on?" I say.

"Well, this is not my class. This is my planning period, but since the building is so small, another teacher," nodding toward the black woman who tried to rescue Heather, "floats in here with her class and uses my room when I'm not teaching. They're working with the NovaNET program. It's designed to improve their literacy skills. Do you know it?"

"Yes. We used that in after-school credit recovery. Trying to help kids with low reading levels. Gotta get the test scores up. Adequate Yearly Progress and all that."

"All the No Child Left Behind stuff is pretty meaningless here. We're just trying to survive."

I grimace and shift my weight from one foot to the other, unnerved.

He continues, “NovaNET is not a great program. Just skill and drill. I don’t use it that much. But some teachers love it. Keeps the kids quiet and busy.”

“Yes,” I say. “I remember striving for busy.”

I look around the room, scanning for familiar faces. Then I remember that I couldn’t possibly know any of these students, even the ones who look vaguely familiar. Four years have passed since I taught at Piney Creek.

“Deg…De…gra…da…I give up. What that mean?” A male student trying to sound out one of the words in the analogy program on his computer screen catches my ear. Teaching does that, heightens your senses. Sounds and sights bombard me as they used to when I was teaching.

Dr. Piper sits down next to him.

“Degradation,” she says. “De- means down. It means the state of being degraded or put down. You know…when something is put down to a lower level, a lower quality.”

“So what’s the answer?”

“Well, what’s the question?” Dr. Piper asks.

Before he can answer, Erica’s voice booms. She talks to us the same way she talks to students.

“Alright, guys. It’s almost time for class change. I’d like you to see what a great job the students do during class change. This is when the tape really helps.” She motions us over to the door.

“Come back,” says Isaac. “Any time.”

We exchange furtive smiles. Humor helps, always. But it’s not always at hand.

“Move along,” Erica says, talking to my group, looking at me.

The six of us step outside into the hall and stand in line with our backs to the well-worn lockers.

"Get in line, Shaquila!" The uniformed police officer who escorted us to Dr. Dale's office earlier this morning—or maybe he's a different officer, I've seen several roaming the halls—places his hand on the shoulder of a female student. "I'm serious. I am *not* messin' with you today."

Shaquila giggles and dances over toward the lockers on the opposite side of the hall, out of the reach of the officer.

"Do you want me to demote you to level two?" He threatens her.

"No." She jumps across the hall, walks the tape like a tightrope, just as I did earlier, with her arms out for balance. Her hair is neatly braided. She wears a belt covered in sequins.

"See? I'm on the right side. You can't say I'm on the wrong side." Her sneakers glitter in the fluorescent light.

We are in the hall only a short time, maybe four minutes. Unlike Shaquila, most of the students follow the rules, don't tempt the officers, stay on the correct side of the hallway. They don't use the lockers at all. Instead, they just walk from one classroom to the next, talking to each other quietly, paying us no attention.

"See how well it works?" Erica asks, not expecting an answer. "Discipline and order go hand-in-hand."

Dr. Piper is about to say something when we hear a voice from behind us.

"We're about to get started if you all want to come on inside," Isaac says from his doorway.

The six of us walk back into his classroom and sit in the dozen or so mismatched student desks that are arranged in two parallel rows in the center of the room. There are only four students in his class, two Latino students sitting in desks, two black students huddled around one of the computers. They secretly share a candy bar. Contraband.

Isaac gives me a conspiratorial glance: “See, I told you you’d be back.”

Then he walks to the front of the room.

“Let’s take a look at the plan for today’s class.” Isaac addresses the students. “The first thing is that you all have an opportunity to earn a STAR buck. All you have to do is introduce yourself to one of our guests.”

The students sit quietly, guarded. They eye us suspiciously. A bright red blush spreads across one face.

Isaac is still at the front of the room, near the smart board.

“Come on guys. The procedure for introducing yourself is right here on the wall. You just follow the procedure.”

Isaac points to one of several brightly colored pages that are taped to the wall.

I silently read the page he indicates:

1. Shake the person’s hand.

2. Look the person in the eye.

3. Tell the person your name.

4. Say, “Nice to meet you.”

Other pages taped to the walls contain instructions for coping with anger, asking for permission to leave the classroom, apologizing for inappropriate behavior.

“Come on, guys. This is easy.”

The students sit quietly. One pair of brown eyes stares down at the computer keyboard.

"No one wants a STAR buck? You can buy a piece of pizza at lunch." He bribes them.

"I'll do it," a Latino student finally says. He walks over to Dr. Piper and offers her a limp handshake. "Hi. My name is Eduardo." He peeks toward her face. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, Eduardo. I'm Sus—"

"Is that all I have to do?" Eduardo interrupts her, drops her hand, looks toward Isaac. "Where my STAR buck at?"

"I'll get it for you," Isaac says. "Thank you, Eduardo. Anyone else?"

No takers.

Isaac digs in his desk for the pack of STAR bucks. STAR: Scholarship, Teamwork, Accomplishment, Reward.

Meanwhile, Dr. Piper slides closer to me in her desk. "Where are we?" she whispers. "Is this school or is it prison?

"It's not school," I say. "Something in-between, a training ground for jail. A prep prison."

And then I imagine another sign on the wall:

How to Talk to the Warden.

1. Lower your eyes. . .

*****

January, 2009

The murder trial wells up in my mind as I leave the Bombay Café on a brisk January evening. I've just eaten fish tikka masala, rice pilau, and too much garlic naan. The bitter-crisp taste of Kingfisher lingers on my lips. I don't yet know that Max, my dining companion, will come down with a nasty case of food poisoning by the morning.

I step onto the sidewalk, leaving saffron dreams behind, and gaze across Gilmer Street at the university campus where I am again (and still) a student. The low-hanging magnolias are smothering, sinister, oppressive in the hiss of pale yellow street lamps. I remember the giant magnolia in Nana's front yard, getting lost under its branches on sticky summer nights, unable to find my way out, the thick smell and damp air trapping me, hanging limbs blocking my way, like prison bars.

Everything is a trial, especially now.

The circumstances of my life have changed, dramatically, willfully, over the last four years. I've left teaching at Piney Creek to return to school, reclaiming the role of student yet again. I've left my husband, Michael, and my home to be with Max, a professor who is thirty years older than I am. I can't call him my boyfriend, because he's not a boy. He's my mentor, my muse. Though I'm staying with Max, I feel like a squatter, physically, and a fraud, academically. Who could imagine me, a skinny girl from the north Georgia hills, enrolled in a Ph.D. program? Who could imagine a good girl like me leaving her husband? My family in Donalsville, the small town where I'm from, doesn't approve. I struggle bravely and doubt myself constantly; I keep many secrets.

As I stand on the sidewalk outside the café, the murder trial on which I served as a juror, four years ago this month, a lifetime ago it seems, floats into view as a faint memory, as if out of nowhere, out of the pavement I stand on, a distant manuscript until now, overwritten by layers of intervening experience. The palimpsest of life has dulled my remembrance—until this moment.

But then I blink, now consciously realizing where I am, my eyelids erasing four years in one sweep. Place matters. And this place is haunted.

Just outside the Bombay Café, I turn right, headed to the spot where Max's car is parked along Gilmer Street. Waiting for him to zip his coat, I stand by the small bank parking lot where the body of the murder victim was found, and instantly, memory invades. I see scads of young people running across the concrete lot, the slender ones squeezing between the last bar of the fence and the brick wall of the bank next door, others jumping the six foot cast iron fence along Dunlap Street, which runs perpendicular to Gilmer and forms the western boundary of the parking lot. Cigarette butts lie scattered along the curb that separates the parking lot from the sidewalk along Gilmer, as they did in the crime scene photographs.

I feel the muscles around my eyes instinctively strain. Transported to a second-floor court room in the Lewis County Courthouse, located just three blocks east and two blocks north of here, I peer into a four by six inch video screen mounted in the jury box in front of my seat. Photo after photo of the crime scene and its minutiae flits across the screen until I wilt in stupor. The courtroom is not hot. In fact I have to wear a sweater to keep from shivering, but I feel myself drooping from fatigue.

I could be at the movies; the worn blue chair is the same as those in the dollar theater. Instead I am in the jury box, a theater of a different sort, but a theater nonetheless. An event. A performance. With me as both spectator and spectacle, player and played. On stage, my fellow players warm up to their roles.

I am one of twelve people who will decide whether a thirty-one year old black man will spend the rest of his life in prison. Not the prep prison of STAR Institute, but an actual maximum security state prison.

On that cold city sidewalk, I blink my eyes rapidly, willing the images to disappear. The taste of curry evaporates.

"Hey," Max says, an urgency in his voice bringing me back to his side. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Me, too," I hear myself say.

"It was a mistake, coming here."

He's more right than he knows. Where am I? A sense of panic—my past pursues me.

*****

January, 2005

"I cannot believe they called me to this case!" I wail into my cell phone, frustrated and angry. Then, "Hang on a minute." I maneuver my car toward the exit gate of the courthouse parking garage.

The attendant is ready to take my validated ticket. I remembered to have the bailiff stamp it today so I don't have pay five dollars, like I did Monday, the first day of jury selection. The attendant smiles as she takes my ticket and waves me through the

gate. I'll see the same smile every afternoon for another week and a half. On the days when I leave the courthouse after six o'clock, like the day of the verdict, her shift has ended. Her replacement is a leering youngish man with a gap between his teeth. Each time I pull up to his booth he tries to make conversation, ignoring the line of cars behind mine.

"How can anyone think this is a good idea? The district attorney, least of all."

My husband, Michael, on the other end of the phone, says nothing.

I have just been selected to serve on a jury in a murder trial. The defendant is charged with first-degree murder and possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony.

"I'm gonna miss God knows how many more days of school. My classes are going to shit already. And on top of that, I know half the people on the witness list! They all go to Piney Creek! I honestly can't believe it. How can I be impartial? Why would the DA choose me?"

"Did you say that you're prejudiced toward black people? That would've gotten you off."

"I can't sit up there and lie about something like that. Of course I didn't say that."

"You should've."

"I was sure they wouldn't pick me after I read off the names of the potential witnesses I know. Felton Cummings! Felton Cummings is on the list. Students I teach this semester. I mean, what the fuck?"

"I always heard that if you know the witnesses, you're automatically scratched."

The sun is already going down. I turn on my headlights as I move through light traffic, past the downtown performing arts center and the newspaper building's Greek revivalist facade.

"And then there's Uncle Joey. I mentioned him right away. Said I could never vote for the death penalty. I know what it's like to be the defendant. My uncle was convicted of murder. I sympathize."

"How'd they respond to that?"

"It's not at issue in this case. State is not asking for death."

I turn right onto the Jackson Highway and head away from town. My uncle is still in prison for first-degree murder. The state is not asking for death in this case, but it has the power to do so if it desires. Justice as caprice, I think. A wave of terror crashes through my nervous system. I shake uncontrollably for a second, tap the break to slow my car; then my muscles settle down.

"Well, it's meant to be, I guess," Michael says. "Maybe you'll be the one to do the right thing. Maybe this guy needs you on his jury."

"Fat consolation that is. What I need is for the DA to teach my classes the rest of the semester. This thing is gonna take two weeks at least. Two weeks of subs? I'll never get them back."

Now my head pounds as my mind ticks off a to-do list. I'll have to call subfinder, make lesson plans, send them to Paige, my department chair to print out. It's already after six o'clock. I'd assumed I'd be back at school tomorrow, not writing another week of substitute plans. I'm always late, always making the wrong assumptions.

I drive by the Red & Gold package store and wait impatiently at a stoplight. Michael's voice again.

"You there?"

"Yes," I say. "Sorry."

"So you wanna pick up some dinner? How about Indian food?"

I make a u-turn at the next traffic light and head back downtown, to the scene of the crime, although I don't yet know that it happened there. Innocently, I walk the few paces from car to the restaurant's door.

"Lamb vindaloo for one," I say. "To take away, please."

*****

On the first day of the trial, the jury consists of 15 people, a cross-section of college-town life—in the eyes of the law, a group of the defendant's peers. That afternoon a university student chosen as one of the alternates loses her shit, cries in front of the judge: "I can't do this—it's too stressful." He dismisses her. Why didn't I think of that?

The second day a middle-aged woman learns that her brother has been badly injured in a car accident. She turns pale. Dismissed. Now we're 13.

In the group is a middle-aged black guy who drives a truck for a living, two stay-at-home moms, an older woman who lives in Rockingham, one of the county's public housing projects, and a young hippie-type who's the last remaining alternate. He wears the same black corduroy blazer every day and has to sit through the trial even though he doesn't get to vote when it comes time to decide the verdict.

The prosecutor is the long-serving district attorney, always dressed in an expensive suit, silk tie, and wingtip shoes. He is the picture of a white, Southern gentleman, his "Yes, Ma'am" and "How do you do?" drawl cloying and deftly deployed. The defense attorney wears a yellow Live Strong bracelet. My guess would be former military—his exaggerated crew cut and clipped speech give him away. The victim's well-dressed family sits in the front row—mom, dad, two twenty-something sisters. All fat with pale, freckled skin, the mom and girls cry intermittently, while the dad glares angrily. I know these people, or people like them. I grew up with them, in the rural white South. My peers, I think.

The defendant, whose name we are told is Jeffrey Pope, wears a light blue shirt and a tie. His skin is nut brown, and he stares straight ahead, refusing eye contact, though I look at him intently, willing his gaze to turn my way. Have I seen him before? Do I know him? Did I teach his little sister?

"Do you know Mrs. Mae Turner?" the DA had asked me during jury selection, just yesterday. "Or any of her daughters? Kenyasa? Deandra? Kiki?"

"Yes," I replied. I was nervous the whole time I sat on the stand. Why? I have nothing to hide. Yet I felt like I was the one on trial, the one who might be sent away, like I am a case to be examined.

"Which one? Mrs. Turner or her one of her daughters?" the DA continued.

"I know Kenyasa. She was in my senior literature class."

Kenyasa is a highly capable student with a sweet, confident disposition and firm plans to attend college. I like her a lot.

If Kenyasa were on the jury, at least I'd have someone to talk to. As it is, I feel isolated.

One of my fellow jurors is eight months pregnant. She has stringy blond hair and no front teeth and asks for a cigarette break during every recess. One man hasn't bathed in weeks. He wears a fake leather jacket and has curly sideburns. Blackheads pepper his nose and forehead. Another is a former student at Piney Creek, though I never taught him. He's now an undergrad at the university, majoring in economics. Two women, one black and one white, are nurses. We get to know each other quickly. We have no choice.

"All rise. The honorable judge Alex Smith presiding."

The judge, tall and dark in his robes, is the first elected black judge in Lewis County. He takes the bench and calls the court to order. Several bailiffs and an armed police officer guard the perimeter of the room, one of the bailiffs standing near our jury box. The court reporter is in position, and Tom Harper from the *Morning Sun*, our local newspaper, is in the front row of the audience, notebook in hand, along with several eager law students from the university, one of whom has long legs and wears a reddish mini-skirt. We all have roles to play.

Like robots we stand. Like robots we sit. Thirteen of us in the jury box with too little leg room, shoulders rubbing, muscles already aching. The bailiff, who will become our constant companion during the seven-day trial, has given us small legal pads on which to take notes. He passes around a box of number two pencils badly sharpened, just like in school at testing time. We are instructed not to read the newspaper or discuss the case among ourselves.

After two full days of jury selection—sitting bored, waiting to be questioned, waiting for other people to be questioned—the trial starts too quickly.

First witness of the day is the emergency room doctor who was working the ER at Lewis Regional the night the body was brought in. He is pale and balding and seems accustomed to the routine of testimony. In response to the questions of Mr. DA, he describes the victim's injuries—the cause of death was a gunshot wound. We spend the morning looking at photos of a swollen corpse. Bullet wounds in his belly. Dried blood. During the photo display, the victim's family leaves the room for the only time during the trial. I can still hear the mother sobbing after the courtroom door is closed.

The family is back after lunch for an afternoon of police testimony. Three officers—one woman and two men. They recount responding to the 911 call, searching for a suspect, questioning the myriad witnesses, collecting evidence, casting about for information. More photos. Shell casings, this time. Photos of the concrete parking lot where the body was found, yellow arrows indicating the dead boy's placement on the ground. I squint at dark spots that could be blood or oil or even old chewing gum.

Judge Smith looks bored. Sleepy.

After an hour of this tedium my mind starts to wander. I try to pay attention to the testimony, but after a while, I can't. Instead I write on my legal pad.

I stand at the place where the Princeton School meets Piney Creek. The Princeton School always wins. I write.

The Princeton School is a private boarding school in the next state over where the victim was a student. The student population there is almost exclusively white and moneyed. The victim was visiting our town on the weekend he was killed, here to watch

a university football game. After the game, downtown was packed, frantic. He was allegedly drunk and obnoxious. Someone shot him outside a night club called Extasy. He died in a bank parking lot as crowds of people ran away.

Piney Creek is one of three public high schools in Lewis County and serves students living on the east side of the Cherokee River, which bisects town. I have been teaching there for five years. The defendant is a former student at the school, I eventually learned. I taught his wife's cousin last semester, Kenyasa Turner, one of my favorite students. The relationships are tangled.

Has the South changed? I write on my pad. *Does justice exist?*

I look again at the defendant and then at the victim's weeping family. They look like me, but I feel suddenly divided from them—frightened, lost, angry. I know what it's like to sit on the other side of the courtroom, behind the defense table.

Where are my loyalties here? I can't decide.

*****

January, 1998

"It's your boots, ma'am. You're gonna have to take off your boots."

The police officer holds a metal detector wand in her left hand. I sit on a narrow bench in the freezing entry room of Goodman State Prison and take off my battered brown hiking boots. I will remember not to wear them next time. Without boots I walk through the metal detector again. This time, it doesn't complain.

After handing our identification cards to another female officer seated behind the desk, filling out forms that list the name of the prisoner we are here to visit, and having the back of our hands stamped with yellow ink, Daddy, Mama, my sister Terri, and I are

permitted into the next waiting area, the third so far. Each one is a little warmer than the last, and the razor wire that surrounds the first one is no longer visible. We are deeper inside, yet nowhere near the heartless center of this ugly place, a center I can only imagine, where prisoners and their warders are the only occupants, filling endless time with numbing routine.

My palms sweat. I step back into my boots and stoop over to tie the frayed laces.

"If you have to use the bathroom, you should do it now," Mama cautions Terri and me.

The three of us walk into the women's bathroom and occupy the stalls. The air reeks of urine, and toilet paper litters the tiled floor. There is no seat on the toilet in my stall, just speckled porcelain. I squat and pee, careful not to touch the rim.

"Don't scrub your hands too hard," Mama says. "You might wash off that yellow stuff."

My sister and I obey the orders she so glibly pronounces, gingerly wash up, rub our hands against our blue jeans since there are no paper towels in the bathroom.

Daddy is waiting outside. We approach a doorway sealed off with vertical iron bars and wait for the officer on the other side of a thick pane of bullet-proof glass to notice us. It takes several minutes. When he finally sees us and presses a button, the armored door begins to slide open. As soon as we're inside, the door shuts, trapping the four of us in a tiny room no bigger than a closet. Two walls consist of sliding bars. Another is cinder block. The fourth is glass, with an officer seated behind it. If this were a Hyatt, we'd be in the elevator, marveling at the view. But this isn't the Hyatt.

The officer holds up his fist, the back of his ebony hand facing us. His lips are motionless, his dark eyes demand obedience. Terri and I don't know how to interpret this sign and panic momentarily, but Daddy has been here before. He holds his hand under the black light for a few seconds. We hurry to do the same. The stamps on our hands glow.

After each of us passes under the black light, the barred door on the other side of the enclosure slides open. We walk through and the door closes firmly behind us. The click it makes on closing is deafening, decibels louder than the movie version of jail doors closing. We stand at the end of a narrow hallway, unable to escape. I feel my breath shallow, raspy against raw nostrils. It is audible. I crave antiseptic, astringent, Afrin. I am scared.

We walk down the hallway past vending machines selling sodas, gray pre-packaged sandwiches, cheese crackers, potato chips, every unhealthy food. Clouds of rancid steam waft from the two microwaves. The sound of fake-butter popcorn popping. The stink of it. People with dirty fingernails wait on line.

Scattered across the gym-like room are clusters of orange plastic chairs and tables. Four chairs face each other with a tiny table in between. At each cluster sits a man wearing a white button-up shirt and white pants with navy blue piping up the legs. One of them is my Uncle Joey. Aunt Dianne, still his wife after more than seven years in prison, sits across from him. On the table are a microwaved steak sandwich and a can of Coke. Aunt Dianne holds a snack-sized bag of Bugles. Uncle Joey waves us over.

We cross the room, eyed carefully by another uniformed officer. Revolvers bulge at each hip. There aren't enough seats for all of us at our cluster. Daddy walks over to the

guard behind a high, imposing desk to ask if we can move some more chairs over. Meanwhile Uncle Joey stands up and hugs each of us loosely. The men in our family are not demonstrative.

I haven't seen my uncle in more than seven years, not since he was sent here, to the state prison, from the local jail, after being found guilty at his trial. He is serving concurrent life sentences for conspiracy to commit armed robbery and first-degree murder. I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek. An old strategy I use to keep from crying. Tears pool in my eyes anyway.

Uncle Joey is now almost bald.

I wipe my eyes. I am awkward. Uncontrolled compassion, heartache, and desperation make me helpless, small. I try to hide my loss of composure, look at the stained tile floor.

Daddy returns. We have been granted permission to move two more of the orange chairs to our cluster. I grab one and he drags another across the floor. Behind us we leave traces in the dust. We sit knee-to-knee as if huddled around a campfire.

"How are y'all girls doing?" Uncle Joey asks. "How's school?"

"I graduated." I say. "I'm working at the university library now."

"Oh, that sounds good. You always did love books."

"And I'm a sophomore," my sister says. "I've decided to major in biology."

"Well y'all have just growed up, haven't you?"

I sit quiet as a pebble. I don't know what to say next. Or what to do. Luckily Mama is there, and she is incapable of allowing silence a space to linger.

"How are Denise and Stanley?" She turns and asks Aunt Dianne about their children, my cousins. Neither Denise nor Stanley is attending college. Denise is on her second marriage, and Stanley works at Kmart. We women chat while Daddy talks cars with his brother. The NASCAR race in Daytona is coming up; they debate who will have the fastest car this year.

Across the room, an inmate breaks protocol. He is sitting with his foot propped on the opposite chair. A guard quickly swoops in to correct the situation. I try hard not to imagine what happens down the hallway to the left, the one from which the prisoners emerge for visits, the one that leads to the prison proper.

I can't stop my mind's wandering. How did Uncle Joey end up here? My family might not be well off, but we're honest, church-going folks. This place is foreign to me, and it must be to Uncle Joey. There are few white prisoners here. What could he possibly do, day in, day out? Who does he talk to? NASCAR is a redneck obsession.

"I guess we need to get going," Daddy finally says. "The count will start soon."

"What's the count?" Terri asks.

"That's when the guards lock this room down and count all the inmates and visitors to make sure the numbers add up right. No one can enter or leave while they do this. And believe me, they take their sweet time. We should leave before it starts."

"Well, thanks for coming, girls." Aunt Dianne stands and smiles. "It's so good to see you. We love you."

"Love you too," I say.

As we walk away, I glance back. Aunt Dianne is finishing the sandwich. Uncle Joey watches us. The sadness in his eyes is unbearable.

The four of us retrace our steps by the microwaves, back through the tiny enclosure, into the bathrooms, again past the desk to pick up our I.D.s and Daddy's car keys, through the crowded lobby where other visitors are waiting, out the doors into the small graveled courtyard, through the security check at the gate and onto the other side of the razor wire.

No one said a word. We obeyed the rules. They let us out. Uncle Joey follows the rules too, yet he is there for life. Disciplined. Punished.

Finally, I exhale, my breath as visible as the clouds in the cold gray sky.

*****

November, 2004

"We need to see you two guys for a minute," Mr. Thomson says with a wincing smile. "Andrew. Kevin."

Mr. Thomson is one of our assistant principals at Piney Creek, the most competent of the three. He walks into our after-school English department meeting unannounced, unexpected, hands on his hips. Ex-military. He is taking Andrew and Kevin, two of the twelve English teachers, to see Dr. Meyers, our new principal. No explanation. They leave fast, Thomson closing the door behind them, the speed of the summons sucking all the air out of our department head's classroom.

The ten of us left in the room, still sitting in blue student desks, are stunned silent, staring at each other. What just happened?

We try to talk about rubrics, anchor papers, preparation for End of Course Tests, but none of us can concentrate on the meeting agenda. We're all distracted. Why them? What for? This has never happened before.

"New principal," I say. "New rules."

"And new punishments. Don't forget that," Roberto, a fellow teacher and one of my closest friends, adds.

After the meeting, as I walk across the parking lot toward my Accord, I immediately call Andrew on my new cell phone.

"Congratulations! You're the fifth caller," he says after the third ring.

"What the hell happened? Why were you jerked out of the meeting like that?"

"Oh, I just got suspended. Kevin and I got suspended from school."

I stick the key into the door lock and pull myself, my briefcase, lunch box, and computer bag into the car.

"What? How can you be suspended?" Students get suspended, I think, usually on a sure path to STAR Institute.

"Well, I'm not supposed to say. We were told not to talk about it."

I can feel his silent laughter over the phone line. We have become best friends over the past five years of teaching together.

"Come on, you gotta tell *me*!"

"I assigned my students Kafka. The higher-ups didn't like that."

"Stop."

"Okay, okay. We're suspended because we know a little secret for subverting SASI."

SASI is the online student attendance program our school uses. We are supposed to take attendance during the first five minutes of each class period so that the central

office knows where every student is at every moment in time. It's a new rule, one among many. We must be accountable; we must count, all the time.

"Huh? I'm confused."

"Roberto showed us how to play the system. We can take attendance for all classes first thing in the morning so it will look like it's taken during the first five minutes of each class. Then we just go back at the end of the day and fix it if it's not right. We're not doing anything wrong. Still taking attendance. Just doing it differently. Not wasting class time doing it." He pauses. "We got tired of seeing our names on that list."

"Oh, the attendance lady's list?"

This year Piney Creek has a new attendance policy, and the names of teachers who don't report attendance in the first five minutes of each class are published in a school-wide email memo each day. There's a new sheriff in town, and things are changing at Piney Creek. New policies and new punishments for students. And for teachers.

"I'm sick of that list. Like the most important thing I have to do in the first five minutes of class is take attendance?"

"So you figured out a way around it, huh?" I ask.

"Actually Roberto figured it out. But he told me and Kevin about it."

"So why didn't he get suspended like you guys?"

I turn into the parking lot of the grocery store near my house, sit in my car, unwilling to end the conversation.

"'Cause even though he figured out how to manipulate the system, he doesn't need to actually do it. He remembers to take attendance." And after a pause, "So do you."

I laugh.

"So how long is your vacation?" I ask.

"I don't know. Just day-to-day at this point

"Not bad, I guess. I could use a day off myself."

Instead I am taking work home with me. I have papers to grade. At least a couple hours' worth of work. This job grinds on me more and more. If only I could focus on getting students' attention, encouraging them to listen, to participate. Instead, I am instructed to count them. Keep track of them. Measure them. Rank them. Manipulate them. I'm helping to shape docile bodies, though I don't have the vocabulary to describe my teaching that way. Not yet.

"I can't say I'm not looking forward to it."

Silence. I am not sure what to say, but I don't want to hang up. I am bad with silences, except when I crave them. Finally, I speak: "So call me if there are any developments or anything. I'm jealous, you know."

"You wouldn't be if you'd been in that office. Meyers was pissed, like we were being insubordinate or something. His face was three shades of purple. And Thomson was just standing there behind him like some kinda tough guy. It was surreal."

"Like Kafka."

I wander toward the front door of Winn Dixie, grab a cart, fish around in my purse for the shopping list I jotted down during morning announcements.

"Worse. We were being humiliated, punished for doing our jobs, for finding an extra five minutes to teach, not for *nothing*."

"Shit. I'm sorry."

I pick up a head of broccoli, drop it into my shopping cart. I imagine Dr. Meyers and Mr. Thomson, two burly white guys, menacing behind the desk, our wardens. Suddenly I remember I'm still on the phone with Andrew.

"So, um, have a good evening. And don't stay away too long," I say.

"I won't. I'll be around."

Three school days and a weekend go by before I see him again.

*****

January, 2005

On the fourth day of the trial—and for the third long day in a row—we ride in an extended sheriff's van to Peacheys Country Cookin' for lunch. Soul food in no-man's-land, right here on Gilmer Street. Five-foot peaches are painted on the windows facing the street. The floor is made of wood planks. Peacheys is the real deal, everything limp and greasy and cooked in fatback.

I can't stomach Peacheys' food for the third straight day. The granola bar I ate on the way to the courthouse this morning will have to do. But I go through the buffet line with everyone else, not wanting to stand out; I pick up a plastic tray and a package of plastic silverware, ask for a vegetable plate and point at the black-eyed peas, boiled cabbage, and plain white rice, knowing it will wind up in the trash.

"Biscuit or corn bread?"

My eyes glaze over as I reach the end of the serving line.

"Ma'am?" The server waits. His white shirt is splattered with grease stains, and his hair is covered with a navy blue hair net.

The man who will eventually be elected foreman of the jury, the most aggressive among us, clears this throat from his place behind me in line.

The server says again, “Ma’am? Biscuit or corn bread?”

“Oh,” I finally say. “Biscuit, please.”

I fill my paper cup with sweet tea and walk toward the fast-food style booths where the other jurors are already sitting. I decide to sit with the nurses today. They always sit together.

“Mind if I sit down?” I ask.

“No. Join us. We got a seat open.”

The pudgy white woman whose son is at freshman at my school makes it four as she slides into the booth next to me. The table is small for four adults; we bump elbows.

“So should we say something or not?” the black nurse asks the white one.

I pick up my plastic fork and spear two peas.

“I think we have to. I just can’t let it go. It goes against everything I know is right. It’s for her own good,” the white nurse answers.

The peas don’t have enough salt. I reach across the table, tilt the salt shaker once, twice.

“What are y’all talking about?” the mother asks.

“She wants to say something to that woman about smoking. How dangerous it is for her child,” the black nurse says.

“Oh. I noticed that, too. She puffs like a chimney in a blizzard. She’s what, ‘bout six months along?” asks the mother.

“At least,” says the black nurse.

"Of course judging from her mouth, health and hygiene don't seem to be important issues for her," the white nurse says. She likes to talk.

I manage to eat a few more peas. Sip my tea. It tastes like syrup.

"It might be better not to even mention it. What if she takes it the wrong way? What if she jumps us?" says the black nurse. "It's not like we're not going to see her again."

"That's true," the white nurse says with a laugh. "At least for the next few days. And I could see her doing it too. There's a meanness to her."

I try the biscuit. It oozes Crisco. Not like the biscuits Mama makes. The balance is off.

The other jurors are arranged at nearby tables and booths. Some cliques have formed. A few people, like me, try to sit at a different table every day. Wanderers. A part of and apart from each of the groups.

"Y'all about ready?" the bailiff who accompanies us to lunch every day walks over to our table. "We got to leave in about five more minutes."

I look at my plate, spear an errant pea and take one more bite of biscuit. The cabbage and rice sit untouched.

"Honey, ain't you gonna eat a thing?" The bailiff's grandfatherly voice. He takes pity on me. Why do I always attract pity?

"I'm just not hungry, I guess."

He places his gnarled black hand on my shoulder as he walks by.

"Let's go folks. Judge Smith gonna get impatient if we late gettin' back."

My heavy plate in hand, I walk by the trash cans, depositing my uneaten lunch as I move, finally out the door toward the cool January afternoon.

The non-smokers have formed a line to get back into the van. I queue up. The pregnant woman and three other smokers huddle in a small circle some distance away. It looks like the nurses have decided to hold their tongues, at least for today's lunch break.

I slide across one of the van's battered bench seats, all the way to the window. Two other jurors crowd in beside me. I have no means of escape. Smothered. I should have waited to get on last, so I'd be next to the door. But then I might have ended up in the front seat, next to the driver, forced to make conversation. I settle in for the short ride back downtown.

A black teenage boy rides his bicycle down the sidewalk toward us. He has no coat on, just a blue sweatshirt with a hood. I can see his breath.

"Why isn't he in school?" I think.

As he gets closer I see that the rider is Felton Cummings, one of my former students and a potential witness for the state. He dropped out of school last year during fall semester of his senior year. His dad's a cop.

The police van pulls across traffic, heads east on Gilmer Street. For every reason, and no reason at all, I start to cry.

Without a word, the black nurse hands me a tissue.

*****

November, 2000

"Then guess what she said?" my friend Andrew says to me following his after-school phone call to Felton's mother. Students linger outside the teacher work room

where we meet when the school day is over. It's Friday afternoon. Why don't they go home?

"No idea."

It is the first year of teaching for Andrew and me, and we've battled through to the end of another long day. We are sitting in the teacher work room, which is crowded with teacher-size desks, the walls lined with book shelves holding frayed textbooks, workbooks, teaching guides, and other ancillary materials. There is one grimy phone for the twelve English teachers to share. Andrew has just put the receiver back in its cradle.

"She said, 'Well here he come up the driveway right now. I'm 'bout to beat his ass. See if that straighten his ass up.'"

He does her voice, the accent, the inflection, hitting the two "asses" hard. I startle.

"Are you serious? She said that to you?"

"Uh-huh." He laughs.

I walk over to one of the two tiny refrigerators in the corner of the room and open the door. A tub of Tupperware that has been there for a week or more is starting to pucker and emit an odor. I grab a bottle of orange juice and sit at my desk.

"I wonder what he'll do on Monday. You better watch out," I say.

"Well, I don't know how it could be worse than today."

"He might bring a blade. He might shank you after class." I tease him.

Roberto walks in. He's a teacher with slightly more experience than either of us and a fast friend to both. We'll lovingly begin to refer to ourselves as the unprofessional trio when during post-planning, we skip the faculty luncheon and go out for beer instead.

Roberto grew up in Chicago; he's seen everything. Andrew and I go to him for advice on the days when nothing makes sense.

"What's that? Who's 'bout to get shanked?" Roberto asks.

"Andrew is. He called Felton Cummings' mama and told her what Felt did today."

"Which was?"

Andrew stands up, imitates Felton's actions during his fourth period class.

"When I told him to sit down and get out his copy of *The Crucible*, he stood at me toe-to-toe, looked me dead in the eye, and said, 'Fuck you, Mr. Sampson. I'll do whatever the hell I wanna do *when* I wanna do it.' He said fuck you! Right to my face!"

I giggle at his performance, punch drunk from the day's tribulations.

"Naw, dude. You won't get shanked. Kids got short memories. He'll forget it by Monday."

"Not after his mama beats him," I say with a smile.

Roberto sits down, puts his feet up on the desk. It's Friday. He wears Jordans to school on Fridays.

"At least you don't gotta deal with Marcus Browning," he says. "Today during second period, when I gave him the vocabulary quiz, he wadded it up, slam dunked it in the trash can, mimed pulling his pants down, then sat on the trash can like it's a toilet and he's taking a shit. Really. I kid you not."

Again, I laugh.

"Problem is, I laughed too. I couldn't help it."

"Who's Marcus Browning?" Andrew asks.

"Kid in my ninth grade class. Actually a really bright kid. But he's so done with this place. He's like 17 and has three credits. Just waitin' to drop out."

"Guess my day wasn't so bad after all." I smile at the two of them and think back through the day's three classes. Nothing was broken. No one cussed me out. "Just had to contend with Marieo Wingfield for the last two hours of the day. That's enough to try anyone's patience, but what the hell? It's Friday."

A moment passes silently. We're exhausted; it shows on our faces. I stifle a yawn.

"Speaking of Friday…What are we still doing here?" Andrew looks at the clock. "It's four o'clock. Let's go get a beer."

*****

August, 1990

When the phone rings at three o'clock in the morning, the news is never good. This time it's terrifying. I am sixteen and I sleep across the hall from my parents. The walls are thin. I hear everything, remember most of it.

I remember Mama answering the phone. I remember Daddy saying "You've got to be kidding me" again and again. Later I learn no one had died, but Aunt Dianne was sobbing on the other end of the phone. Uncle Joey had been questioned by police and arrested. Aunt Dianne didn't know what to do.

I remember pulling the covers up to my chin, not knowing what to do either, wishing I could disappear.

A week earlier Daddy came home from his work at the local bank. "There was a murder in Donalsville last night" he said casually while taking off his tie, running a comb through his hair.

"This is not Atlanta," Mama responded. "We don't have murders here."

"Well, there was a murder here last night. Two people were killed. David Walton was one of them and some boy who broke in and tried to rob him."

I overheard Daddy whisper that David Walton was a drug dealer rumored to have large amounts of cash in his house. No wonder the thieves thought he would be a good target.

"How did that happen? They shot each other?" Mama asked.

"I don't know. That's about all I heard."

The conversation ended, and I quickly forgot it happened.

Until a week later, when my uncle is arrested and Aunt Dianne calls at three in the morning to tell us.

Terri and I slowly learn the details, mostly from Mama. Daddy doesn't want to talk about it, at least not with us, and we don't press him.

"He didn't shoot anyone," Mama says, as the three of us huddle in my bedroom. "He never pulled the trigger."

"Then what happened?" I'm older than Terri. She sits quietly, teetering on the edge of the bed, and listens while I ask Mama all the questions I can think of.

"Well, these two men—Swanson and Pendergrass—they worked for Uncle Joey's company." The company was an ironworks factory that was already losing money when Joey bought it two years ago. Then the situation got worse. Joey and Dianne had to sell their house and lakeside property to pay debts. They rented a trailer off the highway. The company had gone bankrupt.

"Things got really bad, money-wise, for all of them, so Swanson and Pendergrass decided to make some easy money by breaking into David Walton's house. They planned to do it when he wasn't there, to just go in for money and jewelry."

Mama pauses, takes a deep breath.

"But they wanted to have a gun with them, just in case something happened," Mama explains.

We're still confused. Our eyes lock in fear.

"But how does this have anything to do with Uncle Joey? Why is he in jail?" I ask.

"Well, they asked Joey for a gun. In exchange they said they'd give him a cut of the money. And he did it. He gave them one of his guns."

"But he wasn't there! How can they charge him with murder when he didn't kill anyone?" I'm fighting back tears. Terri shivers beside me.

"They used his gun. When they went into the house, David was there and shot and killed Swanson. Then Pendergrass fired back and shot him."

I have heard the word conspiracy on television, but I'm not sure what it means. I don't know which question to ask next. Mama hugs us then tries to explain.

"They can charge you with conspiracy to commit murder even if you were not the actual murderer. It's the weapon that matters. They traced the gun."

Pendergrass has accepted a plea, claiming that Uncle Joey was the mastermind behind the heist. He will be charged with the lesser crime of manslaughter, in exchange for his testimony, and will eventually be sentenced to eight years in prison.

"At least they've decided not to ask for the death penalty," Mama says. "We can thank the good Lord for that."

Is she serious? The death penalty? For Uncle Joey? My uncle? The one who sits politely on Grandma's couch every Sunday afternoon while we kids eat lunch around the table? The one who sips his sweet tea quietly and hardly speaks?

On the advice of an attorney my family hires, Joey petitions the court for a change of venue for the trial, so it's moved to a nearby town. My sister and I continue with our normal school routines over those two weeks of the trial, which happens the next January, but my parents drive to the courthouse every day. My cousin Denise, Joey's daughter, one year older than me, testifies as a character witness.

Again, information is hard to come by, but Mama does share bits of the trial with us. She talks to us while shredding cabbage for coleslaw or frying chicken for supper or washing up after, in hushed tones that Daddy can't overhear.

"Lynne Darwin, that assistant DA, grilled Denise when she was on the stand. She got all confused by the questions, didn't know how to answer them. She started crying."

This time Mama's eyes fill with tears. She looks down at the dirty dishes sitting in the sink.

"How could he do that to her?" Mama's voice speaks quiet furor. "She's an eighteen year old girl for goodness sake. She didn't do nothing wrong. She don't deserve that."

Denise was supposed to say that Joey was devastated when he heard about the shooting, to show that the murder wasn't premeditated.

"She couldn't get the words out," Mama says.

I try to imagine myself sitting on the witness stand, but I don't have much to go on other than countless episodes of *Matlock* I watch on summer Sunday nights. I can't see Denise sitting up there. What does she wear? Who does she look at when everybody is looking at her?

*****

January, 2005

Felton Cummings is on the witness list for the state. So is Marieo Wingfield. And Martin Billups. And Edward Davis. And Johnna Terry. All current or former students of mine except for Edward Davis, but Edward Davis has a reputation around school. Everyone knows Edward. I saw him get in a fight over a grilled cheese sandwich last fall. Martin and Johnna are in my first period senior class this semester. And Marieo. Marieo from my afternoon class the first semester I taught at Piney Creek, is simply trouble. All the time.

Only Marieo and Edward actually testify. The rest are never called. They just happened to be standing outside the club on the night of the shooting. Faces caught on the security camera and identified by school administrators as people who might be convinced to testify against a homeboy.

Edward's testimony turns out to be purposefully non-consequential. He doesn't claim to have seen the defendant downtown the night of the murder, at least he doesn't say so from the witness stand. Instead he describes being in the crowd of people outside the club, hearing gun shots, running across the Regions Bank parking lot, jumping over the iron fence. He smiles at me from the witness stand, sheepish. Am I supposed to feel proud? Embarrassed? I avert my eyes, pretend to make notes on the pad in my lap.

Next, one of the Lewis County investigators testifies that C.C. Taylor, who is currently serving a federal sentence for trafficking cocaine across state lines, agreed to cooperate with the police, to coax someone to admit on tape that the defendant was the one who shot the kid downtown, outside Extasy. Word on the street was that Jeffrey Pope had committed the murder, but so far, the police had only flimsy evidence of his guilt. Hearsay. They needed something on tape.

C.C. had already been arraigned for trafficking cocaine, along with his wife Tina. The case against them was supposed to be open and shut, the police had substantial evidence, and C.C. and Tina were expecting long sentences. In exchange for their cooperation with investigators, the judge might agree to reduce their sentences, provided that the evidence they produce leads to a conviction in this case. C.C. sits in the courtroom in an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs. His chance to testify will come later.

Marieo is up next, and he's supposed to be one of the prosecution's clinchers. He was the dupe, the one riding in C.C. Taylor's car during the murder investigation, when C.C. wore a wire in an attempt to get stronger evidence against the defendant. Marieo was allegedly taped saying that Jeffrey Pope was the one who pulled the trigger.

But that's not what Marieo says on the witness stand. Instead, he says he has no idea who shot the victim. When he sees me in the jury box he waves. I smile at him softly and, again, look down at my pad.

How can I be on this jury when I know almost everybody in the courtroom? Why doesn't the judge care?

The victim's family must have seen my smile. I feel looks of scorn from them, although I don't raise my eyes to see. Am I some sort of traitor? Where do my loyalties lie? To the truth? I still believe in truth. To the law? I've stopped trusting the law by now.

Then I think we are simply all together here, all of us trapped, by whatever circumstance of fate, in this room at this moment. The law looks down from above, sees us tiny, powerless, each one of us a victim waiting to happen. This time, it's the defendant's turn to star, and we're his supporting players. Next time…who knows?

There is an overwhelming problem with the prosecution's star witnesses. None of them is particularly cooperative on the stand. Marieo wears sagging jeans and a button-up shirt with no tie, answers questions with one-word answers, is evasive, shifty, contradicting the tape we're played several times. On a recording full of static, nearly impossible to hear, Marieo says the defendant is guilty. At least the DA insists that is what he says. Do I hear those words he tells me I am hearing? Mostly I hear static and music from the car stereo tuned to 95.5 the Beat. They play the recording again and again, and though I listen hard, I can't make out the words that are spoken. I recognize the music, but can't remember the artist or the name of the song. Outkast, maybe? I don't know.

When C.C. Taylor is led to the stand, he's as evasive as Marieo, staring down at his shackled hands throughout his testimony. He doesn't produce the smoking gun the police are hoping for, probably won't get his term shortened after all. But I can't blame him for trying. Or can I?

Then the prosecutor brings forward an eyewitness. Jamar Burroughs is a bulky black man in a blue sweat shirt. He's the only witness who testifies to the defendant's

guilt. He's a former Piney Creek student too, but I don't know him since he's older, the defendant's age, my age. Jamar admits to seeing the defendant shoot the victim; he was standing right there when it happened. He also admits to having four or more drinks the night of the murder and smoking two or three blunts. He also cries on the stand.

The prosecution has no physical evidence to present. The clothes the defendant wore the night of the crime—blue jeans, a sweatshirt from the Gap, a Carhartt jacket—contain no gunpowder residue. This fact might be convincing, suggesting the defendant's innocence, but it is mitigated by the testimony of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation analyst who tells us the clothes arrived at the crime lab too late, the window for finding gunpowder residue closed.

No gun was found. There is a receipt for a gun from Benjamin's Fishing and Outdoor in the drawer of a nightstand by the defendant's bed, but no gun. Should Benjamin's be on trial for conspiracy, convicted, like Uncle Joey?

The defendant's wife testifies on the sixth day, but the defendant never does. We hear his words only from Lewis County police officers who read interrogation transcripts and police reports. We see photos of his bedroom and his car. Unmade bed with heart-shaped pillows. Red dirt driveway leading to an unassuming duplex. We see mug shots that show him wearing braids instead of the close-cropped cut he has now. The private details of a life projected on tiny display screens for us to judge. At the bidding of the state, I become a voyeur.

I imagine officers entering the house with a warrant and guns drawn. His two-year-old daughter screaming in fear. A family surprised in the act of living.

Two pieces of evidence are damning. The clothes the defendant allegedly wore on the night of the murder were found stuffed into a small Igloo cooler in the back of the laundry room on a high shelf, well out of the way.

And his cousin, an earnest woman about my age, testified that she saw him downtown on the night of the murder. He claimed he wasn't there, said he went to a blues club with Tony and Robbie, neither of whom is there to substantiate this alibi.

"Hey cuz!" she allegedly said, leaning from the window of her Ford Explorer.

"How you doin'?" he supposedly replied.

Are these sketchy pieces of information enough to convict?

Maybe there's a reason the defendant contradicts his own cousin about his whereabouts that night. Maybe his wife's testimony—those were his work clothes, stashed in the cooler after a day on the construction site and forgotten—is true. Can I send a man to prison for life on this evidence?

Maybe he killed a man. But what if he didn't? What if it wasn't him?

Anxiety overwhelms me throughout the trial. What is my role here? Who expects what from me?

I barely eat, even at home. I don't sleep at all during the week of the trial, nor for many weeks after.

*****

November, 2004

I write the letter during my second period planning. It has been on my to-do list for several weeks; I can't postpone it any longer. Uncle Joey's probation hearing is less than six weeks away.

November 5, 2004

State Board of Pardons and Paroles

2 Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, SE

Suite 458, Balcony Level, East Tower

Atlanta, GA 30334-4909

Dear Members of the State Board of Pardons and Paroles,

I am a high school English teacher in Lewis County, and I'm writing to plead with you on behalf of my uncle, GDC 799237, whose eligibility for parole is approaching. Since you do not know Uncle Joey as I do, I wanted to write and let you know what a kind and loving man he is and how much his family longs for his release and return home.

Uncle Joey's wife Dianne and his children Denise and Stanley have visited at least once per week throughout his 15-year incarceration. They love, support, and miss him terribly. His five grandchildren, ages two through seven, are also regular visitors who cannot wait to spend more time with their papa. In addition to his immediate family, who visit every week, Uncle Joey's brother (my dad), his sister (Aunt Joanie), and his mother (my grandmother) visit regularly. My grandmother is approaching her 90th birthday this month, and there could be no better birthday surprise than her son's parole.

Uncle Joey is well-loved throughout the community, where he has many friends and supporters from his church and workplace. He lives in a close-knit community where he is missed by many. I believe that Uncle Joey deserves a chance to return to the people who love and care about him. I know that his desire is to help support his family again, and he certainly has the skills to find a well-paying job. He has worked in the Goodman State Prison automotive shop throughout his incarceration, and he has a network of

friends and business acquaintances who are more than willing to give him a second chance.

Should you decide to grant him this chance, I can honestly expect that Uncle Joey will never be a threat to any person. He is remorseful for any part of wrong doing with which he may have been involved, and he deserves the opportunity to prove that. Please allow him to return to the family who loves him so that he can lead a productive, fulfilling, and law-abiding life from this point forward. I beg you to consider his appeal for parole with care and generosity.

Please accept my thanks for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

K. A.

I write the letter knowing that it won't make a difference, knowing that its receipt will never even be acknowledged. The letters that count are those from the victim's family, and apparently, they write often. But I am compelled to write. I have to.

At the first hearing, eight years into his term, parole was denied for eight more years. Another eight years have passed. I have been to visit him a handful of times.

I put a stamp on the envelope and put it into the side pocket of my briefcase. I'll mail it after school.

During fourth period, my senior literature class reads Nadine Gordimer's short story "Once Upon a Time." As we read aloud, in an effort to keep students engaged in the story, I draw a diagram on the white board showing the fortifications the family makes to protect its house and belongings from robbery. When we reach the part about the family

installing razor wire to run the border of their property, I make a pitiful attempt to draw it.

"What's that supposed to be?" Sherrod asks.

"That's the razor wire. I know it looks ridiculous the way I've drawn it, but it is the best I can do. I'm not an artist."

"Hey, that's the stuff they have around the prison, ain't it? Razor wire?" Bobby contributes to the conversation. This is rare; he's usually asleep by this point in the period.

"Yes. Yes, Bobby, it is. It's like barbed wire but even worse."

"You never been to prison have you, Ms. A?" Bobby asks. Both of his parents are incarcerated.

"Actually, I have. I go visit my uncle there from time to time."

"Your uncle in prison?" Latasha asks incredulously.

I sit on the top of an unused student desk, suddenly needing support.

"Yes. My uncle's in prison. He's been there going on 16 years. In fact, I just wrote a letter to the parole board this morning. He's up for parole soon."

"Uh-uh! What he do? What he do?" Bobby becomes animated.

"Well, I don't know whether I want to talk about it." I feel my eyes burning as tears start to form.

I stand, retreat behind my desk, clutch my book a little tighter.

"Come on, Ms. A. You can tell us. What he do?" Sherrod asks.

"He was convicted of conspiracy to commit armed robbery and first-degree murder."

"Damn, folk! Your uncle shot somebody?"

The students seem appalled, impressed, sympathetic, surprised.

"No. He didn't shoot anybody. But he did make a stupid mistake. He had a gun, and he let a friend borrow it."

"His friend shot somebody?"

"Yes. His friend shot somebody and then pinned it on my uncle. He's serving two life sentences for that stupid mistake."

The students sit quietly, taken off guard. For once, every one of them is paying attention, all thirty pairs of eyes trained on me. I blush.

"So let's move on with the story," I say as I walk back over to the white board. "Can anyone predict how this story is going to end? Any idea why the razor wire might be significant?"

"That cat's gonna get stuck in it?" Deveckio asks.

"Almost. Something's gonna get stuck in it."

"The little boy?" Latasha moans. "No! Not the little boy!"

"Let's keep reading," I say. "Who wants to be next?"

For the first time, Bobby raises his hand.

*****

January, 2005

Sometime during Jeffrey Pope's trial, in the only kind of half-sleep I manage to drift into, I have a vivid dream. It is a dream of a memory, something I am sure actually happened, although I don't know how close my dream gets to the reality of it. Whatever reality is, that's not what matters. The dream is what matters, the dredging up of a thing I

have folded away and hidden in a deep pocket of my mind, so deep I can't remember the last time it resurfaced, if ever it did. But coming to me when it does, as it does, vivid as it is, the dream/memory is more real than anything that ever happens in the courtrooms of life, as lucid as the specter of death itself.

Christmas vacation has just started, and Mama drops Terri and me at Uncle Joey's house one morning to play with Denise and Stanley while she goes shopping for last-minute gifts. Aunt Dianne is working at home. We are eight, nine, ten years old. Uncle Joey has not yet purchased the failing ironworks. The wind whirls outside; Christmas is in the air. The world seems just right.

The four of us walk down to Lake Sidney, which lies less than a hundred yards from the garage. Red mud cakes the soles of our tennis shoes. Misty, their old yellow dog, follows us. It is cold, and some of the smaller inlets of the lake have frozen; they are covered in paper-thin patchworks of splintered ice. Stanley has several G.I. Joe figures in his jacket pocket. We take turns making them skate across the frozen patches. I let one fall in and then have to reach in and grab it before it sinks. My hand turns instantly red.

"Y'all kids better get away from that ice," their Aunt Eller calls from the front porch of her tiny house, which is located less than 200 feet from my aunt's. "You're gonna get frozed out there. Why don't y'all get back in the house?"

We troop back indoors, bored. There's nothing to do inside. Denise and Stanley have already poked through the closets and laundry room, successfully snooping for their Christmas gifts. We three older kids are disabused of the notion of Santa, but for Terri's sake, we pretend.

"Santa had to drop off our gifts early this year," Denise says. "His sleigh was too heavy to hold everything."

"Ohhh. Can we play with your new toys?" Terri asks.

"No. Mama and Daddy don't even know we found them. We don't want them to get in trouble with Santa," says Stanley.

Finally we resort to television. The Muppets Take Manhattan *is on. We watch, satisfied, until lunch.*

Aunt Dianne has been filing paperwork downstairs. She calls us into the kitchen, where we watch her make baloney and cheese sandwiches, cutting off the bread crusts, which she knows I won't touch. We split two cans of Coke between the four of us and sit around the dinette to eat. Aunt Dianne leaves us to our food, grabs a Slim Fast from the refrigerator, heads back to work.

"You can have two cookies each if you finish your sandwich. Hear?" she says on her way back downstairs.

Somewhere between lunch and rinsing off our plates and glasses, Denise has a brilliant idea.

"Mama, Mama," she calls down the stairs after Aunt Dianne. "Can we please make Christmas treats for Daddy? Please! We'll clean up after. Promise!"

Aunt Dianne hesitates for a minute. "What kind of Christmas treats?"

"I don't know. We'll have to be creative and think something up. You're always saying how we need to be creative."

"Well, okay. But don't make a mess. If you do, I'll tan your hide. You hear me, Stanley?" she shouts up the stairs.

"Yes ma'am."

He is already kneeling on the countertop, rummaging through the cabinets.

"And another thing. You can't use the oven. Not unless I'm up there. Understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

As soon as permission is granted, we set about deciding on the rules of engagement. We will function as two teams—me and Denise versus Terri and Stanley. We can use only supplies we find in the kitchen. No oven. No appliances. When he gets home from work, Uncle Joey will judge which of the Christmas creations is best.

Ready? Set? Go!

We rummage through the refrigerator and the pantry, searching for supplies. Denise and I collect apples, marshmallows, toothpicks, and chocolate chips. We have a secret advantage of which I am unaware until the contest begins.

"I know what we can make," Denise whispers in my ear. "I saw it in Highlights *magazine. We're gonna make Santa Clauses out of apples."*

Unaware of our cutesy idea, Stanley and Terri take a more appetizing approach. They choose blueberries and Cool-Whip from the refrigerator and fancy crystal glasses that they find on the top shelf of the china cabinet. As an afterthought, Stanley grabs a package of vanilla wafers.

We separate, Terri and Stanley in the kitchen, Denise and me in the dining room. We use toothpicks stuck in the apples to give Santa chocolate chip eyes, buttons for his coat, boots. The marshmallows become gloves, a fluffy beard, hair. Our apple Santas

look pathetic, not like Santa at all. But we pretend not to notice. We proudly hide them away and retreat to Denise's room to play Candy Land. Soon, Terri and Stanley join us.

Uncle Joey finally gets home from work. When we hear the kitchen door squeak open, we rush to greet him.

"Daddy, Daddy! You're gonna be the judge, okay? You have to tell us whose Christmas treat is best!" Denise assaults him.

"Pick us! Our treat is better than theirs," I say.

"Uh-uh. Ours is better! Ours tastes good. Just wait till you taste it!" Terri's eyes grow wide.

Uncle Joey looks tired. He is wearing dirty work clothes.

"Okay, okay. Can I least put my stuff down? Take my boots off?" Uncle Joey dodges us as he walks toward the den.

He calls down to Aunt Dianne—"Hey, honey. I'm home,"—then sits on the sofa and takes a deep breath.

We wait eagerly.

"Okay. Let's see what you've got."

We take turns showing off our creations. Denise and I parade our Santas across the long coffee table, balancing them on the chocolate chip boots, offering our best deep-bellied "Ho-ho-ho."

Then Stanley and Terri have their turn. They present a concoction of frozen Cool-Whip mixed with blueberries. They have spooned the mixture into a glass and stuck two vanilla wafers on the rim.

"You have to eat some," Terri says. "It's really good."

Uncle Joey dips his spoon in, takes a gigantic bite into his mouth. Some of the Cool-Whip gets lodged in his moustache.

"Um-mmm. That is *good." He smiles tenderly at my sister. She is only four years old.*

"Who wins?" Stanley blurts out, unable to wait.

"Well, it's a really tough choice," Uncle Joey says. "But I think I'm gonna have to go with this one." He points at the glass of blueberry Cool-Whip.

Terri and Stanley high-five and dance around on the orange shag carpet. Terri had just learned how to turn cartwheels; she does several around the perimeter of the living room, almost knocking into the grandfather clock.

"They won just 'cause they're younger." Denise whispers to me knowingly. "Our Santas were really the best."

Uncle Joey overhears this and smiles.

"Here's something for you two girls. Just for being good sports." He slips a quarter into each of our palms. "Shhhh. Don't tell the others."

Justice prevails. The world is right, just for a minute.

I wake with a start, Uncle Joey still smiling down at me in the dark. Slowly, he disappears. In the absolute quiet of a darkened bedroom, the sound of my breathing becomes unbearable.

*****

January, 2005

Closing arguments are next. Walking out of the courthouse, I wonder how long they'll last. I don't even remember the opening statements anymore, even though they

were only seven days ago. The trial might be finished this week after all. Tomorrow is only Thursday.

Morning comes and the prosecution argues first thing, the district attorney standing near the jury box, making eye contact with sleepy jurors in turn. His voice is deep, carefully rehearsed. *Matlock* comes to mind, again. And yet now, here, it is different; unlike Andy Griffith's, the district attorney's polish is a mere veneer.

"I want you all to know, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, how hard it has been for some of these witnesses to testify in this courtroom." The district attorney's eyes turn pointedly to me. "They are under tremendous pressure to conceal what they know to be true. Pressure from their families. Pressure from their friends. These young men know, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, they know that the defendant is guilty of this crime for which he is accused."

I look at my fingernails. I have bitten them to the quick.

"They're afraid to say it here. It takes enormous courage for them to even come in here. But they know. And I submit to you that the emotion you saw on the witness stand is telling. It tells you, ladies and gentlemen, how difficult this testimony is for these witnesses. I ask you to keep that in mind during your deliberations."

Arguments for the defense will be after lunch, and we go to the restaurant at the downtown Holiday Inn this time. The food on the lunch buffet is terrible, cold and gelatinous, but at least it's a change from Peacheys. Do I eat? I have no recollection.

The defense lawyer has a theme, a posture, during his closing argument as well. He paces back and forth in front of the jury box as he speaks. As he reaches one end of

the box, I can almost hear the command: About face. Then he heads back in the other direction.

Trial scenes from the movies come to mind, the performance of defense attorneys, of Gregory Peck in *To Kill a Mockingbird.* I've watched it with my ninth grade class a dozen times. This defense attorney can't hold a candle to him. Yet here, a life is actually at stake. Why can't the defendant afford Gregory Peck?

"It's about doubt, folks. If there is any doubt, any reasonable doubt in your mind that the defendant is guilty of this crime, you have to acquit him. You've heard it before, but I'll say it again. The accused is innocent until proven guilty. Without proof of guilt you *have* to find him not guilty. This is your charge and your obligation."

The truck driver, sitting directly behind me, has dozed off and is snoring lightly. I feel his breath on the back of my neck. If this was my classroom and he was my student, I'd clear my throat in his ear.

"What's the proof, folks? Where is the gun? Why no gunpowder residue?" His voice rises and his march continues, never stopping. His arms move in arrhythmic jerks, punctuating the stale, dry air.

"Are you going to believe a guy who freely swears under oath that he had consumed five, four to five, alcoholic beverages and smoked marijuana on the night he supposedly witnessed this crime? Are you going to believe someone who tells two different stories—one on the stand and one in the interrogation room? Are you going to believe the testimony of a convicted felon who is trying to get himself a lighter sentence on federal charges? Who are you going to believe, folks? Are these witnesses credible in light of the circumstances?"

Judge Smith gives us our charge and we are herded again into the jury room. The hippie kid, the alternate, has to sit in a separate room; he can't even contribute to deliberations.

The foreman we elect is the loudest, most irritating white man in the room, but he is the only one interested in serving, and we don't want to waste time.

"What do y'all think?" he says once we're all seated.

"Can I have a minute to think about it?" the older retired man says. "I want to re-read my notes."

I look back over my own notes. I have written a quick description of each witness, along with pertinent testimony. After five minutes of quiet the pregnant woman starts tapping her pen on the table.

"I guess we can just start throwing out questions that we have," the college student suggests.

"Maybe we should take a vote first to see where we all are," the foreman says.

We write down guilty or not guilty on slips of paper and pass them to the end of the table. I have already made my decision. I write not guilty on my slip. I think Jeffrey Pope committed the crime, but I write not guilty.

There are four people who vote guilty. The rest agree with me.

"Listen. I think that he probably did it. I think he did do it. But maybe it was somebody else. Sounds like it was all dark and chaotic out there. Had to be hard to tell," the truck driver says. "I just can't be sure."

"Then you have to vote not guilty, man," the foreman says. "You voted guilty. If you have a doubt, you have to let him off. Even if you think there's a chance that he did it. It has to be iron-tight."

"But what if he did it?" The truck driver seems genuinely confused. Or maybe he feels as tormented about this decision as I do.

"The police did a piss-poor job of putting this case together. I mean no gun, no actual evidence, that videotape was a piece of crap. I couldn't even understand what was going on. And the witnesses weren't believable at all. I mean, he could've done it, but…" The college student again.

I speak up occasionally to participate in the argument to convince the remaining holdouts. Soon there are only two—the truck driver and the retired man.

It is past six o'clock.

"Can we go home?" the pregnant woman asks the bailiff when he comes to check on us. "I'm tired, and I got kids at home. I need to cook supper."

The bailiff returns after asking the judge.

"Judge Smith really wants this case decided today. He said he'd buy y'all pizza if you want. If you're hungry or if you just need a break."

"Let's just figure this out and get outta here," the older woman says. Along with the pregnant woman, she has grown impatient over the last hour of deliberations.

"I'm with her. I don't want no pizza. I wanna go home," says the pregnant woman.

Now we're under pressure, some of us hungry, all of us grouchy. A part of me wants to say, "Slow down! This is serious business here. This is a man's life. It's his

family's life. We gotta be careful." Instead I sit quietly. I want to get this over with as much as they do.

"What about the victim's family?" the retired man asks. "I think this guy did it. We owe it to the victim's family to convict him."

"What about the defendant's family?" I hear myself ask.

The cloud of fatigue thickens in the room. Comforts beckon, and impatience, as always, carries the day.

We finally agree. The foreman calls the bailiff.

"We have a verdict," the foreman says, apparently enjoying the momentary power he wields.

"I'll go tell the judge."

As we file back into the jury box for the final time, I can't look at the victim's family. I can't look at anyone. Instead I stare defiantly at the Georgia state seal emblazoned behind Judge Smith.

The foreman stands. "In the case of the state of Georgia versus Jeffrey Pope, we, the jury, find the defendant not guilty on all counts."

Sobs of joy and sadness assault my ears as I hurry out of the courtroom, collect my brown wool coat and knock-off purse, and walk through the metal detectors toward the parking deck for the last time.

*****

I decide not to go to school on Friday. I've already requested a sub, not knowing whether the trial will end on Thursday or not, and besides that, I desperately need a day off.

When I return to Piney Creek Monday morning, it is with a sense of overwhelming dread. What will I find waiting for me? I've been gone for two whole weeks. I've never missed so many days of school, even in fourth grade, when I had my tonsils removed.

The first thing I see as I make my way down the hall from the front office is Kenyasa Turner, my student, the cousin of Jeffrey Pope's wife. She is waiting outside my classroom door. Her back is turned and all I see is her puffy jacket, her smooth ponytail. I know it's Kenyasa without seeing her face. She's tall, easy to recognize.

"Good morning, Kenyasa," I say, as I approach, key in hand. "How are you?"

I notice when I see her face that she's crying; tears roll down her cheeks.

She sniffs, wipes her face with the back of her hand.

"It's okay. Come on in." I open the door and flip on the light.

She walks into my classroom, grabs a tissue from the table by the door.

"I'm okay, Ms. A." she says, voice shaking. "I just wanted to come by and say thank you. You don't know how happy you've made my cousin, my whole family. They want to say thank you. I want to say thank you. We're so grateful."

"Oh. Well, it wasn't just me, you know. There were 12 people on the jury. We all agreed on the verdict. We did what we thought was right."

"You did the right thing." Her voice betrays a forced assurance. She knows there's a good chance that Jeffrey Pope is guilty, I think, as we all know.

She hurries out of the room into the increasingly crowded hallway. I feel like a wreck. Can I make it through this day?

Looking around, I see that my room has been destroyed over the two weeks I've been absent. Books are thrown haphazardly around the floor, students desks are out of line, someone has taken the mouse from my classroom computer. The side of my desk is stained with dark liquid. What happened there?

On my desktop, beside an overturned plant, is a stack of half-completed student assignments and several notes from the various substitutes. There is also a note from Morgan, the student teacher who works in my classroom this semester. Everything seems misplaced, neglected. There is gum stuck to my desktop. I suck in my breath, unsure how to begin the clean-up process.

Ashley Henry, one of my first period seniors, walks in.

"Ms. A! You're back!" She smiles as she deposits her backpack and jacket onto her desk.

"Yes," I say. "Finally."

"We're so glad. That sub you had was whack."

"Y'all gonna have to help me piece together what happened while I was gone. It looks like a tornado came through here."

"Yes, some people took advantage for sure. You know who they are."

Her eyes drift to one corner of the room. She walks closer to my desk.

"I can probably guess," I say.

"Well, I'm gonna go get my breakfast, Ms. A."

"Okay, Ashley. See you in a minute."

I remember why I do this. The kids. I love them.

Next in is Andrew, my best friend and fellow English teacher.

"Well howdy, stranger. Welcome back," he says with a smile.

"Hey. I'm glad to be back." And after a pause, "I think."

He walks across the room and sits on a student desk top.

"Anything too crazy happen while I was gone?"

"I don't think so. I mean your classes got a little wilder every day," he says. "But nothing major."

"What's this shit on the side of my desk? Do you know?"

He bends over to get a closer look.

"Uh-uh. Not sure about that. Looks like coffee."

I touch the stain, smell my fingers.

"Maybe it will come off," I say.

"Well, listen. We're sure glad you're back. I'm glad you're back." He smiles again, lingers. "We'll have to grab a drink sometime, catch up."

"Definitely."

He stands up, walks toward the door.

"Hey. Are you going down to the office?" I ask.

"Yes. I gotta sign in and check my mail."

I haven't found the courage to check my mail yet. The box will be crammed full, I'm sure. Attendance notices, overdue library book reminders, memos regarding any number of useless things. I sigh.

"Mind grabbing my newspapers while you're down there?"

"Sure. I'll be right back."

I have no lesson plans for the day. I figure the best I can hope for is to get caught up, hear all the gossip, figure out what went on during the last two weeks. I'll let students read the *Morning Sun*, our local newspaper, and fill out missing assignment sheets.

I pick up one of the substitute's notes.

Things were okay the first two days I was here. The students weren't really interested in doing the work you left for them, but they were at least cooperative. On the third day, there was a fight during first period. Susan Tucker was one of the girls. I never got the name of the other. No one would tell me. I don't think she was one of your students. She just barged in the door. They started fighting right on top of your desk, spilled my coffee and knocked everything to the floor. I had to jump out of the way to avoid getting hit. I'm sorry things are such a mess.

I've known Susan Tucker since her ninth grade year. She thrives on trouble. Her involvement in the fight is no surprise.

Andrew returns with a stack of 25 copies of the *Morning Sun*. I scan the front page headlines and below the fold, there is a mention of the trial, the verdict. I sit down behind my desk and begin to read.

One of my fellow jurors, the older retired man, is quoted in the article. He lingered and talked to Tom Harper, the reporter designated to cover the courthouse beat, while I left the scene as quickly as possible.

"We had mixed feelings about the verdict. It wasn't unanimous." He speaks for all of us. "But in the end, there just wasn't enough evidence. Several people felt that the police department and DA's office fell down on the job. They couldn't make a strong enough case."

The victim's father is also interviewed for the piece.

"I just don't know what the jurors were thinking. I sat there in that courtroom. I heard the witnesses testify. There was more than enough evidence for a conviction. The murderer got away scot-free. How can they call this justice?"

I put the paper away, unable to finish the article. The warning bell rings, and I walk out into the hall.

"Come on, guys. Get a move on. You only have five minutes to get to class."

The bell rings and I walk to my desk to take attendance. Students chat quietly. Several of them have questions for me.

"Hey, Ms. A. Is it true you were on the jury for Jeffery Pope's trial?" Harrison asks.

"Yes," I say. "It's true." I walk to the front of the classroom, center stage once again.

"You know he did it, right? Why y'all didn't lock him up?" Harrison again.

"In the eyes of the law. . ." I say, the words trailing off.

"Ms. A! Guess who was in church Sunday morning?" This time NeNe speaks up.

I don't respond.

"Jeffery Pope. Jeffery Pope was in church with his wife and his baby. He gonna get baptized next week."

"Hmmm," I say.

"That's good. He's turning his life around. Y'all gave him a second chance at life," NeNe says.

"Yo, Ms. A. I wanna do that sometime. I wanna decide if folks go to jail or not. What you gotta do to be picked for a trial?" asks India.

"Well, first you register to vote. The voting roster is where they pull names of potential jurors."

"Oh. Never mind then."

"Listen, guys. I really can't talk about the trial any more. It's all so fresh in my mind. I need some time to process things. You can respect that, right?"

No one answers.

"So what I need you guys to do is… I need you to find something quiet to do. You can read the newspaper if you want or you can read your independent reading book if you have it with you or you can work on assignments you didn't turn in while I was gone. I need you guys to behave yourselves while I try to sort through all this stuff. You're seniors. You can handle it, right?"

"We straight."

I sit at my desk and shuffle through papers without seeing them. My head throbs. Students chat, discuss the weekend, laugh, sing. I feel nauseous.

Morning announcements pipe over the intercom, the authoritative voice of our principal tells us all what to do and when to do it.

Really sick now, I run out of the room, barely making it to the student bathroom across the hall before I throw up, collapse on the bathroom floor, a crying mess.

*****

January, 2009

Within 48 hours of eating at the Bombay Café, I vomit. The bug hits Max first, lightly, but I get the brunt of it. Later the diarrhea starts. By halftime of the Super Bowl two days later, lying on the sofa in Max's apartment, I can't keep water down and am running a fever of 101 degrees. I want to make a little pallet by the toilet and lie there, to save myself repeated trips from the sofa to the bathroom.

When I finally crawl upstairs into bed and drift to sleep, fevered dreams crowd in. Not memories this time but images of impossible things. I ricochet like a pinball through Manhattan's skyscrapers. I befriend a pair of tigers with knots tied in their tails. I ride a bicycle down a dirt road toward Lake Sidney, a giant pink-eyed rat chasing me. I wake in a sweat, unsure of reality, of where I am, who is with me. I reach out for consolation, find Max lying next to me.

The courtroom, the prison, the school, memories tangled with dreams, all triggered by a piece of pavement I noticed, or a virus, or food poisoning, or…. Me in a retching swirl, curled up in a cramping ball, targeted and imprisoned by structures not of my making, their tentacles strangling me. Me, always and already trapped and choking.

Early the next morning the ringing phone beside my bed wakes me.

"What happened?" Mama asks. "We were expecting you to call last night."

"I hope you didn't worry." My speech is slow. I'm still lying in bed, still feeling nauseous. "I got sick. Some kind of virus or food poisoning or something. I've haven't been two steps away from the bathroom since six o'clock last night."

"Oh, you poor baby!"

I am 35 years old.

"Do you need me to come look after you?"

"No, no. I'm okay. It's just a 24-hour thing. I'm already starting to feel better. I haven't thrown up in several hours."

"Well, you make sure you're drinking enough fluids. You'll get dehydrated if you don't."

"I know." I swallow against the queasiness I still feel. "What did y'all do yesterday?"

"We went to church, as usual. Jim's sermon was really good. He preached on forgiveness and mercy. It's so refreshing to be reminded of God's grace. And then, let's see, we left from there and stopped at Captain D's for lunch. Then we went to see Joey. It's been a long time since we've seen him."

"Did everything go okay?"

She sighs long and low before speaking. "Yes. He's doing fine, I guess. Doing just as well as he can, considering the circumstances."

"As we all are," I hear myself think.

"Just wish he could get out of there. Seems to me he's more than paid the price," Mama says.

The line goes quiet. For once she has nothing more to say.

"I had a dream about Joey the other night," I finally say in a whisper. "I dreamed that everything was right. I dreamed that he was smiling."

Chapter Three

Classrooms

March, 2007

I advise Lena on the phone: “Another thing you have working in your favor is the job market. With almost half of Georgia’s teachers retiring within the next five years, schools are desperate. That’s not exactly consolation, I know, but if you look long enough, you’ll find a school that will hire you.”

“Will hire anyone with a pulse,” I think to myself.

Lena, a student teacher in the undergraduate English Education program in which I work as a graduate teaching assistant, is my student, and I am her teacher and university supervisor. Along with her mentor teacher, I’m supposed to help her learn to teach. I go out to the school where she’s student teaching and visit her three times per semester to watch her teach and offer her advice.

Lena’s earlier sighs of self-pity are replaced with dead silence. When the phone rang, my caller ID didn’t identify the caller, and I usually don’t answer if I don’t know who’s calling. This time, for some reason, I did.

“I’m having a freak out about the job search. I don’t think Shelly will write me a good letter or recommendation,” Lena says.

A gust of wind suddenly blows over the pause, across the connection; it’s been a particularly windy February. What do they say about March? In like a lion, out like a lamb? Maybe we’re headed for an early Georgia spring.

"What if she marks me down on classroom management? She just said last week that she has no confidence in my ability to manage a class. She's taking second period back 'cause she thinks it's a total disaster. And it's not even my fault." Lena and Shelly, her mentor teacher, have had a rocky relationship all year. Lena is not a very good teacher, even for a novice.

"You do have some bad kids in that class," I say.

Not really, but I feel an urge toward sympathy and want to avoid inducing tears.

Shelly, who recently obtained her educational specialist degree at the university where I work and study, is a decorated teacher who consistently agrees to mentor a student teacher each year. She is one of the mainstays in our network of mentor teachers.

"So what can I say to change her mind?" Lena asks.

"Nothing. At this point, nothing," I repeat, to make my point. "I trust her; she's gonna be candid about your strengths as well as your weaknesses."

"But what if I don't get a job? I've worked my whole life for this. I just can't fathom four years down the drain."

"It's clichéd, I know, but when one door closes, sometimes another opens. You just have to view it as an opportunity to entertain other options."

"I don't want other options," she says. "I want to teach."

"Then apply for jobs. See what happens. Trust the process."

I peer through the blinds covering the west-facing second floor window of Max's apartment. The older woman who lives three houses down and her grandchild are playing outside, all bundled up. He likes to climb the irregular brick steps leading up the hill to

the road. Tessa, my twelve-year-old lab mix, notices the activity and issues a low growl. She doesn't like kids, especially kids on her turf.

"Okay, then," Lena's voice is back. "I feel much better after this conversation. Thanks for your time, Kay. I appreciate it a bunch."

"Anytime. Call me back if you need to talk. Keep me posted."

I click my flip phone closed, and most of the positive things that happened earlier that Tuesday afternoon vanish. All I remember is emerging from a meeting with Jack, one of my advisory committee members, a professor who's overseeing my independent study this semester. We'd talked about an article I'm supposed to write for publication in one of the academic journals in my field of English Education. I remember driving my red Prius down Paul Street thinking intently, I'm onto an idea, something important I can write.

When I got home after our meeting, I settled into a comfy blue and white striped chair, relishing the quiet of the almost empty apartment and thinking, "I have a good idea. I can write this." I had just opened my laptop when Lena called. And now I can only watch as the outrageously good idea for the piece I'm supposed to write floats away like so many wisps of cloud in the too-blue sky.

Tessa growls.

"Git 'im, girl," I say. "You git that kid good."

*****

September, 2005

I bump into people at the most embarrassing moments; this time I am standing in the women's underwear section at Macy's, looking for a girdle. Well, not a girdle,

exactly, but something that will help disguise my plumped-up mid-section. The last time I stepped on the scale the digital green numbers read 134. After that, I decided to stop weighing myself.

My husband Michael and I are flying to Philadelphia next weekend for his cousin Martina's big Italian wedding. The whole family will be there. The dress I'm supposed to wear, one of the few that still fits, is a navy and white sheath. It makes me look pregnant, and I'm not. I don't want to field questions from Aunt Josephina, so for the first time in my life, I'm looking to purchase a girdle.

"Yo, what up, friend?" I hear Adam say, as he approaches me from behind.

I'd know the voice anywhere—New Jersey street-wise, southern fried. His skin is white, her mother's people Italian-American, but he has spent his life immersed in hip-hop culture.

There's no escaping him, so I twirl around quickly, shove the tummy control briefs back onto the circular sales rack, all too obvious, making it clear I've got something to hide.

Adam teaches English at one of the local high schools, Lewis Central, Piney Creek's cross-town rival. Hirsute and rumpled, he walks toward me, carrying one bag from Foot Locker and another from the Gap.

"Hey, home fry. What shakin'?" I say.

We talk to each other like that. He started it. He's a performer, his act honed in a school where black students number more than fifty percent. I'm a follower, at least today, in ladies' underwear.

As we exchange greetings and bump fists, I notice his mother standing several yards away. She's thumbing though a rack of nightgowns.

"Oh, just brought my mom to the mall for a little retail therapy. She needed to get out of the house."

Adam is an old friend, trying to be friendly now. We met during my first year of teaching at Piney Creek; he was a student teacher that year and has now made a reputation for himself teaching journalism and Advanced Placement Language and Literature courses at Lewis Central. His mom's been fighting lung cancer for more than four years, and she stays with him sometimes.

"Hi, Mrs. Allan," I call out, waving.

She smiles absently and continues her perusal of old-lady nightwear.

"She's out of it. Too many pain pills make the mama loopy."

I don't know what to say, so I shift my purse to the other shoulder. Adam's the last person I wanted to run into, especially today. Our relationship may be friendly, but I don't trust him. He trades in gossip, something I try, unsuccessfully, to avoid.

"So what you doing, girl? Haven't seen you in a minute. How's the university treating ya?"

"I dunno. It's alright, I guess. I mean I'm digging my classes. And it sure as hell is nice to be out of the grind. I didn't know how tired I was 'til I stepped off that treadmill."

"I hear ya. It's vicious."

He's a good teacher, I think. Regardless of our history, his gigantic ego, the ups and downs in our friendship, I can give him that.

"But I feel so useless now. I know this time last year I was ready to piss on Piney Creek, but at least when I was there I felt like I was doing something. Now I feel lost."

Why'd I say that to him? In lingerie, of all places.

"Truth be told you ain't missing much. Second year of not making AYP, and the shit is hittin' the fan. If we have to do any more of this test prep bullshit, I'm gonna revolt."

The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* is in its third year of implementation. It requires more testing, more accountability, more scripted instruction, always rising test scores in order to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

"But aren't you pretty isolated from all that? You're a star, right?" I smile.

"More like a super nova." He laughs.

My own laugh sounds tinny. I look down at the worn carpet. This mall is showing its age.

"No one's isolated, not even assholes like me." He looks more serious now, the smile vanished.

"That sucks. Why won't they just let us teach?"

"'Cause they don't know what teaching is?"

"Word."

He keeps eyeing his mother, as if she were a child, capable of losing herself among the racks of bras and panties. Right now, she is trying on a satiny nightgown over her clothes.

"So what's it like teaching undergrads? Mom keeps pestering me to go back to school."

"It's not teaching," I answer quickly. "I mean, technically, yes, it *is* teaching. But it feels so strange. What do I have to offer a 21-year-old white girl with the world on a string? Maybe I'll get used to it, but I don't know…" My voice trails off.

Adam's head cocks to the side; he's peering into me. I imagine him telephoning Andrew, another teacher friend: *"I just ran into Kay… You wouldn't believe…"*

"It just seems pointless sometimes," I say. "People don't learn to teach by sitting in Tucker Hall. They learn by doing it, getting their hands dirty."

"Teaching people who want to learn. Imagine that."

"It's not teaching."

My mind wanders to one of the students I'm supervising this semester—Hazel. Does she want to learn? Nope. She has everything all figured out. Mommy and Daddy have spoon fed her life, and she's pre-programmed with all the answers, incapable of asking any of the right questions.

"Well, I'll trade ya for a couple weeks," he says.

"I shouldn't complain. It's a pretty sweet gig. No 15-year-old telling me to go fuck myself. No clueless administrator telling me what to teach, what to do. But sometimes I do miss it, the chaos of it."

"Like an Iraq vet misses Sadr City."

"Yes," I say. "Just like that."

High school as war zone. Life and death. I detest the metaphor but somehow can't escape it.

Mrs. Allan approaches us, her eyes clotted with mascara.

"You remember Kay, right Mom? You met her at that writing project potluck thing I hosted. Last summer."

Ms. Allan stares as me blankly, without recognition.

"Remember? All the people came over? The little kids running around everywhere, tearing stuff up?" He talks to his mother like she's an infant.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Allan says.

I'm still not sure she actually remembers.

"How are you sweetheart? You look like you've put on a little weight."

"Mom! Shhhh."

"It's okay," I say to Adam. "I have."

And then to Mrs. Allan: "I guess I'm getting less exercise now that I'm not on my feet all day. I spend a lot of time sitting in Tucker Hall, reading. Doesn't exactly burn up the calories."

Tucker Hall is the ugly brick building that houses the College of Education at my university.

"Kay's working on her doctorate, Mom. She's back in school full-time now."

"Well congratulations! Your mother must be so proud."

"Thanks, Mrs. Allan. She is."

The three of us stand silently for a beat. What else is there to say? Finally Mrs. Allan continues. "I've been trying to tell Adam he should do the same thing."

"Mom, I said shhh."

As if she might say something else about me, something I don't want to hear. I feel my breath quicken. I need to get out of here. I'll have to come back later to make my purchase. Or maybe look for the girdle at J.C. Penney's.

"Listen," I say. "I gotta run." I look at my watch, again, too obvious.

"It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Allan."

I smile and start to walk backwards, away from the two of them, almost running into a rack of racy lingerie.

"Keep in touch, yo. Don't be a stranger," Adam says.

There's something knowing in his smile. I don't like it. *"Looks like Kay went and got herself knocked up."* It'll be all over the system by ten a.m. tomorrow.

"Cool. I will. Good to see you," I say, smiling back.

I make my way to the escalator, through the cosmetics department, brushing aside an offer of a free perfume sample. Out of Macy's, I head toward the food court. Suddenly, I'm starving.

Pizza is not what I should eat. I am trying to lose weight after all. But that can wait until tomorrow. I shuffle into Sbarro without scanning its inhabitants first—scanning is something I usually do in any public space, looking for people I know so I can avoid them. But this time I forget, and I find myself face to face with a former Piney Creek student, Patti Lattimer. She's working behind the counter, wearing a neatly pressed uniform, her hair in a tight bun. Her face is full, fat, dark. Her smile is contagious.

"Ms. A! What you doing here? Buying up the mall?"

Relief. I smile. Suddenly I'm home. With somebody I like. Somebody who likes me.

"Do you see me carrying any bags?"

She laughs loudly. I remember how that laugh could torment me last spring when she was a student in my fourth period ninth grade literature class, and all I needed was a moment of quiet.

No one is in line behind me, so we take a few minutes to catch up.

"How you doing?" I ask.

"I'm straight. I transferred to Walker Area this fall."

Walker Area is one of the two public high schools in Walker County, which borders Lewis to the southeast.

Patti's manager walks behind her carrying a freshly baked pizza to the display case. He is white, skinny, pimply. He removes an empty tray and expertly slides the steaming pie into its place. My stomach suddenly turns at the sight of cheap cheese and processed meats piled high, laden with salt and chemical additives. Maybe I won't eat after all.

"So how do you like it there?" I shift my eyes from the manager back to Patti. "Is it better than Piney Creek?"

"It's different. I'm taking most of my classes on the computer. So I get to listen to my jams while I work."

"That sounds good."

My cell phone buzzes in my purse. I see that it's Michael, my husband, calling from home, probably wondering where I am. I silence it.

"It's tight," Patti continues. "I think I might actually stick around long enough to graduate."

"You don't miss the Eastside?"

"Naw. I got friends in Walker too. My mama's people from Walker."

"Oh. Well, I'm glad you're in a good place."

Patti taps her fingernails, one by one, on the countertop. They look freshly manicured. She notices my stare and stops tapping. I'm still the teacher; she's still the student.

"What about you? What kinda place you in now? You still teaching?" she asks.

"Sorta. I'm teaching at the university now, just one class. It's for people who want to be high school English teachers."

"People wanna do that? For real?"

"Yes," I say. "You could too."

The manager walks by again. This time he makes eye contact with me, smiles shyly. He shoves another pizza under the florescent heat lamp in the display case. They must be preparing for the lunch rush.

"Uh-uh," she says. "Ain't no college gonna let me in."

"Well I know you could keep a class in line. I can hear your students now: 'Yes, Ms. Lattimer. No, Ms. Lattimer.'"

Patti laughs.

"You like teaching teachers?" she asks.

"It's a lot easier than teaching at Piney Creek."

I laugh this time.

"But you know what? Believe it or not, I miss Piney Creek more than I thought I would," I say.

"Get real, Ms. A. You miss all them hardheads?"

"Well… not all of them. But, you never knew on any given day what sort of excitement you'd run into. I liked the adventure of it."

Patti laughs again. I remember how much I like her.

"I miss seeing you guys everyday. I miss the life, the action," I say.

An Asian couple with a small child has walked in. They stand in line behind me, the mother holding the girl's hand tightly. The kid's eyes light up when she see the pizza in the case.

And Patti's eyes go past me. I wonder if she heard what I said. I wonder why I said it. I wonder why I'm talking so much, saying things out loud I don't even say to myself. I hate to talk. I just came here for a girdle. It was supposed to be in and out.

"Well, it's great to see you, Ms. A. I miss you a lot, too. But I gotta take these folks' order."

"It's good to see you too, Patti."

I turn toward the door, leave Sbarro without eating anything, exit the mall without buying a girdle, walk into the sunshine of a bright autumn day.

*****

February, 2007

"I cannot let her keep teaching second period. It's a complete disaster. I mean, what did you think?"

Shelley, Lena's mentor teacher, has left her third period class to speak with me before I leave the suburban school where she works. I have a 45-mile drive home ahead of me. Dull sunlight seeps through the windows of the small conference room in the main

office. It's the only quiet spot we can find to talk; the school is overcrowded and teachers have to share classrooms.

The sun makes me sleepy.

Lena and I have been chatting for the last half hour about her performance during the 90-minute class period I've just watched her teach. Lena thinks the class went pretty well, considering she has a group of what she describes as rotten students who don't have any interest in learning and are almost impossible to deal with. During the conversation I almost agree with her—"You did a reasonably good job," I say.

I share three or four things I think she did particularly well—the students seemed to like the Anne Sexton poem she chose to share with them, she employed proximity control well to redirect the behavior of unruly students, etc.—and then I give her suggestions for things that did not go well. I try to be generous, remembering my own struggles in the classroom. I lie outright, deliver exaggerations without thought. I radiate sympathy; kind words spew from my mouth. I suggest that she brainstorm alternative actions she could have taken at particular points in the class.

As soon as Shelley knocks on the door and Lena leaves to return to the classroom, I feel my entire body change. I sit rigidly and uncross my legs. My chin propped in my hands, elbows on the conference room table, I lean forward, conspiratorially, all sympathy gone from my voice:

"I think the kids are openly laughing at her," I say, "and she's either unable or unwilling to see it. I think the small group work went on for way too long and the groups were not talking about the short stories they were supposed to read and analyze. And the students hated the Anne Sexton poem. I think she still looks uncomfortable in front of

them. She's having a hard time finding any way to connect. She can't think on her feet, make adjustments on the spot. I don't know that anyone is learning from the experience. The small group presentations were a complete waste of time. No one was listening."

"Exactly." Shelley nods her head in approval, glad to see that I'm on her side.

"You know I believe in this program," she says. "I believe in it as much as anybody. I went through it myself. I know y'all are trying to do a good job. But I just don't know if I'm willing to take on another student teacher. Definitely not another Lena. Something's gotta change in the selection and admission process."

"We're thinking about what we can do. Of maybe moving to interviews. I like to think I could've spotted a Lena from a mile away."

Shelley looks doubtful.

I continue, trying to sound as if I know what I am talking about. "The thing is—and I've said as much to Maggie—we have to have an explicit procedure in place. We have to be fair in the admission process. I mean Lena's GPA was a 3.8. The writing sample wasn't stellar, but it was good enough."

Maggie is the director of the undergraduate English Education program and my direct supervisor. She was my advisor and professor during my MEd program, as well as Shelley's. The circle of teacher-acquaintances is small.

"Yes, but you know, and I know, that those things don't necessarily translate to someone being a good teacher," Shelley replies, leaning back into her cushioned chair, her dark eyes suddenly hard against the sunlight.

"Yes. And you know, like I know, that these are just kids—kids learning to teach kids. They gotta have a chance to learn. Some of them will get better with time."

I'm aching to get on the road. My stomach growls.

"And some of them won't," she says. "Teaching is hard. Teaching here is hard."

Yamasee is a large high school in what is becoming suburban Atlanta. It is my third year as supervisor here. Over the years, I've driven back and forth between Yamasee and home many times, watching strip malls and fast food joints replace farms. Of all the schools I've worked in, the student population here is the most diverse, with large groups of Hmong and Vietnamese students, black and white students, Latino students, students from Serbia. They seem to have forged an agreement. Each group occupies its own ghetto and avoids the others. Cross pollination is rare. As in most schools in this country, the vast majority of the teachers and staff is white, including Shelley. And Lena.

I'll have to observe her again later in the semester. What am I going to say next time? Why don't I care more? I long for the isolation of my car, for my iPod, that bag of peanut M&Ms in my glove compartment.

Shelley continues: "Do you know she's talking about applying at Piney Creek? They'll eat her alive at Piney Creek."

"I know, Shell. Trust me, I know."

*****

February, 2001

"Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen!!! Please don't make me blow this whistle!" I'm out of options, and I know it.

My class of 32 tenth-grade students bounces off the purple walls around me. Students shout at each other, cursing at random, with no thought of me, the authority

figure in the room. Some throw paper at me, at each other, through the crack in the wall and into Kevin's classroom next door. Jeffery bursts out singing "Ms. Jackson," an Outkast song that floats like a mantra through the halls: "I'm sorry Ms. Jackson. This is for real."

I'm 26, it's my first year of teaching at Piney Creek, and I'm barely surviving. I work sixty-five hours a week and rarely sleep. I feel tears start to burn my eyes, and I blink rapidly. Can't show weakness. Must be strong.

My pep talk to self does little good as I look around the metal-walled room. The legs of the mismatched chairs are bent. The trapezoidal tables crowd into every corner of the room. Two beat up bookshelves look ready to topple over at any minute. Graffiti covers one of the walls. The orange carpet is full of gum and covered in water stains. Everything feels dirty, though the custodians clean the room every evening.

And then there are the students. Their faces are brown, black, white. They drink sodas and eat French fries they've smuggled from the lunchroom. They are sweaty from PE class.

Rico and Eddie throw dice in the back of the room. Jorge draws a picture of a revolver on the table top. Elizabeth sleeps. Michelle has been gone to the restroom for more than 20 minutes. Nathan knocks Steven's JROTC uniform to the floor and purposely steps on it. Melissa cries silently as Lexis makes fun of her hair. Latrina sits quietly, trying to complete a writing assignment, staring, bored, at the paper, and then out the translucent window, into the parking lot.

My gaze follows hers. I see two students sharing a cigarette.

I let the whistle wail as loud and as long as I can stand it.

"Goddammit!" Keo'shea finally yells above the shrill of the whistle. "Y'all shut the fuck up so she'll stop blowing that thing."

There is a slight dip in the noise as students try to avoid more of the whistling.

"We'll be good."

"We promise."

"Just stop blowing that thing."

"My eardrums are busting."

I take the whistle from my mouth. The room is almost silent. My strategy has worked, at least for the moment.

"Okay. If you all want me to stop blowing the whistle, you gotta be quiet long enough for me to at least get these instructions out. Understand?" I muster the firmest voice I can.

Lourdes passes a note to Carlos.

Most students are quiet now, but their faces are not listening.

"Thank you. What we're going to do next is we're going to create visual representations of our reactions to the book," I say

"What book?" LaToya asks.

"The book that we just finished reading aloud as a class, *Night*. Remember, *Night*? The little boy who survives the Holocaust?"

"That story fucked up," LeMarkus says.

"Yes," I respond. "It *is* messed up."

Victor approaches me as I stand at the front of the class, back to the white board. He has his passbook in hand.

"Hey, Miss. Can I go to the bathroom?"

"Not until Michelle gets back."

"But she been gone for, like, half an hour or somethin'. She ain't comin' back, Miss."

I give in, initial his passbook. He closes the door quietly as he leaves.

"Now what I want you to do is to think about visual symbols, or they can be words if you prefer, numbers, whatever, that capture the theme of the book, of *Night*. You're going to create visual arrangements that show your reaction to what you read."

"I dunno why them people don't just run away. I wouldn't let no punk-ass come kidnap me in the middle of the night. What wrong with them?" Eddie asks.

"Yeah, folk. I woulda just pulled out my glock. And snap, snap, snap. Them brothas done." Cody laughs and high-fives Eddie.

The noise jumps up again as students demonstrate how they would've avoided being captured by the SS and taken to Auschwitz. Suddenly students are yelling, jumping into their chairs, miming shooting and beating each other, using rulers and pencils as guns.

"Yo! Pipe down over there!!"

It is Kevin's booming voice coming through the crack in the wall. Kevin is a friend and fellow English teacher whose classroom borders mine. Piney Creek was built in the early seventies without interior walls. Open classrooms, I think the fad was called. By the time I'm here, 25 years later, metal walls have been inserted to create discrete classrooms. Sometimes the walls don't exactly fit.

"Don't make me come over there," Kevin says. He is large and black. When he talks, students tend to listen. His threats are not empty; he's come over here before. But this time his words have little effect. The volume level in my classroom drops only slightly.

"Come on y'all." I'm begging now. "I have all the materials you need to do the assignment—big pieces of paper, magazines to cut photos from, scissors, glue sticks, markers, glitter. I think y'all can do a really good job with this. We all read the book—I read it to you. An easy A for everyone."

Students rush to get supplies from the box at the front of the room, pushing each other and me out of the way. I walk around the room, assisting with the distribution of materials, answering student questions, signing more bathroom passes. Victor has returned to class, smelling of smoke; Michelle still has not.

As I approach Kammie, she proudly shows off her paper, which has a huge cross, colored and glittered in the center.

"So what's the significance of the cross, Kammie? Why does it occupy so important a place on your paper?" I ask.

Kammie explains in a quiet voice: "You know how the people in the camp they always saying how God important and religion is and all. And they pray a lot and atonement. So I thought I should put a cross."

"Oh, God," I think to myself. "What do I do now?"

*****

March, 2008

I write this email easily, in twenty minutes or so, to a troublesome student teacher I am supervising this semester. Jordan is placed at Piney Creek, and I don't like her much; she's arrogant. Responding to her weekly journal entry is a chore. Short on patience, I write quickly, mind wandering. Soon I'm seeing Max's smile, thinking of how he will touch my back as I fall asleep. I type:

Dear Jordan,

Perhaps there was a full moon last week? I never used to believe in the effects of the full moon until I started teaching, but it can definitely cause kids to act crazier than usual. Or maybe, like you say, they're just looking forward to spring break (aren't we all??)

As far as being short with friends and family members when the going gets tough, I can certainly identify. Teaching is a consuming profession, and it is hard to step back and separate the frustrations of school from the rest of life. I think it's important to maintain a life outside of school, otherwise you go crazy. I hope that you can find the time next week to do some things that you enjoy, to forget about the students for a while at least, to rejuvenate.

It's true that your youth and inexperience work against you, especially with Piney Creek kids. It wasn't until my third year, when I had taught big brothers and sisters, cousins and friends, when I started to have something of a reputation, that kids gave me much respect at all. This is the good part about finding a school where you want to be and staying there a while—it does get easier as you become known as a "presence" within the school. Coaching the debate team or sponsoring a club can help too. When

students start to see you as a fixture, they begin to realize you're in for the long haul. Right now they see you for what you are—someone who will be out of their lives in just a few more weeks. This is not to excuse their disrespectful behavior, just a way of trying to understand it.

I used to feel the same way as you express in your journal entry—why am I killing myself to help kids who would just as soon spit in my face? How can I meet them halfway if they won't even take one baby step toward me? I guess one thing that helped me think about this is to get to know a little bit about the circumstances of their lives outside of school. Many of these kids have some difficult shit to deal with. Things that I, as an adult, would struggle with. Again, not to make excuses, but when your day-to-day existence is fraught with physical violence, neglect, lack, and downright fear, it is hard to care about characterization in a short story. It is hard to develop a trusting relationship. It is hard to believe that some white chick standing in front of the class has your best interest at heart. There's a lot of history there that we're fighting against.

Many times I tried the "teaching only to the kids who want to learn strategy." I'd seat these kids in a particular area of the room or send them (the trustworthy, motivated ones) to a different classroom with assignments, while I stayed behind to "baby-sit" the others. It wasn't my best pedagogical move, granted, but it worked on the days when I just wanted to pull my hair out. You might find it more effective than sending out the disruptive students.

When I started teaching at Piney Creek, one of my fellow teachers said, "If you can teach here, you can teach anywhere." I think there is some truth to that statement. You might find that this year's frustrations pay off when you find yourself in a

comparably "easier" school situation next year. If, on the other hand, you're finding it hard to care about the learning of students, perhaps you need to think carefully about whether education, or more specifically high school, is the field for you. I'd be happy to talk with you about other options if you'd like. Just let me know.

Finally, with regard to the more unstructured, individualized writing time you have planned this week, you might find that it goes better than trying to have them all do something together as a class. You might want to try spreading them out—a few in the library, a few in Kevin's room (supervised, of course), a few in the commons area with your mentor teacher. That might help with the volume level.

The other suggestion I have is to break the writing task into smaller chunks, making something due at the end of each period, or each portion of a period. For example, they have to complete the introduction paragraph by the end of the first 20-minute writing block, etc. I always found that one of the hardest parts of helping students with writing was topic generation. It seemed that once they had an interesting topic, they could do pretty well with getting thoughts down on paper.

I hope these ideas reach you in time to be of some help. Please keep me posted. Best, Kay

I press send.

*****

I'm sitting in a blue student desk at the back of Grey's classroom, observing Jordan teach. Grey is a former colleague of mine, a friend, and Jordan's mentor teacher.

Piney Creek has moved into a new building since my first year of teaching here. The building is huge, squeaky clean, well-equipped. There are smart boards in every

classroom, projection systems, laptop docking stations, uniform student desks that are free of graffiti.

My laptop is open, and I type furiously, as if I'm taking minutes at a meeting. A female student sits down in front of me, flicks her ponytail, brushing her hand against the screen of my laptop.

"Sorry," she says, turning to look at me.

"It's okay. I know I'm in the way." I smile.

I'm three years removed from this place. At times it feels foreign; at others, nothing seems to have changed.

Students are talking, walking around the room, playing with each other, flirting. The bell rang five minutes ago. Jordan is attempting to get them started on a writing assignment that asks what three things they'd most want to have if stranded on a desert island. She tells a male student that he must be quiet if he sits in an unassigned seat. A cell phone rings and Jordan reminds a female student to turn off her phone.

A lot *has* changed in three years, I think to myself, typing all the while. Students were just beginning to bring cell phones to school back then. Now they are ubiquitous, cacophonic.

"Alright, are y'all done?" Jordan asks. And without waiting for an answer: "You're talking, so you must be. Does anyone want to share with me what they've written?"

Students don't understand why they have been asked to complete this writing assignment. No context is given. No one speaks up. They seem either confused or disinterested.

I type the notes that I will use to discuss Jordan's teaching with her after the class period. I type fast, feeling tied to the desk:

How could you build on what students have written to help introduce the television show in which the main character is "stranded" as the last man alive? Might it work better to move directly into the episode after the writing? Or maybe show the episode first? Perhaps you could spark discussion by telling them what three things you would want to have on a desert island.

I want to get up and teach this class. I wonder if I could do it better than Jordan is doing. Surely I could, even though it looks like a tough group of ninth graders. But I want to hear what the students would take with them to a desert island. I have curiosity, something Jordan lacks. I look over the shoulder of the female student in front of me and my eyes see the words "food" and "candy." The male student next to her has written in large letters "MY GAMEBOY."

Jordan has moved on. Keeping my mouth shut is hard. I wedge myself tighter into the seat.

"Okay, you should have a book on your desk. It is time to begin silent sustained reading."

Students begin to settle in for quiet reading time. Some of them take novels from their book bags. Others visit the shelves at the back of the room to pick a book at random. Others grab newspapers or magazines from a crate at the front of the room. As a teacher I both loved and hated this classroom structure.

After several minutes of collecting materials, the students take their seats and the room gets relatively quiet.

A male student's voice breaks the silence. He is looking over a graded assignment that Jordan has handed back: "Why you gonna put an X on this?" he says loudly. "You said just write what you think. How come what I think gets an X? What? What I think ain't good enough?"

Jordan does not respond to this challenge; she is sitting at Grey's desk, reading.

"Oh, so now you gonna act like you don't hear me?"

Why doesn't Jordan come over and speak with the dissatisfied student? I think but don't type. She's giving the impression that she doesn't care. Is she doing that on purpose? A power move? I want to shake her. She's here for them, not the other way around. I see the student waiting for an answer. Jordan ignores him.

Instead she addresses another student: "Marco, please stop talking."

Ten minutes pass.

With no transition or explanation of what's coming up next, Jordan says, "Today we're going to watch some television."

Students begin to talk to each other. They pay her no mind.

"Unless you guys can't get quiet and listen up... If you can't listen up then we'll read a short story."

Reading as punishment, huh? And just how is this supposed to encourage students to enjoy reading? What's happening here? Jordan and the students occupy two different universes. My job is to turn her into a teacher. I sigh. Why isn't she me? I think. Why am I not still in the classroom? Life matters here.

I feel alive here in the high school classroom, muted as I am by the observer role I'm now playing. I rarely feel so alive in my doctoral classrooms. How does the

poststructural theory I am reading in my seminars apply here, how does it help in persuading these students to care about school success? Why should they care about school success? The word "incommensurate" invades my mind. Chasms too wide and deep to bridge.

My mind wanders to Derrida, one of the theorists I've been reading for my independent study with Richard, another professor on my advisory committee, then back to these students. What is there to deconstruct here? How can deconstruction help? I look at the students, most of them belittling Jordan, ignoring and taunting her, and my heart cries out, silently, for both the students and for Jordan.

"Touch them," I cry out silently to Jordan. "Show them you care."

Instead she says, "As soon as you quit talking we'll start the show."

Jordan sits on a stool at the front of the room, her back ramrod straight. She presses a button on the remote control and the opening sequence of a television program pops onto the smart board.

Students see what they will be watching: an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

"Why we gotta watch this? That junk's from the sixties," a male student says.

"It's from 1959."

Jordan waits for several minutes while students continue to talk and finally says "Okay, then, get out your green workbooks."

Students respond loudly: "No!"

"Then be quiet. If you want to watch, you have to be quiet."

Why the insistence on absolute quiet? Jordan is a control freak, I think. I was too, at first. Learned to give up on that shit quickly. The threats never worked.

Jordan walks the room, distributing handouts to each student. There are five questions:

1. What does Henry Bemis love to do?
2. What does his wife do to his book of poetry?
3. What happens when he enters the bank vault?
4. What stops Henry from shooting himself?
5. What happens in the end that makes Henry say, "That's not fair?"

How would Jack, the professor who taught the reading course Jordan took last fall, respond if he saw these questions? Fact questions. No higher order thinking involved. Didn't Jordan listen to anything we tried to teach her last semester? I continue typing.

"L.T., if I hear you talking again, you have to leave." Jordan's voice is remarkably stern.

"Man, I was asking you a question," L.T. protests.

"I can't tell the difference between you talking out of turn and asking me a question."

In my head again: She has a lot to learn. If she were an intern in a teaching hospital and I were the doctor in charge, would I let her operate on anybody? Ever? My eyes turn to the students and then back to my computer.

Is it appropriate to punish students who are trying to ask legitimate questions? I type.

My thoughts are interrupted as a small student sitting in the front row shouts out the answer to the first question: "Mr. Bemis loves to read!"

"The next person who speaks out is going to go to Mr. Roland's room to read a short story and answer questions. I'm doing you a great favor here. All you have to do is pay attention."

Most students watch quietly. L.T. speaks.

"Hey, man…"

Jordan: "L.T.! Come out in the hall. Bring a pencil with you."

Jordan escorts L.T. out of the room, taking a green workbook with her.

"Man, this is bull jive," L.T. says as he leaves the room.

Are you being too quick to send students out? I type. *Will the students who are sent to Mr. Roland's room be able to meet the same learning goals as the students in the room?*

I remember how hard teaching at Piney Creek was for me. I remember the book chapter that Catherine, a fellow doctoral student and former colleague from Piney Creek, and I are writing: Deconstructing Student Teacher. Can I put Derrida's theories to work in this space? Can we, in our writing, really bridge the theory-practice binary? Derrida is so far away from this place, I think. The real binary exists within me: theories of teaching versus actually teaching. Where am I? Where do I want to be? Sitting here, everything falls apart.

Students click their tongues in disapproval. They don't like Jordan anymore than I do.

The episode ends and Jordan turns off the smart board. A male student asks whether they can watch another one and Jordan refuses straightaway.

"So why couldn't the main character have lived after an atomic bomb?" Jordan asks.

Several students respond. They don't say the word radiation, but they are tiptoeing around the right answer. Jordan gives them no reinforcement. She simply moves on, slave to some lesson plan no doubt plotted out in the dead of night.

She asks students to take out the short story templates from the beginning of the unit. Several students immediately begin to complain that they don't have the templates; they ask what Jordan is talking about.

"Look in your notebooks. Don't just assume that you don't have it. We've used these before." She paces around the room. I notice her ill-fitting shoes.

Students seem genuinely confused, and Jordan's answer is rude. By this point, I'm on their side.

A female student says, "We need to know what we're supposed to do. You didn't tell us." She knows what's up.

Jordan looks lost, searching for something to say.

Suddenly there is an interruption over the intercom. The school receptionist announces bus changes for the afternoon in a thick country drawl.

"They really have to interrupt us this early with bus changes?" Jordan says, looking at me. "I could be teaching these kids."

Whatever she's doing, it's not teaching. Teaching, I think. Did I ever teach? Did they ever learn? Jordan didn't learn what I tried to teach her. That much is clear.

The bell rings. I feel it in my bones, like I never left. Invincible, under fire. I love it. I look at Jordan and smile.

"Do you think you had a good day today?" I hear myself ask.

*****

January, 2006

I'm pissed as I read the first few chapters of *Who's Teaching Your Children?* (Troen & Boles, 2003), part of this week's reading assignment for my doctoral seminar in teacher education. Jack, the professor teaching the class, hasn't shied away from giving us a heavy reading load for the course; this is only one of three lengthy pieces we have to read in preparation for this week's seminar discussion when we'll continue our examination of different theories on how pre-service teachers should be prepared for the profession.

I sit on the futon with my feet propped on a footstool near the wood stove. Michael and I rely on the stove to heat the house; the closer I sit, the warmer I am. It's turned winter in the last few days.

Raging, I use a pencil to underline because it feels raw running across the paper. I can hear it. Like I'm actually scratching into the pages, imprinting them with my retorts. I put the book down after the fourth chapter and don't go back to it until days later. In the meantime, I try to put my finger on why I'm having such a negative reaction to it. Just what it is that makes me feel so threatened by the argument that Troen and Boles (2003) present?

Maybe I'm angry because they are not telling my story, for my own experience as a teacher goes directly against much of what the authors claim. Not everything, mind you. Teaching IS hard. Teachers ARE undervalued and underpaid and disrespected and overworked. And any teacher can tell you that, myself included. No, the part that galls

me is that the authors believe that the quality of new teachers is deplorable. And herein lies the threat. Troen and Boles are suggesting that I, as a recently trained teacher, am not a good one, or at least not as good as they.

I started teaching at Piney Creek in 2000. The group of teachers that Troen and Boles describes as "several notches below those who were [retiring from the profession] in terms of intelligence, knowledge, capability, maturity, and talent" (p. 7), includes me. They are describing me. They are describing the people who entered teaching with me and after me, and I happen to know some damn good teachers! Myself included, on a good day.

But I shouldn't be taking this personally, huh? After all, the authors are not talking about me or Catherine or Andrew or Sam or Emma or any of the other fine teachers I know who have recently entered the profession. They are speaking of broader trends. But I can only speak what I know, and my story clashes with that told by Troen and Boles (2003).

So the assumption made about me, as a teacher, is that I am either (1) unintelligent/stupid/unqualified/incapable/immature/untalented or (2) the one standout among thousands of losers, the exception to their rule. I suppose I just happened to have encountered several other exceptions to the rule in my school. So is my experience as a teacher at Piney Creek so unusual, then? Because I feel that when newly trained teachers are described in this piece, I am not being described. My experience is being silenced.

And it's not just Troen and Boles (2003). Paige (2002) paints the picture of teachers as lacking in content knowledge. But having taught for five years, I know that content knowledge is NEVER the most important part of my teaching, not on one single

day. Listening? That is important. Patience? Important. Creativity? Persistence? Caring? Important. But content knowledge? I know more about English literature and composition than my students; that is all I need to know.

The experience that Hess (2001) describes as typical of teacher preparation could not be more foreign to me. My MEd in English Education was not undertaken because it was a "quick and easy way to get an advanced degree" (Troen & Boles, 2003, p. 34), nor did I find it to be easy. I was asked to examine my attitudes about teaching and learning, about society and the way we word the world, and I learned a great deal through the process—not only about how to teach but about myself and the structures that govern who and what I can become.

I agree that reform is necessary, don't get me wrong. I just get tired of hearing all the problems in education blamed on teachers. As if we created the situation we find ourselves in. As if we're not doing anything to help. As if we're the stupid, unprepared ones.

*****

October, 2002

I rush the Student Council members from my classroom where they meet before school every Tuesday morning. I agreed to be the faculty sponsor during my second year of teaching. Every teacher is expected to do something beyond teaching—coach a sport, sponsor a club, tutor after school. As if teaching a full day is not work enough.

My first period seniors are piled around the door, clogging the hallway, herded toward my room by administrators—young bodies eager to come in and eat their Egg McMuffin breakfasts.

"Morning, y'all," I say as they start drifting in. They sit in the blue student desks. Book bags and purses make moving around the room difficult.

Hurricane Kay, as I refer to myself, has been whirling for almost an hour already. Preparations for the school's Homecoming celebration, which I manage as the sponsor of Student Council, are well underway. My list of things to do has 14 items on it. I've finished most of my first cup of coffee. It's October, and I'm in my third year of teaching.

"Hey, Ms. A! I got time to go to the bathroom?" Kita asks.

"If you hurry." I look at my watch. "About three minutes 'til the bell."

I finish a conversation with the Student Council president then shoo her from the room. I have a precious few minutes to get ready for first period.

I peer at my laptop screen for a minute, scan the inbox of my email, skim a message from a disgruntled parent. I'll have to reply to that one later.

As I circle from behind my desk and move toward the classroom door, I pause briefly to turn on the overhead projector, where a transparency contains a handwritten agenda for first period's class. I flip the classroom light to the off position, walk out into the hall.

"Come on, Meech. Let's get in here, please. No tardies today."

"No tardies. Not today," says Meech. "Today's gonna be a good day."

I smile at Adriana as she makes her way down the crowded hallway toward my door. Her baby is due just before Christmas. She steps onto the blue flecked carpet with Cedric right behind her. The two of us bump knuckles as he makes it inside just before the bell rings. I shut the door and turn to face the class.

"Have a seat, y'all. Let's get started. How's everybody doing today?"

A range of responses ring out:

"I'm straight."

"Sleepy."

"Let's get this thang crunk, Ms. A."

I walk over to the overhead projector, point to the day's agenda.

"Well we're gonna start today with a short writing assignment."

Someone groans.

"Oh, come on. It's not that bad. I'll show you the topic in a few minutes, but first, let's just take a look at how the rest of the class period will play out. After we write, we'll share what we've written with a partner, and then we'll take a look at a short story that we're gonna read together as a class. It's called 'No Witchcraft for Sale.' I think you'll like it. And then we'll finish up with a discussion of the story if we have time."

"Awwww. We don't get to read our novels today?" Brenda asks.

"Not today. We'll have some time tomorrow. You reading something good?"

"I just started *The Coldest Winter Ever*. It's tight. Sista Souljah, man, she tell it like it is."

Several students agree with Brenda.

"I haven't read it yet, but everyone says it's good. I should make the time," I say. "I'm glad you're finding plenty of interesting books. Meeting your reading goal will really help out with your grades. The reading check does count as a test grade."

Then addressing the whole class: "By the way, that reading check's coming up in just over a week, so make sure you're keeping track of your reading records."

"How many pages we got to have?" Brittany asks.

"1000," I answer

"Since last time?" From Elbony.

"No, all together. 500 more pages since the last check."

"Okay. That's cake."

A knock on the door interrupts us. Dr. Dale, one of our assistant principals walks in carrying a portable file box. Inside are all the materials I'll need to administer the Georgia High School Graduation Writing Test, which I'll give to a group of juniors tomorrow during first period while my seniors are shuffled to another teacher's classroom. Students who don't pass the test will be retested. Students who don't pass after multiple attempts won't graduate. Some of my seniors won't graduate because of test scores.

"Sign here, please," Dr. Dale says. "This certifies that you've received your materials and guarantees that you won't look at them until the test tomorrow morning."

I initial beside my name on the clipboard she hands me.

"Thank you, ma'am," Dr. Dale says as she leaves the room.

I stash the file box in my closet and lock the door.

"Now. Back to work. Here's what I want you to write today."

I project the topic for today's journal on the screen and read aloud to students: "Is there anything you own that you would never consider selling? Something that's worth more to you than any amount of money? In several paragraphs, tell me what that something is. Why is it so important to you? Why would you never want to part with it? How would you respond if someone offered you a huge sum of money to sell it?"

The room is quiet as students contemplate the writing prompt.

"So think for a few minutes and then start writing. As soon as I take attendance for today, I'll write my response. Remember that the room needs to stay quiet, and you need to be working. We'll share in about 10 or 15 minutes."

Students begin writing. A few muted conversations continue. I ignore them as I bubble the attendance sheet, look for my notebook. I sit down at my desk, pencil poised to write about something I would never sell, but my mind goes blank.

I wait a bit, then say, "So find a partner and share what you just wrote with him or her. Quickly. Then we'll come back together as a class."

Students partner up, moving their desks to they can see each other easily, and begin talking about what they wrote. I hear snippets of these conversations as I walk over and flip on the light.

"I wouldn't sell my child for nothing in the world. I heard some people sells they babies. What would make somebody do that?"

"Ain't no amount of money I'd take for my photo album. That's my whole life story in there. I got a picture of Big Mama in there and she passed. You can't put a price on that."

"Nobody buying my cell phone. I got that shit all tricked out. You wanna hear my ring tone? I got T.I. on there. Somebody try to buy it, I tell 'em just keep on walking."

"I think my education too important to sell. I know we don't pay for it exactly, but I wouldn't let nobody take it away. I done worked too hard to turn back now. I'm 'bout to graduate high school. That's something not everybody done. My mama ain't done it. I'm proud of that shit."

I feel my face blush. I smile to myself.

"Today," I say to the class, "is a good day."

Their eyes turn to me.

"I wouldn't sell it for all the gold in California."

*****

April, 2009

As soon as I answer the phone I can tell that Valerie has been crying.

"Hey, Kay. Do you have a minute?" she asks. Her voice quivers.

It's 4:30 on Friday afternoon. I'm driving slowly, on the way home from my yoga class, feeling relaxed, breathing deeply, window rolled down so I can enjoy the spring breeze.

"Of course I do. What's up?"

Valerie is a student teacher placed at Lewis Central this year. Adam, my on-again, off-again friend and former colleague, is her mentor teacher, and she's been struggling all semester with his rowdy tenth grade literature class. The class is composed mostly of black male students, four of them fresh from time spent at STAR Institute, the district's punitive high school.

"I'm so sorry to bother you on the weekend, but I've just had a really rough week. I thought that talking about it might help."

"That's what I'm here for. What happened?"

I slow down as I approach the first speed bump in Max's neighborhood. I've just had my front wheels aligned. Don't want to hit it too fast.

"You remember Tay, right? You met him when you observed me last time."

"Yes, I remember Tay. He made a point of introducing himself to me."

"He likes to talk alright. Well before spring break, I thought he was really turning things around. He had been coming in to make up missing assignments on Tuesdays and Thursdays and had made a big improvement in his grade. Adam even noticed the difference."

"So what's the problem?"

I pull into the garage and sit in my car. A bumblebee has followed me in and buzzes around the windshield.

"Well, since we got back from break, he's just been completely different. He won't do any work and he keeps saying things like 'I'm tired of trying. This junk's stupid. I'm gonna quit.' Stuff like that. I talk with him after class, and he says he's just messing around, but I don't know."

"Have you called home?"

"Yes. I talked to his sister Kendra last week. His mama wasn't there. Kendra said they're pretty close and she would try to talk to him. But on Thursday, he missed his appointment for a make-up test after I had gone to all this trouble to get him a ride home on the tutoring bus. It just kinda broke me."

Her voice cracks. I hear a sharp intake of breath.

"I just feel like I've been putting so much into this kid, and he's so smart. He could have such a bright future, but right now he's just more interested in being a li'l gangsta, mr. macho man tough guy than in getting good grades and making something of himself."

"Everyone defines 'making something of themselves' differently. It's Tay's life. You don't get to make the decisions; he does. You can only do what you can do."

I bite my lip. I hate feeling so helpless.

"I mean, I know. I know that. I know it's his responsibility, but I get so frustrated, you know? He could do this in a snap if he wanted to."

"But until he wants to, if he wants to, you just try everything you can think of. It sounds like you're giving him every opportunity."

"But he's not taking me up on it! And that's what kills me."

"I remember the feeling well, Val. It's tough. I know."

Now my eyes begin to well with tears. I wait several seconds, but she doesn't speak.

"Have you talked to Adam about it? What's his advice?"

"We set up a meeting with Tay's counselor. We're gonna talk to him next week. I don't know what else to do. I'm at the end of my rope with this one."

"It's not a fun place to be."

I pause, unable to think of anything I can say to console her. Finally: "But it is part of teaching. You know what they say. It can be the best of jobs. It can be the worst of jobs."

"Ah, a little play on Dickens."

"It's tired, I know." I should stop trying to be funny

She laughs, barely. "Okay, Kay. I've taken enough of your time. I hate to burden you with all this, but I didn't know what else to do."

"It's fine. I've been there. I don't have any advice for you, but I've been there. I know how you feel. Maybe a beer would help?"

"That's a good idea."

I roll up the car window, press the button to lower the garage door.

"Let me know how things go."

"I will. Have a good one."

"You too, Valerie."

I reach into the back of the car for my yoga mat and feel a shoulder muscle pull. A five-minute conversation erases an hour of relaxation, of blissful calm.

"Damn it," I say. "Damn it all to hell."

I slam the car door and walk slowly up the stairs.

*****

October, 2009

"Holy shit! I think I've finally figured out crow pose," I think to myself. "It's not the arm strength at all. It's all in the core."

I've been holding the pose for almost a full minute, something I've never done before. After five years of regular yoga practice, I'm finally holding crow for more than a few seconds.

An instant later, my concentration broken, I tumble backwards and rock onto my heels. They squish into my well-used blue yoga mat, making impressions in the synthetic material.

"If you're not feelin' crow, just hang out in wide leg squat for a minute. The stretch is just as good. Make the decision that is right for your body," Ruby, the local artist who is also my yoga teacher, says to a class of 20 or so people.

We are crowded into the darkened yoga studio at my neighborhood gym. Even though I don't have the money, I joined the gym just for Ruby's class. Well, that and the steam room.

The Black Eyed Peas are singing "I Got a Feeling" on the sound system, and I want to sing along. I'm sweating from 12 rounds of sun salutations, the front of my hot pink tee shirt drenched. Thank God we lie on our backs soon. Deep relaxation approaches. My favorite part of class.

Too bad I can't still my mind enough to enjoy it. I'm headed to an English Education teaching team meeting immediately after class and the thought of it distracts my focus.

"Wherever you are, just relax. It feels like…melting. Do this by scanning your awareness around and through your body. The space around your body and the space inside your body, just let go."

Ruby has dimmed the lights and calmed the music. I try to follow her instruction, to let go of my apprehensions, my annoyances, my cares, the babble in my head.

"Continue to release and relax any tension you may come across until you connect with your inner state of being, which is wide open, like the sky."

I lie in reclined butterfly, trying to focus on my breath, not worried that I no longer believe in inner states of being.

Instead I imagine the minutiae of the upcoming meeting. I cringe, thinking of Tommy's arrogance, Catherine's chattiness, Harper's over-eager questions. Maggie will serve us cheese and crackers, will offer water and wine. Maybe I'll have a glass. Maybe that will help.

Maggie is the head of the undergraduate English Education program at my university, and she hosts these meetings. She and four graduate teaching assistants, including me, are responsible for the instruction and supervision of this year's group of 35 teacher candidates and all the planning and discussion that entails. We meet every two weeks to compare notes, discuss students who are struggling and strategies to help them, plan for end-of semester portfolio defenses, and the like. The meetings rarely last less than two hours.

"Maintaining the relaxing pose, bring your breath back to the complete, three-part breath. Slowly, in your own time, in your own way, use the three-part breath to make small movements with your body, stretching, making any movement that feels appropriate to you."

Ruby brings me back to the yoga studio.

"When you're moved to do so, roll over onto your right side, and when you're ready, use both your hands to push yourself up into a comfortable seated position for a moment of silence."

I've let the entire relaxation time slip by without actually relaxing. My mind is in overdrive, my shoulders jacked up to my ears. I roll onto my right side, spend a few seconds in fetal position, release my breath slowly. I've been holding it without realizing it. How can I be so tense and not even feel it?

I sit up, take lotus position. Even now I can't get the upcoming meeting out of my head. Two hours of tedium that could be covered in half that time, and when I finally make it through the official meeting, I won't be done. I'll spend another ten minutes talking to Catherine while standing in Maggie's driveway. Catherine, who always wants

to have the same conversation. I can hear the insecurities in her voice, the cry for reassurance. She must be desperate to seek reassurance from me.

"How's your writing going?" she'll inevitably ask.

"It stops and starts. Good days and bad days," I'll answer. "How's yours?"

"I sent what should be the final draft of my dissertation proposal to Ellie three weeks ago. I still haven't heard back from her. I know she's got tons of work to do, but it's kinda hard not to get discouraged."

Eleanor—we call her Ellie—is a professor in our department and a renowned qualitative researcher. She chairs the dissertation committees for both Catherine and me.

"I know. I never imagined this process would take so long. If only I didn't have the assistantship to worry about. At least I'd have more time to write."

"It's such a pain in the ass." She sighs.

I sigh. The noise startles me. I open my eyes and see that Ruby has opened her eyes, is looking at me, a concerned expression on her face. How can I blank out like this? It happens more and more often now. Seconds, minutes—I never know the length of time—just disappear. Frantically, I force a smile. Ruby smiles back.

"Thank you all for coming to class today, for allowing me to do this. I appreciate the opportunity to do this. I hope you have a great rest of your day. Thanks for spending part of it with me. Namaste," she says to the class, to me.

"Namaste," I repeat, bending forward at the waist, my hands in completion mudra. I maintain the pose for a few seconds then double my mat and roll it up tightly.

"Thanks, Ruby. That was great," I say as I walk from the cozy yoga studio toward the blaring lights of the gym.

"Is everything okay, Kay? You seem a little distant."

"Yes, everything's okay. Thanks for asking. I just got a lot on my mind today."

She smiles, touches my shoulder as I walk through the door.

I squint against the lights and instantly my head starts to pound. Why do I have to spend two hours in a meeting when I could be writing? Why can't I just do what I want? Who—or what—is stealing my time, my life? And why do I always let it happen?

*****

August, 2007

"The way I like to start this class is by explaining the major assignment. It's a reflective journal of your school-based experience that you keep across the semester. All of the smaller assignments feed this one."

I'm standing in front of a group of 25 undergraduate students in a university classroom. It's hot; sweat stains are probably blooming from my armpits, darkening the pink of my blouse.

All but three of the students in front of me are white. All but six of them are female. They wear tee shirts and flip flops. Future high school English teachers, my captive audience.

One is filling out a daily crossword puzzle in *The Red and Gold,* the university's student newspaper, as I talk. Several stare into space as if they are unwilling to believe this class can be of any use to them. I am teaching it for the third year in a row and starting to grow weary of it.

"You are required to write a one thousand-word journal entry per week. You choose the topic, but it has to be related to some issue or concern you're experiencing in your placement school."

I perch on the table at the front of the room. I'm a percher, always teetering on the edge, loving the thrill of the saved fall. I smile at the students. Only a few smile back.

"To give you guys a concrete example of what I expect, I'm gonna read to you from the journal I kept when I was in your shoes, when I was a student teacher here, way back in 1999. Yes, I went through this same program as you are about to. I know what you're going through. I've seen this program from every angle."

A few more of the students smile, warming to me slightly. The class I'm teaching is called Supervised Field Experience in English Education. Students, who will be in schools full-time during spring semester, are preparing for their long weeks of student teaching. This class is supposed to help them get ready.

"So here's a bit from my journal. I wrote this eight years ago. I know. I know. I'm old. I'll try not to bore you guys."

A male student giggles softly.

I read: *This entry is about writing—assigning writing, teaching writing, responding to writing, assessing writing. The topic has been on my mind non-stop for the last few weeks. My mentor teacher has been out having minor surgery, and I have subbed for her several days in the last two weeks. Together, we worked out a general plan of what the senior classes would work on during the week she was absent. She wanted to assign an argumentative essay, but she left it up to me to set up the particulars of what we would actually do and when.*

I doubt any of these students would have the same freedom to plan lessons that I had then. *No Child Left Behind* and the state mandated curriculum and testing that have grown out of its requirements have put constraints on mentor teachers that did exist then.

Momentarily distracted by this idea, I look up from my reading to see if students appear interested in my writing at all. About half of them look at me intently. One young lady takes notes. A few others stare at their laptops. Facebook? I wonder, resuming my reading.

"Aha!" I thought to myself. The perfect chance for me to try to teach some writing skills, to start setting kids up for the ways we will approach writing in the spring. I wanted to give them a model, preferably my own writing, and I just happened to be writing an "argumentative" type speech for the Governor's Education Commission hearing next Monday. Perfect.

I remember the time when I wrote this entry very well. It was my initial introduction into how little the input of practicing teachers is valued in creating educational policy that will affect them and their students. The governor at the time had put together a blue-ribbon commission to design and implement school reforms. Of 35 commission members, two were classroom teachers. I was to speak in front of the commission the following week, as they were ostensibly seeking public input.

I headed for the book, Inside Out *(Kirby & Liner, 1996), scouring the pages for good ideas on how to teach expository writing. Time. I think I'm giving them sufficient time. The assignment was made a week and a half before the paper was due, and at least one day of class would be devoted to writing, another to peer revision. Topic. I'll let them pick their own topics and we'll brainstorm some ideas to help people get started. I'll*

encourage them to choose local, relevant issues in the hope that they will be able to write more passionately about issues that directly affect their lives.

The students I taught then were seniors at Lewis Central, where I completed my student teaching. I marvel at my naïveté, imagining that in a week and a half I could teach the students something new or important to improve their writing.

Putting my writing on the line for them to criticize was not that tough. I was a little nervous, mostly afraid that they wouldn't care, that they would blow it off or consider it silly. Students in second period did seem a little uncaring, but students in fourth period made up for this lack by becoming very involved in giving me feedback on the piece. I modeled the way a writer should have specific questions for her writing group, and however crazy this may seem, fourth period kids answered my questions about the argumentative piece in much the same way my writing workshop group had on Monday. Obviously, they know at least a few things about what makes good writing. They gave me some excellent ideas to think about.

I look around my current class of pre-service English teachers. Do they share the same enthusiasm I had then? Do they want to make a difference? How long will their idealism last? I look at them, all young, eager, smart. Suddenly I feel immensely sad. For them. For me. They have no idea of the troubles the classroom—the world—holds for them. I do, yet I have no idea what new troubles it holds for me, and I fear they are mammoth. I read to them, no longer hearing what I am reading, consumed as I am with this overwhelming sadness.

After teaching all three senior classes from my own plans, I have been dealing with some feelings of failure. First off, it is really hard to get and keep the attention of 35

seniors who are sitting with their friends at tables. I tried to minimize the time spent with me standing in front of them talking because I know how hard it is to concentrate in the midst of such distractions. It was frustrating, though, when I did try to talk to the whole class as a group. Fairly quiet, but consistent conversations were going on simultaneously all over the room. I had to stop frequently and ask for everyone's attention. Some students who were trying to listen to me had a hard time hearing because of the extraneous noise.

If I thought things were bad then, I had an awakening when I started teaching full-time at Piney Creek. I had no idea how bad the "extraneous noise" would get. Or how fascinating it would become, how I would eventually long for the chaos of that place, a feeling I now am afraid is gone forever. For there is no noise in this classroom, save the drone of my voice reading. I try to perk up my delivery:

And some of the students were obviously not impressed with my efforts to reach out to them by sharing my writing. When I read a sentence about why I wanted to teach, about how I looked forward to the special relationship that exists between teachers and students, I got several "Yeah, right's" and a smattering of cynical laughs. I guess I just have to stick with it, to keep showing these kids that I do care about them and that I do want them to succeed. But it is discouraging when the kids seem so apathetic toward learning. I realize that there's a lot of past history to overcome. I have faith that a workshop approach to writing will help them as writers but getting there is hard to do, harder than I anticipated. Especially when I only have a day here and a day there to work with them.

A look around the room tells me I am no longer very good at perky, that I should probably wrap this up. Students have that glazed-over look. They don't identify with what I'm reading; perhaps they sense my mood. But probably not. More likely, they don't get it. Maybe some of them will in time; just not yet.

Another sense of failure comes from the way students behaved when given twenty or thirty minutes for peer revision. I had tried to model some of the behaviors I wanted to see—say something positive before saying something negative, make suggestions not imperatives, don't focus on surface level errors. As I walked around the room giving help to individuals and groups of students, I realized that most of them were not working on revision. A few tables actually passed their papers around to let classmates read them, but the majority simply took their papers out, laid them on the tables, and then began to talk about other subjects. I heard flashes of brilliance, but they were hidden deep within mounds of unrelated "What are you doing this weekend?" talk.

I leave my perch on the table, carry my notebook in hand, walk around the crowded classroom. Proximity control can be very effective in classrooms of all kinds. Prisons, too. I read the last paragraph as I stroll the room.

So after my first attempt at teaching writing, I feel both satisfied and frustrated, proud and embarrassed, excited about the future and hesitant to try again, confident that the papers will be interesting and afraid that the papers will be deadly dull. This teaching life is one of contradictions. There are no easy answers. But as I close out another week on the front lines, I am thankful for small favors. At least I didn't get trampled during the bomb threat/stampede on Wednesday. At least the kids didn't mutiny on me. All in all

they listened to and respected me, even after three days of substitutes. And I'm confident this writing stuff will come with time and practice."

Pause.

Am I expecting applause, a moment allowing me to recover? Nothing comes my way. I clear my throat.

"So that's an idea of what I expect you to write each week. Pick something that stands out across the week and reflect on it in detail. We'll share these with each other from time to time."

"But what if nothing exciting happens?" a female student asks. "My school is so boring. All I do is sit at a table in the back and listen to my mentor teacher teach. I never talk to anyone or do anything."

"You've been there a week. Give it a chance," I smile.

High school is many things, I think, but it's rarely boring. Not if you know where to look.

"Are there questions about the assignment?"

The students sit quietly. They don't look especially interested. Or maybe they're just scared, intimidated by the whole process, overwhelmed. They have five campus classes to process, in addition to their school visitations. Or maybe they sense that I am not all here, that I am lost in my own world.

"Well, let me know if you think of anything. My email address is on the syllabus," I say, looking down at my watch.

"Ms. A—…. I mean, Kay, it's, like, so weird to call you Kay," another female student says. "Anyway, Kay, what if we don't like to write? Personally, I'm not a very good writer."

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Ansley," the student responds.

"Ansley, you're going to be a writing teacher. You have to write. It's part of the job. Might as well get used to it."

She nods, blushes.

"I'm not expecting this to be polished writing. I'm expecting it to reflect thought and consideration about what you're doing out there in your placement school. I want honesty, not perfection."

I wait in silence.

"Well…if there are no other questions. We'll talk about the other assignments during the next class. See you all then. That's Thursday. Thanks for being here today."

I shove my papers into my backpack and walk out of class. No one approaches me to say good-bye. I feel alienated from the group, apart, misplaced.

Suddenly I am overcome with nostalgia—I miss Piney Creek.

*****

April, 2004

It's Thursday, I remind myself as I walk toward my classroom, D208. I'm still getting used to Piney Creek's new school building. The wide halls, the tall windows, the fresh smell. At least being in this space is more pleasant than being in the old school building, now demolished.

I start my tenth-grade class with sentence corrections on Tuesdays and Thursdays. After collecting mail and attending to morning duties, I quickly copy two sentences on the white board, using the department's Daily Language Practice teacher's guide as a resource. The Daily Language Practice is supposed to help prepare kids for the standardized tests they will soon take. By correcting errors in sentences, they will be prepared to identify the same errors on the multiple choice test. How any of this skill and drill helps them to write more effectively is dubious.

phineas inspected the ship's sale fore the group set out to see, I write.

God! What an awful sentence. Why am I doing this shit? In my third year of teaching, how have I allowed this to happen? I feel like I'm just going through the motions. I'm so tired all the time.

I yawn. Look down at my watch. Ten minutes until the bell. I have time to grab some coffee.

I walk through the crowded hall toward the English teacher planning room. Students push past, rushing from the bus drop off toward the cafeteria. They talk loud. I don't feel like making eye contact, looking for students I know, so I don't. I don't feel like talking.

Fuck! I forgot the handout I'm supposed to copy for first period. I wheel on my toe and head back toward my classroom.

Raphael, one of my fourth period students, meets me at the door.

"Can I leave my baseball stuff in here until after school, Ms. A.?"

"If you can find room by the closet door, I guess it's ok. But I'm not responsible. Don't come crying to me if someone messes with it."

Why am I so impatient today?

I rummage around my desktop and find the activity sheet that requires students to manipulate the weekly vocabulary words. They must use each word in a sentence that provides enough context clues for someone unfamiliar with the word to figure out what it means. This kind of exercise is supposed to foster higher-level thinking skills. But most students, I've noticed, simply rush through it with minimal effort or copy from another student.

Back to the planning room. Another look at my watch shows only six minutes until the bell rings. Hope there's not a line for the copy machine or I'm screwed.

I walk into the planning room. Grey, one of my colleagues, is sitting at one of the tables arranged in the center of the room, eating a cranberry scone and drinking a cup of coffee. How does he always have so much time to spare? Maybe because he's been doing this for ten years.

Kevin is at the copy machine. Just my luck. The one teacher least capable of coaxing the machine to play nice is using it.

"Morning," I say. "How y'all today?"

"It's Thursday. Can't be that bad," Grey says.

"If I could just get this fucking…oh, excuse my French, Kay, I didn't see you standing there. If I could just get this freaking machine to work."

"Here, let me help."

I walk over to the copier, move Kevin out of the way with a gentle hip bump, open the paper feed tray, pull out a mangled sheet of paper.

"I think it was just a paper jam. It should work now," I say, reinserting the tray into its slot, backing away.

I walk over to the closet, grab a transparency, stand impatiently. I look at my watch again. This glance down has become endemic. Two minutes 'til the bell.

I shuffle over to the countertop at the far side of the room, grab my coffee mug from the dish drainer, fill it two-thirds with coffee and one-third with cream and stir, as I wait for Kevin to finish at the copy machine.

"Look. I give up. This thing is a piece of junk. Go ahead if you want," Kevin says.

"I only need one copy. I'll be quick, I promise."

I put the transparency into the correct slot, push the buttons for my access code, feed the vocabulary review through.

"Thank you, Kevin. I owe you."

I rush down the hall toward my classroom, joining the throngs of similarly fast-moving students, fighting against those moving slowly and trying to avoid class at all costs, and make it to the door just in time for the warning bell. A booming voice stops me in my tracks.

"Well, good morning, Ms. A. Good to see you on this bright Thursday morning. Remember to take pride in Piney Creek High School." Mr. Bliss, our benevolent long-serving principal, greets me as he walks down the hallway toward the main office.

"Good morning, Mr. Bliss," I reply. "Ready for another one?"

"Always."

Mr. Bliss was a young teacher during the Civil Rights Movement and protested with Dr. King. He believes in the power of education, in social mobility. He defends

individual teachers and the profession against every critic. And though I don't know it yet, he will retire at the end of this school year. When he's gone, I'll get a taste of what a hard-ass administrator can be like.

The tardy bell rings as Mr. Bliss continues to walk toward his office. I close the door behind me as I step into the classroom. My first period class is small—21 tenth-graders—and mellow. I feel I barely know the students, though the semester is more than half over. They're a quiet class, unlike many of my others. Only Jamychael gives me attitude on any regular basis.

"Morning, y'all."

I usually add "Good to see you all today." Instead: "Get started with your sentences. You know how this works."

I sit down in the plush blue chair behind my desk and take attendance on a scantron sheet, just like the ones students use for the tests. Get myself organized. Drink several long gulps of coffee.

"Jamychael! Get to work. You've got two more minutes for this. Have you written a single thing?" All this without moving from behind my desk. Jamychael begins to copy from the board.

In front of me on my desk is a stack of papers I need to grade. Essays that my second and fourth period's ninth grade students turned in more than a week ago. The stack is 6 inches high. Looking at it makes me want to cry. I try to read the first one, but a movement catches the corner of my eye. I look over to the students. They have finished copying the sentences and are getting restless. They start to pick at each other, talk, take out math homework.

I stand and walk to the overhead projector.

"Enough time for sentences, okay? File these away in your notebook under the section for sentence corrections. I'll collect them tomorrow."

"What's next, Ms. A.?" Hershel asks.

"Vocabulary. Take a clean sheet of paper. You'll file this in the vocabulary section of your notebook, that's section two."

Even I'm bored. Is this what my teaching has devolved into?

"After this, could we do something fun?" Delores asks. "We haven't done nothing fun in so long."

"I know, Delores." I sigh. I have no better response for her, but I try. "These words are important. They'll be included on your final exam. It's important that you know how to use them in sentences."

I yawn, barely remembering to cover my mouth.

"Okay, vocabulary word one is *voracious*? Who can remember the definition for that one?"

Jamychael puts his head down. Within a few minutes he's snoring lightly. I never bother to wake him up.

****

April, 2008

I am sitting in an almost empty classroom at Prosper High School, waiting as the last students drift off into the hallway. I've just watched Tevin, another of my student teachers teach a 90-minute English literature/Composition 12 class, and as students exit the room, I hurriedly finish typing up my notes.

Prosper High School is tiny. Everyone knows everyone else. Everyone goes to church on Wednesday nights. It reminds me of the high school I attended. Tiny. Conservative. White.

"Will you be able to stay for the conference?" I ask Stephanie, Tevin's mentor teacher. Stephanie is a middle school teacher recently transferred to high school. She was trained to teach at the university where I am a student.

"Sure. If you guys want me to hang around, I can," Stephanie answers.

"That's great," I say. "You're always welcome to stay."

Tevin nods his head in agreement.

Stephanie shuts the classroom door and pulls over the office chair from behind her desk. The classroom walls are covered—hand-made student projects on British literary time periods, movie posters for adaptations of classic British novels, posters with general words of encouragement—Hang in There!!, a giant list of the Georgia Performance Standards for the course. No empty spot remains.

Tevin and I sit in student desks facing each other. I have my laptop open. He has a spiral bound notebook and a green pen.

"So how do you think the class went today? Let's start with that. What were you especially proud of?" I ask.

"Well, I was really happy that the students didn't put their heads down during sentence corrections. Usually at least three or four of them go to sleep immediately."

Students are asked to copy down four lengthy sentences from the board, correcting errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics. Ironically enough, when I saw

Tevin's predecessor, Lauren, teach in this same classroom last year, she had used the very same sentences. They are full of references to obscure British texts and authors.

"Where do you get these sentences?" I ask. "They're pretty dense."

Tevin looks in Stephanie's direction.

"I got them from the supplementary materials that came when we adopted these new textbooks. I use them every semester," Stephanie says. "Easier than coming up with new sentences every time."

I nod.

"And this is your class starter every day?"

"Yes," Tevin answers. "That's Stephanie's system, so I thought it would be smart to stick with it."

"Yes." I agree. "It's hard when kids have to make too many shifts between the mentor teacher's structures and your own."

Stephanie nods in agreement.

I face Tevin.

"How much class time do you usually spend on the sentence corrections?" I ask.

"It usually takes, what, about 15-20 minutes," he replies, tapping his pen against his notebook. Nervous energy. As relaxed as I try to make these conferences, the student teachers are under the microscope, being examined. No escaping the power relationships among student teachers, mentor teachers, me.

"Twenty minutes of a 90-minute block?" I think to myself.

"What do you think might make the sentence corrections more interesting for students?" I ask aloud. "What would keep the students awake? If you had the chance, what might you do differently?" I continue to probe.

Tevin hesitates, casts his eyes quickly toward Stephanie. I hate this tension.

"I think it's really good for them to do the corrections. They make so many mistakes in their writing. They need all the practice they can get. They're gonna be in college next year. They gotta know how to write," Tevin finally answers.

"And do you think this helps improve their writing? Do they see the connection between the corrections and their own writing?"

Stephanie jumps in.

"It definitely helps. Plus, it's required by the department. We all start class with sentence corrections. We voted that it would be the standard bell work assignment."

Stephanie is a well-liked teacher and a decorated one. She has a Teacher of the Year plaque behind her desk. Students crowd her room before school and stop by to say hi during class change.

"Like I said," Tevin says. "Only a few of them put their heads down today. I was proud of them. I think they were trying to impress you."

The three of us laugh. It sounds cordial enough, but a sharp edge lies underneath. I want to say more. Ask why the sentence corrections matter to anyone. Suggest that if Tevin has to meet department requirements, he at least create sentences that are more relevant to students' lives. I want to make him think about his practice. Instead I laugh along. Stephanie is another of our most reliable mentor teachers. Relationships with local schools and teachers are important to the success of our teacher education program.

I stand up and walk to the board.

"Why don't you try this one some time? It's been with me for years, a mantra of sorts. Kids love it."

And I write:

phineas inspected the ship's sale fore the group set out to see

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November, 2004

Morgan, the teacher candidate working in my classroom this year, is walking down the hall. I can hear his polished shoes shuffling across the tile floor. The sound makes my skin crawl.

Morgan is currently teaching a two-week unit with my ninth grade class. They are reading *Romeo and Juliet.* This is his preparation for taking over my two tenth-grade classes for twelve weeks during spring semester.

I don't like Morgan. He dresses in suits and oxfords, as if dressing professionally will somehow make up for lack of talent. He's slow on the uptake, and, most annoyingly, he moves my things around. I never realized how territorial I am until I am forced to share my classroom with him. His every mannerism makes me crazy. Even when he tries to be helpful, I want to bark at him, tell him to go away. He'll never be a good teacher. At least not here at Piney Creek. He's afraid of the students.

It is my fifth year of teaching, and the school is now run by Principal Meyers and the strict guidelines dictated by our state's interpretation of the *No Child Left Behind Act.* Students are tested regularly, after-school tutoring is required for most students, everyone is tired, no one is happy. Funding for the arts is cut to the bone. Rules are more important

than relationships. Teachers are scared of losing their jobs. Teaching in a "needs improvement" school is not easy.

I haven't told anyone here yet, but I'm taking the Graduate Record Examination next month, applying for graduate school for next fall. Something's got to change and fast. I need a break.

"Good morning, Kay," Morgan says as he enters my classroom. "Do you have a second? I need to talk to you about something."

"Ummm. Not really. Not at the moment. I'm still getting ready for first period. But I'll be happy to talk to you at the beginning of planning period if you can wait."

Morgan turns almost purple, one of the few people who blushes more severely than I do.

"It's just that I'm trying to grade these writing assignments, and last night I read Kendrick's. I don't know what to do. He writes like a first grader."

I collect materials from my desk, prepare for the morning trip to the planning room.

"You gotta walk with me, Morgan," I say, papers in hand, on my way out the door.

"What do you do when students can't write simple sentences?"

He waits for my response, but I don't offer one.

"And this is an advanced class! How did Kendrick wind up in an advanced class?" he continues.

"There are lots of possibilities to explain his placement. He might have an IEP. Have you checked with Ms. Fallows on that?"

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) spell out the modifications to which students qualifying for special education services are entitled, according to another federal law, the *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act*, dating back to the mid-1970s.

We reach the planning room door after a short walk. I scramble around to find my keys, which are attached to my identification badge.

"Here," Morgan says. "Let me help you."

I don't want his help. But I shove some papers his way until I find the right key. Unlock the door.

"Well, that's something you definitely want to do. Check with Ms. Fallows."

Ms. Fallows is the chair of our special education department. She is one of the single most helpful professionals at Piney Creek.

The room is crowded with people. I stake my claim in the copier line and continue my conversation with Morgan.

"It might also be something simple. Maybe he behaved well in middle school. Sometimes kids get recommended for advanced college prep simply because they are quiet and sit in their seats. If they don't cause problems for the middle school teachers, it's assumed they should be in ACP, away from the troublemakers. It's not a matter of skill, really."

I speak softly, not wanting others to get involved. Nothing like a spirited blame-the-middle-school-teachers debate to start the day.

My turn at the copier. I run off viewing guides for Act III of *Hamlet.* Forty-five of them for my two senior classes. We'll be watching the Mel Gibson film for part of each

period today. Hooray. Time to grades some papers if kids will just cooperate and watch the movie.

"The other thing you might want to think about," I say to Morgan as we leave the planning room, having managed to avoid conversation with any of the other teachers there, "is how he's responding poorly to *this* assignment in particular. Sometimes the writing performance you see directly correlates to motivation to complete the assignment. You have to keep things relevant. Did he understand what he was supposed to write?"

I drop the viewing guides on my desk and begin to set up the VCR for first period. Morgan doesn't answer.

"Have you thought about that?" I ask again.

"Well, really, I was just wondering what grade I should give him. I mean, I want to give him, like, a 20, but I feel too bad doing that. It's what he deserves, though."

"Says who? Are you using the six-trait rubric to grade the assignment?"

"No. It's not a test grade or anything. Just a daily assignment. I'm not using a rubric," he says.

"So why does he have to get a 20 then? Why crush his self-esteem?"

I grab my clipboard and walk into the doorway. Though I've asked him as a matter of routine to join me in the hallway during class change, Morgan doesn't follow. Instead, he sits at my desk and moves the stacks of papers around. I feel my face turn red.

"What can you do to help him improve?" I hear myself ask, turning my head to look back inside the classroom. Morgan doesn't hear me. Or he pretends not to. But I know he is staring at me. I sense tears in his eyes. I didn't mean to make him cry. Or maybe I did.

"Good morning, DeMarkus," I say to a student as he enters the room. We bump fists. "I'm so glad to see you in class today."

DeMarkus smiles and looks away.

*****

February, 2010

I drive the 45 minutes to Barton-Chambliss High early on a Thursday morning. Seven a.m. early. I feel like such a crybaby as I complain to Max about having to get up early. Arriving at school at eight in the morning three times during the entire semester seems like such a chore. I use to pull this routine five days a week, 40 weeks a year. I've lost my stamina.

Erin, another of my student teachers, a brilliant young black woman who digs popular culture and professes a desire to bring it into the high school classroom, has warned me that her first period class is quiet and painfully boring. In her words, she "pulls teeth" to prompt any kind of response from them. Only 16 students are in the class, and of those who attend on a regular basis only two or three of them actually participate on anything more than a superficial level.

Over the past four years of supervising student teachers I have seen my share of boring classes. Forty-five minutes of reading aloud in monotone. Completely silent independent question and answer.

Still nothing prepares me for the level of disengagement I observe during Erin's first period. I can barely stay awake, even with 16 ounces of coffee coursing through my digestive system and a supposed interest in watching the class, observing the students learning and the student teacher teaching.

"What's the point?" I think to myself. "Why am I doing this?"

I station myself at a small table near the mentor teacher's desk, set up my laptop and plug in the charger, prepare to type notes like a madwoman. My fingers usually ache after a full 90-minute class period. Two classes back-to-back are brutal. I have two classes back- to-back today. After Erin, I will watch Rhoda teach.

Usually I try to type as much as I can capture during the class period—quotes from the student teacher, quotes from the students—maybe because that is what my university supervisor did back when I was the student teacher being observed. I keep track of movement, facial expressions, who speaks up, who doesn't. Sometimes I wonder if the notes are of any use to the student teachers. I'm bored with taking them.

In this class, every question Erin asks the students is greeted with complete silence. Other than two or three whispering students, I feel I'm in a morgue. I type: "No response" so often that my fingers grow to the letter sequence. They type "no response" on impulse; no conscious thought necessary.

I lose interest, grow restless, quickly. I look for things to type in the notes, scouring the room for any little thing to notice. Finding very few events of which to take note, I type what's written on the board. How the room looks. What students are wearing. Like any of this matters. My notes, which normally range ten pages or more, stop on page four.

I'm bored. The students are bored. Erin is bored. I'd rather be sitting in the dentist's office than in this rolling chair.

Erin talks about verbals and gerunds and Robert Frost and four types of sentence combinations. The students sit quietly in their seats for 90 minutes.

A female student uses a cell phone under her desk. A male student sits like a stone, without writing, without speaking. A female student reads a novel hidden behind her notebook. A male student has his head down, asleep. I wish I were asleep.

What am I doing here? What is any of us doing here?

The futility of the entire project of schooling overwhelms me in a moment of absolute clarity.

"I gotta get outta here," I think to myself. "I have a novel to write."

Chapter Four

Coming Undone

December, 1977

"You about ready to go?" Daddy asks Mama one cold morning.

The grass outside our light green single-wide mobile home is covered in thick frost, crinkly underfoot. The white pines my parents planted the summer before have grown almost a foot; they are nearly as tall as I am now. Daddy has cranked Mama's rust-red Ford Pinto so that it can warm up. I'm still lying in my bed, a white crib that I have clearly outgrown, petite as I am, at age three. I wear Sesame Street footed pajamas, and my hair lies in ringlets on the pillow.

"Are you ready to go, Kay?" Mama asks.

"Do we have to?"

"School starts at eight o'clock. I can't be late, hon. You know that."

"Five more minutes? Please, Mama?"

Mama walks over to the crib, grabs my wrists and pulls. Fighting her gently, I finally sit up, place my right palm on the top of her hugely pregnant abdomen, look up at her with a grin.

"When does the baby get here?" I ask for the hundredth time.

"A little over a month now. Are you getting excited?"

"I want a little sister. No boys. If it's a boy, we're sending it back." I've heard someone say this before, probably my aunt Joanie, Daddy's sister, who has her own little boy.

Mama lowers the side of my crib and helps me down to the threadbare carpet below.

"Get your things," she says, running a brush through my hair. "I'll meet you in the kitchen."

I grab the blue polka dot blanket that Nana quilted for me and that I sleep with every night. I can't lift the wicker diaper bag that contains my clothes, shoes, and a few toys, so I drag it behind me toward the kitchen, which is located at the opposite end of the trailer.

Mama shoves my pajama-clad arms into a brown wool coat, pulls mittens onto my hands, tucks my hair into a blue toboggan. Then, with a groan, she lifts me up, carries me to the Pinto, where I lie down in the front passenger seat.

"Charley?" Mama shouts back toward the front door where Daddy is just leaving the trailer. "Can you bring her stuff? I couldn't carry it all."

Daddy goes back inside for a minute, walks out the front door, my diaper bag and blanket in hand. He turns to lock the door and then walks down the narrow concrete sidewalk toward the Pinto. He wears a dark tan double-knit suit, white dress shirt, wide bronze tie with a paisley pattern, and brown wing-tips. He is dressed for work at the local bank, where he is just starting to move up the managerial ladder.

"Bye, sugar," he says to me as he drops the diaper bag into the back seat and covers me up with the blanket. "You be a good girl for Nana and Grandpapa, hear?"

"Okay, Daddy. Love you."

"I love you too. See you tonight." He shuts the door to keep the cold out.

Daddy gives Mama a hug. I can't hear what he says, but I can guess, because I've heard it before: "Be careful. Don't overdo it."

Mama drives the ten miles to Nana's house, me lying in the bucket seat of the Pinto, stretched across the console, my head tucked into her lap. My head barely fits between her pregnant belly and the steering wheel, my hair so long it tangles with the gear shift. I drift back to sleep.

My three year old world. Comfortable, secure, present. I can't see the life ahead of me, ahead of my parents. The future does not loom. There is only now, and now is sweet, eternal.

"Well look who's here!" Grandpapa says as Mama emerges from the Pinto, me folded into her arms. I'm too big to be carried now, especially by Mama, who is overbalanced and unsteady on her feet. Grandpapa removes me from her arms, and I cling to his neck. Mama retrieves my diaper bag and we head inside.

The house smells warm and inviting. Nana wears a plaid house dress, slippers that are bursting at the seams, and a patchwork apron. She is bending over the oven, putting a pan of biscuits in to cook. Grandpapa deposits me and my blanket on the limp orange sofa and puts another stick of wood into the fireplace. He shuffles across the gray linoleum and out the back door where more firewood is stacked.

"I gotta get going, Mama. I'm going to be late as it is," my mama says to her mama. "I'll be back at four."

"I do wish you'd stop working," Nana says. "Who knows what you doing to that baby being on your feet all day? I hope he ain't the one to pay the price."

Mama is a high school teacher in the county bordering the one where we live.

"Kay thinks the baby's a girl," she replies.

"Kay's too smart for her age," says Nana, smiling at me.

And then, to Mama: "You take some time off, hear?"

"Two more weeks. I won't go back after Christmas break. I promise."

Mama bends over the sofa, kisses my forehead, and then she's out the door before I can cry for her to stay with me.

Why do people kiss each other good-bye? Is it because there is always the chance they will never see each other again? Do I know that at age three? Nana knows it. She walks over, sits on the sofa, pulls me close to her. She's fat; I sink into her flesh.

She fishes around in the wooden magazine rack at the sofa's end and eventually pulls out a mint green soft cover book. Three children are pictured on the cover—a dark-haired girl wearing a turquoise dress and white pinafore, a blondish boy in jeans and a striped shirt, and a little sister in pink overalls and saddle oxfords. The three of them are playing baseball—Jane batting, Ann tossing, and Dick in hind-catcher gear.

"Do you want to read Dick and Jane while we wait for your breakfast?" Nana asks.

She's been to a surplus book sale at the county's senior citizen center where she picked up several old primers that the elementary school was getting rid of. Though my grandparents live on a tight income, she managed to haggle with the center's director, scoring five paperbacks for a quarter.

I don't know this, of course. Not then. Then the world was safe. I was loved, protected, covered in kisses, surrounded by smiles. Life wouldn't be visible through the cracks in my world for another few years.

I snuggle, eager.

I've heard Nana read the stories in this book, *See Us Have Fun*--the adventures of Dick and Jane and their little sister Ann—countless times between the day she purchased it and this morning, the morning I read for myself for the first time. As she opens the first pages, I stare at the illustrations, the black marks that I've learned to call letters, and smile.

"Let me read, Nana," I beg.

"Okay, you're a big girl. Show me what you can do."

Like Mama, Nana was also a teacher. She taught in several one-room rural schools after graduating high school in 1923 and before marrying Grandpapa in 1932. Once she was married, she became a mother and an occasional writer, giving birth to five children over the course of 15 years and writing a weekly column for the local newspaper, *The Donalsville News*. Four of her five children made it to adulthood. One, the youngest, my mama, became a teacher.

I move closer to her, my yellow pajamas still keeping me warm, and run my right index finger underneath the words.

"Dick has a ball," I say, looking at the picture of young Dick and his red rubber ball. "See Dick toss the ball."

I turn the page, look up at Nana for encouragement. She nods her head.

"See Dick toss the ball to Skip." I look at Nana again and smile. She smiles back, the pride in her eyes unmistakable, even to a three year old.

"You got it, darlin'. You got it. Just keep going."

And I did.

*****

December, 2007

"So how's it going?" Roberto asks me.

We're sitting across a wide, rough-hewn table at The Royal Tavern, drinking Guinness. It's cold out and various jackets, scarves, hats, and bags fill up the booth, dwarfing us.

"Well, if you put aside my impending divorce, the fact that my parents still refuse to meet Max, that Sarah hates me, that I suspect Adam Allan is dragging my name through the mud at Lewis Central, though he has absolutely no business doing so, that I'm broke and can barely pay my bills, and, well, I'm still not sure what I want to write my dissertation about, things are good. I'm happy."

Unconvinced, he replies, "At least you still have me."

"A short half-Mexican friend makes all the difference."

We smile at each other. Without knowing what's running through his mind, mine catalogues eight years of friendship, most of them spent while we were teachers at Piney Creek. He's still teaching there; I've moved on to the doctoral program at the university. We don't see much of each other these days, but when we do, it feels like we've haven't lost a beat.

"So Sarah hates you, huh?"

Sarah is Max's older daughter. She's a senior at Lewis Central this year and a student in Adam's Advanced Placement Language and Literature course. More tangled relationships—the daughter of my new partner is a student in the class of my old teacher friend. She can't forgive Max for leaving the family; she won't begin to give me a chance.

"I guess she has every right to. I mean, I'd probably hate the woman my dad left my mom for. Even though it's not nearly that simple."

"Nothing ever is."

We both sip our beers, as if we both know it's best to change the subject.

"No dissertation topic yet? You drinking the kool-aid?"

"Gulping it down like Guinness on a cold night. Trying to figure out how many angels can dance on the head of a pin and all that. Reading Foucault at bedtime."

"You're shitting me. I thought you were gonna remember where you came from. Keep it real."

I laugh. The bar is getting crowded with happy hour patrons; we have to shout to hear each other.

"This is real! It's like Baudrillard says—we create our own reality, and even that's only a copy of what we've been taught to believe is reality. I been through a lot of shit lately, and this is as real as it gets. I need this stuff right now. It puts life in perspective. Helps me think, gives me thinking tools."

Did I just say that? Thinking tools? He looks as incredulous as I feel.

"What you need to do is stop reading that shit. Stop reading. Period."

“I’m a reader. You know that. Reading helps. You’re an English teacher, for God’s sake.”

”Nothing helps. Nothing matters, except the kids. Getting ‘em out of Lewis County. Or at least out of the poultry plant.”

My mind drifts to Marty, a former student from Piney Creek. He works at Pilgrim’s Pride now, one of several poultry plants in town. I bumped into him not long ago at Kroger, his cart full of canned goods and processed meats. He showed me a picture of his girl friend and seemed happy.

“The thing is...” I take a long drink of my beer. “The thing is, I don’t know if I can believe that any more.”

“Believe what?”

“That teaching matters. I know it sounds ridiculous,” I say, pausing, knowing I shouldn’t say any more. But I do. “Getting a Ph.D. in education is not supposed to make you give up on education, but that’s what’s happening. Seriously.”

“Seriously? You’re saying ‘seriously’ to me? Education is a job. We have a job to do. A fucking important job. Why else would we put up with all the shit?”

He looks serious. Older, tired. He has three kids under the age of eight, a reason to be tired.

“I thought grad school would be a break. Now I need a break from the break—”

“You’re messing with me,” he says.

“—before it breaks me.”

“Come on.” He’s impatient with me. “Stop being clever for once.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

I wonder if anybody else ever thinks the same things I do.

"So what's the alternative?"

"To what?"

I've lost my train of thought. This pint is going down quickly.

"To grad school," he says. "To education."

"I don't know. Write a screenplay? A novel? That's what I wanna do. Just write fiction and eat good food and see the world and make love two times a day. Oh, and practice yoga. Can't forget that."

He clearly doesn't like what he's hearing. I think I'm only messing with my own life, but I'm also messing with his.

"You want another one?" he asks.

"Thanks."

Roberto returns from the bar with two more pints of Guinness.

"So you're not gonna finish the degree then?" he asks.

"Oh, hell no. I'll finish the degree. I've put in too much to quit now. I'm just not gonna write an empirical dissertation."

"What then?"

"I dunno. Maybe an autoethnographic account of myself as teacher, as reader, as grad student? My multiplicitous self? Fragmented, competing subjectivities? Something like that?"

He rolls his eyes and makes a sound that could be a chuckle. Or a cough.

"And, not to bust your balls or anything, but who the hell cares?" he asks.

"Nobody. Not even me."

"This is what happens when you fall in love."

"I know. Great, isn't it?"

I excuse myself and walk down the short hallway to the toilet. I squat to pee, balancing precariously, careful not to touch the toilet seat. Then I run my hands under lukewarm water, dry them on a paper towel, look down to make sure my jeans are zipped. My image in the mirror does not look happy. I smile to see if she smiles back at me. She does not.

"Screw you," I say to the me in the mirror.

Flummoxed, I almost trip over the wastebasket on the way out.

"Will you be able to get a job, writing something like that?" Roberto asks as I slide back across the green vinyl upholstery of the booth.

"Probably not."

"Do you still want to be a professor?"

"Jesus H. Christ, enough questions for one night, okay?"

I put my head in my hands, stare at the table top.

"Okay, okay," he says. "I didn't mean—"

I look up. "Am I smiling?" I ask.

"No," he says. "Why?"

"I could swear I was."

*****

February, 1981

The small building that houses the four first-grade classrooms is separated from the rest of the elementary school. Like many elementary schools, ours has outgrown the

building meant to contain it. New buildings and mobile trailers surround the central building in concentric circles. We're in rural north Georgia at the end of the Carter administration; people are leaving Atlanta for the country. White flight stretches the suburbs farther north. Everyone at my school is white. Everyone in my town is white.

Connecting the first-grade to the main building is a covered breezeway. My two best friends, Natalie and Joyce, and I like to twirl around the iron poles that are spaced evenly along the sidewalk, imagining that we are "gone with the wind," though we haven't read the book or seen the movie and don't have an idea what the phrase means. We just like getting dizzy.

But when Mrs. Florence, our stern teacher, accompanies us to the building, we walk down the sidewalk single file, directed by the class leader and door-holder, positions that rotate weekly. We follow this path daily in order to reach the lunchroom, the music and art classrooms, and most importantly for me, the library.

"Joshua! Stay in line," Mrs. Florence shouts impatiently at the class troublemaker. Joshua rides my bus and lives behind the pulpwood yard. His mother is a custodian at our school. Mrs. Florence is tall and stone-faced. She wears pink polyester pants and blousy floral print shirts. Her feet are big and her hair doesn't move. It looks like a wig.

Mrs. Florence never has to tell me to stay in line; I know what's expected in school. My weekly visits to Sunday school, along with having a mother who's a teacher, have prepared me for the rigors of first grade. Plus, today we're headed to the library, one of the favorite places in my closely circumscribed world. Why would I let the urge for dizziness overtake my desire for new books?

During today's visit, the librarian, Ms. Helen, will not give us a lesson on the Dewey decimal system or card catalogue navigation. Our sole purpose for visiting the library this chilly February afternoon is to check out books.

As we troop into the library, maintaining a careful single file, I feel Mrs. Florence's hand on my shoulder. Not accustomed to being singled out, I jump, trip over my sneakers, my face turning three shades of scarlet.

"This is Kay," Mrs. Florence says, pulling me out of the line, introducing me to Ms. Helen personally. "Say hello to Ms. Helen, Kay."

I'm a shy child; I never speak unless spoken to.

"Well, hello Kay. It sure is a pleasure to meet you," Ms. Helen says, leaning forward, smiling at me, reaching out to shake my tiny hand.

My blush intensifies.

"Hey," I manage to squeak, looking hesitantly at the young energetic librarian. "She is beautiful," I think.

Mrs. Florence smiles as if she has just presented Ms. Helen with a treasure, a diamond she has found buried in the red Georgia clay.

"Kay can choose a chapter book today," Mrs. Florence says directly to Ms. Helen. "According to the latest testing, she is reading on a fifth grade level. No sense in her being stuck with the picture books."

"Of course. Kay, you may follow me," Ms. Helen says. She smiles at Mrs. Florence and takes my hand.

As I peel away from my classmates, still standing on line, I hear several of them asking questions.

"Where's she going?" asks Joshua.

"Can I go too?" My best friend Natalie.

"She's going to get a chapter book," says Rosie, who has overheard the conversation between Mrs. Florence and Ms. Helen.

"That's not fair. I want to get a chapter book, too," says Joshua. "I can read good as she can."

Mrs. Florence halts the questions from the other students with a stern raised eyebrow, prods the line forward toward the section of the library lined with shelves full of picture books.

"We'll all have a chance to check out a book," Mrs. Florence says. "This way."

As the line of students moves slowly toward the right, deep into shelves full of easy-to-read books, the kind I've been reading since age three, Ms. Helen guides me around the corner into the section of the library full of thick hardbacks and a selection of young adult paperbacks. I've never been to this section of the library before. My eyes widen.

"You may choose one of these books, Kay," says Ms. Helen. "I'll be right over behind the desk. Come get me if you have a question." She points toward the check-out desk.

My eyes scan the shelves, looking for something familiar. Finally I see large friendly print running down a one-inch spine. *Little House on the Prairie*. I know this book. I read it the summer before, after Mama checked it out from the county library for me.

The book is on a high shelf; I can barely reach on my tip-toes. Finally, I succeed in tipping the volume toward me. One more nudge and the book falls from the shelf into my waiting hands. I see the cover. A wagon, two girls in sun bonnets, a shaggy brown dog. Jack. I smile.

I walk toward Ms. Helen who sits behind the desk reading a magazine.

"Did you find something, dear one?" she asks. She looks modern to me, dressed in a sweater vest, bibbed blouse, and penny loafers. Clearly she is smart. She works in a library surrounded by books.

Instead of answering, I slide the book across the counter.

"*Little House on the Prairie*." She smiles as she reads the title aloud. "Now you know this is not the first book in the series, don't you? Have you read *Little House in the Big Woods*?"

I nod hesitantly, not sure what she is talking about. My face gives away the fact that I'm confused.

"Well just in case, let's get that one too. You might like to read it again."

Ms. Helen walks back over to the shelf where I just stood. She takes down another hard back from the same place on the shelf, this one with a little girl holding a doll made of a corn cob.

"This one comes first, chronologically. It will help you understand the second one," Ms. Helen says.

I nod, as if I know exactly what she means. We walk back toward the counter, where she asks me to print my name on the cards found in the back of the two books.

After writing my name, I hand the cards back to her and watch as she stamps the due date inside the front covers of the books.

"Okay, sweetheart, here are your books. They are due on March twentieth. You can go back to your class now," Ms. Helen says. "Come back and see me any time. I'll help you find good books." She smiles, and I shyly reciprocate.

I slide the two books off the counter and head toward the reading circle, where several of my classmates are seated, reading the books they've chosen. The circle is a depression in the library floor, carpeted in orange, ringed by several stadium-style tiers, with animals—zebras, giraffes, and elephants—painted on the wall. I sink down on the top step, open *Little House in the Big Woods*, read the first words:

"*Once upon a time, sixty years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little gray house made of logs*."

In an instant I'm swept away, no longer in a hot, sticky provincial elementary school library but transported to a place I never heard of, to a time before roads, when animals roamed free in the forest. By the time Mrs. Florence announces that it's time to leave the library, I am hooked.

I feel a new strength in my legs as I stand to leave the reading circle. I feel tall and strong, for I am special and set apart and singular and totally hooked on school.

*****

March, 2008

"So does Max celebrate Passover?" Catherine takes a bite of her everything bagel.

"What do you think?" I answer brusquely.

Monday morning writing group. Amanda, Catherine, Clara and me. We're supposed to be talking about the writing we're doing for our doctoral program in language and literacy education. But we're all procrastinators. And writing group often becomes gossip group.

"Well…I wouldn't think so, but he seemed offended when I made that comment at dinner the other night," Catherine continues. Catherine is generally in charge of the flow of conversation at these weekly two-hour meetings.

"Which comment was that?"

Amanda stands up, impatient, and leaves the four-person table where we're seated, a pack of Parliaments in her hand. She rushes toward the door of Corner Café, almost tripping over the pile of backpacks on her way out. The Corner Café is our spot. Good coffee, lots of space, a fairly reliable wireless connection.

"I said something about meeting on a Sunday morning at seven a.m. being sacrilegious, if you believe all that shit." Catherine pauses. "He didn't laugh."

"He smiled. Smiling is as close as he gets to laughing." I crack my knuckles, one at a time.

"He intimidates me," says Catherine. "I never know what he's thinking."

I look at Clara who recently quit working toward her doctoral degree, half-way through our third year in the program, but still meets with us on Monday mornings. She's doing public relations full-time and working part-time on a novel. So much less stress in her face today, even though she was devastated when Carol, a distinguished professor in our department and Clara's former advisor, suggested that she leave the program.

"Usually he's not thinking much," I say. "Mostly he feels."

I smile and Clara smiles with me, stifling a laugh. Catherine looks uncomfortable.

"So how's your paper for Jack going?" she asks, ending the awkward moment.

I'm completing an independent study this semester with Jack, a member of my advisory committee. I'm supposed to write an article that I can publish in *English Education* or one of the other major academic journals in our field.

"It's been stalled out for the past couple weeks. This other thing, this journal article I'm writing with Aaron has taken precedence. Gotta be turned in to Carol by the end of April," I reply.

Mostly we talk about deadlines, dates. We rarely meet them, but we love talking about them, typing them into our calendar programs, our four laptops making a box on the tabletop.

"I forgot you were doing something with Aaron," Catherine says.

Aaron is a professor in our department. I've known him since I was a Masters student and completed my research apprenticeship with him; we write together.

"Does it make you want to puke?" Catherine never shies away from references to bodily functions.

Amanda returns from her cigarette break, sits down. She smokes fast. Maybe I should have joined her. Then I remember that Max and I have quit. Three months and counting.

"A little bit. It's all interpreting this and making meaning of that and existential literacy and dialogical transactions. I don't think that way anymore. I can't. I mean, I pretend to, and I'm good at pretending, but…"

"But at least it's a publication." Practical Clara. "Looks good on your vita."

"I'm not complaining. I'll put my name on anything," I say. "I got no qualms about that."

"I would just worry about how a search committee is going to see it. Is that the kind of work you want to have out there when you go for job talks? You'll have to explain yourself. Why you've shifted paradigms and all." Catherine can be relentless.

Paradigms, I think. Maybe I can put that word in the Aaron paper. Goes well with dialogical transactions and existential literacy.

Clara's eyes dart between us. She dives in, sensing something sad in my silence.

"Carol always told us it's good to show you can write from a variety of different perspectives. The search committee wants you to be able to work with doc students, and they're coming from the whole range of theoretical orientations. It makes you more marketable."

"A pub is a pub is a pub," Amanda says. She takes a sip of her coffee.

Why are we not doing what we are here to do? Why are we wasting time talking about me?

"It's an invited paper," I hear myself saying. "But you know, honestly? I'm not even sure I'll be going on job talks. I'm starting to wonder if I have the stomach for academia, for academics. The politics seem pretty brutal."

I reach into my red backpack, find a tube of Burt's Bees, my preferred lip balm, lubricate my lips.

"There are so many days when I just wanna teach again. It seems so simple. So satisfying," I continue. "I miss it."

"No…" Catherine says.

"I mean, sure. I was tired at the end of every day, and sometimes I wanted to shoot myself in the head, but at least I felt like I was in control."

"Stop it," says Amanda. "You're just tired. You got a lot going on. Teaching is not that simple."

"I know." I say. I'm overwhelmed and grasping at straws. "And I don't want to be in control. I'm relishing this whole loss of control thing. It's liberating."

They must think I'm crazy. I know I think they're crazy. Am I the only one who wonders if she has any control over the words that come out of her mouth?

"At least the fucking observations are done for this semester." Catherine sighs, smiles, mercifully changing the subject.

I taste my lips with my tongue, feel the mint there. Catherine and I taught together, at Piney Creek, and are now colleagues on the English education teaching team. She's working on her Ph.D. as well, has made the most progress of any of us so far. I smile back at her. She's only trying to help, I tell myself.

"If there's one thing I know it's that I can't do teacher education," I say to her. "These supervisees are enough to make me crazy."

"I don't know if I can do it again next year," says Catherine. "Jonah and I have been talking about other options. Like trying to make it through next year on his salary."

"But that means paying tuition. On top of zero income," Amanda says.

When we are not talking about deadlines, we talk about money, or the lack of it.

"I don't mean to change the subject, but maybe we should look at Catherine's comp paper now. It's after 10:30," Clara says.

Lovely Clara, saying the things I can't bring myself to say.

"Okay, so what kind of feedback do you want?" I ask.

Catherine is writing her comprehensive exam papers. Our job as writing group members is to help her. Her defense date is just over a month away. I watch as panic creeps across her face.

"I just wanna know if it flows, if you like the new organization, if there's anything missing, if it makes sense. Just whatever you have to say. Anything, really."

We each dig into our respective laptops, all four screens now awakened out of sleep mode on the square table top, and begin to read from a 32-page Word document Catherine has emailed us.

After only a few minutes of silence, Amanda speaks up: "I'm wondering if this whole introduction could get shortened to, like, one paragraph. Or maybe you could just drop that whole first paragraph. The current one. And then start directly with the deconstruction of the qualitative interview."

I reach back into my backpack, fish around for my earphones, plug them into my laptop. A Willie Nelson song pipes into my ears. I start reading again. From the top.

An hour later I look up. Amanda and Catherine are still talking about Catherine's paper. Clara stares intently at the screen, types. I take a long sip of water from my orange Nalgene bottle. My eyes won't uncross. I can't figure out why the paper I've just spent an hour reading matters. How it relates to teaching. I wonder why Catherine, who is a good writer, clutches and overwrites and repeats herself ten times over when she writes something scholarly. Things aren't supposed to make sense, I think to myself, but at least sentences should.

"I sent you some comments," I hear myself say to Catherine as I take the earphones out.

Catherine clearly wants more. She waits. I find myself talking, again. I hate to talk.

"It's good. I like it a lot better than the last draft."

"Anything specific?"

"I put several comments in there. I just sent it to you."

"Okay, cool. Thanks."

"Listen, this has been fun, as fun as it gets for four square white girls, but I've really gotta go. I have to send some writing to Jack today. We're meeting tomorrow." I start packing my gear.

"Aren't you going to yoga?" Amanda asks.

"Um-hm, but that's not until 4:30. So I got a good, what, three hours to write before then?"

A chorus of "Good luck" trails behind me as I turn to face the door. I wonder if they'll wait until I'm out of earshot before they start gossiping about me.

*****

February, 1990

I sit in Mrs. Allison's world history class, copying definitions for vocabulary terms from the glossary in the back of our three-inch textbook onto sheets of wide-ruled notebook paper. *Mao Tse-tung* I write on my paper, putting a colon after the words, flipping though my book to find a description I can write down.

Mrs. Allison sits behind her desk reading a Tom Clancy novel.

My desk, like the others in the classroom, is old-fashioned, wooden, the desk top carved with the initials of previous students. Not only is the desk shabby, it is too small for high school students, myself not withstanding.

In front of me sits my friend Natalie. We played softball together during middle school. I gave up on athletics when I hit high school, having never been good at team sports, though I tried to be a part of them for the years of my late childhood and adolescence. Always short and runty, I had grown four inches and put on twenty pounds over the past summer, trading my girlish skinniness for the slender, well-proportioned body of a young woman.

"Hey, what you get for number four?" Natalie asks, turning around in her desk.

After the recognition that I wasn't cut out to be an athlete, I had more fully embraced my longstanding position as the smartest girl in class. Friends constantly turned to me for answers. Rarely was there a day in Ms. McGregor's English class when a huddle of four or five friends didn't circle my desk before the bell rang.

"What happened in chapter nine?" someone would ask, and I'd provide a summary of the previous night's reading assignment.

"O-lan killed her baby daughter because she couldn't feed her," I'd say.

"For real? How could someone do that?"

Natalie continues to stare at me, waiting for an answer to her question.

"Look on page 987," I tell her. "The definition is in bold. Second column. See?"

"Thanks, girl." She turns back around.

"Pssst." Across the aisle from me, Chase Brandon passes me a folded piece of notebook paper. A note. I glance at Mrs. Allison, make sure she's not looking, and take the note from Chase. I feel my face burn; I'm blushing again.

As if sensing a new energy in the room, Mrs. Allison looks up from *Patriot Games*. I quickly slide the folded note into my textbook and pretend to work. Eventually Mrs. Allison, overweight, myopic, and the butt of student jokes, returns to her novel.

I've lost interest in schoolwork over the past few years. Not interest in school. Interest in schoolwork, which is boring. School itself is entertaining, if not always enjoyable.

After writing definitions for 30 vocabulary terms, we are to answer questions one through 10, which are written on the chalkboard, in light, barely legible cursive. "Why is this important?" I wonder silently. "Why can't I just read *The Good Earth* instead?"

Mrs. Allison heaves herself out of her wooden desk chair and clears her throat to address us.

"Pupils, I have to visit the little girls' room for a moment," she says in a scratchy voice. "Kay will report to me any misbehavior that occurs during my absence. Please continue your work until I return." She walks quickly toward the door at the other end of the classroom.

My blush seems constant today. I hate being singled out to take names, but it happens all the time. Teachers like me. I am quiet, well behaved, proper, like a noun.

As soon as Mrs. Allison shuts the door behind her, the entire class breaks out in conversation. The women's bathroom is just across the hall; she won't be gone long. We must seize the opportunity to talk while it exists. Talking is what high school is for, after

all. Catching up on gossip, laughing with friends, flirting with boys. Even now, I'm not so good at the latter. I'm timid, full of self-doubt.

Lamar Price, who sits in the desk directly behind me, taps my left shoulder. I shift my body so that I'm sitting sideways in my desk, my back against the concrete block wall, my feet propped in the metal book well underneath the seat of the desk.

"Yes?" I ask.

"So I was just wondering if you're doing anything on Saturday night?" he asks.

I'm only 15, not 16 for three more weeks, not allowed to date yet, and I don't understand that he is asking me out. My parents sometimes let me go to movies or for dinner with groups of girlfriends, but I've never been in a car alone with a boy.

"I might be going to the movies with Rosie and Julia," I say. "I'm not sure yet. We talked about it."

Rosie is another of my best friends, our relationship dating back to elementary school. Julia is her older cousin, who has a driver's license and a black Mustang.

"Do you wanna do something?" Lamar asks, ignoring the mention of my possible plans.

"Well of course. Of course I wanna do *something*," I laugh. "I mean, I don't want to sit at home with my parents." Spending Saturday nights with parents is the most passé thing imaginable, though I usually do just that. Actually, it's not so bad. But I want to be cool, be a part of it all, be like the girls I read about in books, the ones I see on television.

"Do you wanna do something with me?" he asks, more pointedly. "You know, together. Like a date?"

"Oh," I say aloud.

"I'm so stupid," I think to myself. The blush intensifies.

"I don't know if I can. I'll have to ask my parents." I don't want to go out on a date with Lamar Price. He has brutal acne and is definitely not cool. The opposite, in fact. I've just been asked on my first date by the biggest nerd in school. Lamar's nothing like Chase Brandon, who plays basketball and listens to Led Zeppelin and smokes weed on the weekends.

Then I remember. I have a note from Chase Brandon in my world history textbook! Not waiting for a response from Lamar, I turn around in my desk, just as Mrs. Allison returns from the bathroom.

"I heard talking all the way across the hall," she says, a frown furrowing her forehead. She shoots me a look of mild disappointment. "Guess I need to add a couple more questions to keep y'all busy. If you have time to talk, obviously you don't have enough work to do."

She turns to face the chalkboard on the opposite side of the room, picks up a long piece of yellow chalk. As she bends down to write questions 11 and 12 below the first 10, we notice that in using the "little girl's room," she has tucked the back of her cheap rayon skirt into her pantyhose. Part of her upper thigh and right buttock are visible. The room erupts in laughter.

"What?!" Mrs. Allison asks, turning to face us. Her turn to blush has arrived. "What is it?"

Most of the students continue to laugh uproariously. Those of us too embarrassed or polite to laugh sit quietly, looking down. After several minutes, Melissa Day, an older student who it taking world history for the second time, leaves her desk, walks over,

whispers into Mrs. Allison's ear. The two walk quickly into the hall, leaving the classroom a mess of howling fifteen-year-olds.

With Mrs. Allison once again outside the classroom, I slide Chase's note from my textbook, unfold it carefully, read the words inside.

Dear Kay, it says. *I think about you when I masturbate.*

That's all; nothing more.

I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. I can't look at Chase. I can't look at anyone. I feel tears spring to my eyes.

So I do the only thing I can. I pick up my pencil from the groove on the desktop where it rests and flip to the back of the textbook, in search of a definition for the next term: *Great Leap Forward.*

*****

April, 2008

I wonder if Ellie shaves her legs every day. I'm shaving mine now. Meeting with Eleanor, my doctoral committee chair, requires smooth legs, smooth sentences. Ellie is smooth; I need to be too. Razor scrapes flesh.

She will probably say, "You look good today. That's a great sweater."

And I will probably answer, "Thank you."

I mouth "thank you" as I spread the pink lather over my left leg, cover my knee, halfway up my thigh.

"You're not thinking of writing autoethnography are you?" My imagined Ellie asks.

Voices in my head, rehearsal. I'm playing both parts. Mouthing the words. Sometimes I say the lines out loud, talking to my legs, or the shower wall, or the mirror Max uses for shaving.

"I'm not sure I can write anything else." My reply.

Catherine has told me that Ellie does not like autoethnography.

"You won't be writing autoethnography if Ellie is your major professor," I hear her say at writing group.

Then I remember that I no longer take Catherine's advice. She's always wrong.

"Well, you're certainly a talented writer. You can write anything you want," Ellie says. "But aren't there people you want to talk to? Remember they don't have to be academics."

"I guess I'm just having trouble with the whole idea of interviewing," I say with confidence. The shower is my sanctuary. I can say anything without fear here. "My own personal crisis of representation."

Left leg done, I rub shaving cream onto my right. I notice a small trickle of blood running down my left knee. Razor blade must be dull.

"I can understand that. I think we all come to that point where we have to ask what the qualitative interview actually does, how it functions."

She sounds so smart. I don't realize that I must be that smart too, because I am inventing her words, or at the very least mimicking them perfectly. The irony escapes me in the pulsating shower stream.

"It just feels wrong to write about other people, use their words, shape them into what I want them to say, pretend I can speak for them. How do I know what my

participant means when she tells me something?" I ask. "After all the reading of French theory these past three years, I'm tired of the quest for meaning. I wanna give it up."

"And you think autoethnography is the answer?" Yes, she would ask that, and look at me, wide-eyed, expectant.

"It's a bad term, I know. Max says that all the time. It's a bad term."

Out loud this time: "It's a bad term, a troubled term, how can 'auto' describe a fractured subject?" I pause. Then in my head: "That might be too much."

I turn the water off and pull back the gauzy shower curtain. Stepping out into the steam, I dry myself off, wrap a towel turban-style around my hair.

"Can you be more specific about what this project might look like?"

I hesitate, wishing I could tug at my hair as I think about what I should say next.

"I really don't know. It's just that my life is such a jumble right now. I don't think I can get outside myself to do interviews. I think it might be more useful to see what theory can do in helping me figure out my own life. Does that make any sense?"

I don't think it does. Making sense doesn't make sense anymore.

"Of course it makes sense. That's exactly why we need theory. To help us produce ourselves as subjects."

I imitate Ellie's voice, her confidence, as I repeat: "To help us produce ourselves as subjects."

Produce myself? God produced me, my mother would say.

My hand reaches into the cabinet for the tube of SPF 15 facial moisturizer I use every day, and I sit on the black folding stool. My robe is tied tightly. I unravel my hair. It's long; combing it takes a while.

"But does anyone want to read about me theorizing my life? It seems so self-indulgent. Not very rigorous."

"I think we have to let go of our commonsense notions of rigor. Who defines rigor?"

Ellie asks good questions. I've started to do that in my writing. Questions are easy, and, properly phrased, they sound profound. Answers…well there are no answers.

"Yes," I say. "But then there's the whole notion of writing about *real* people, people in my life. I don't want to hurt anybody. Or piss anyone off. Maybe I should just write fiction."

"You're always writing fiction. All we can ever write is fiction. It just has to be good."

Why can't I be that definitive? Simple declarative sentences, one after the other. Why can't I see things so clearly?

"Move on," I say to the tangle of hair in my comb. "Can we please move on?"

Ellie's voice obliges: "What about your committee? Have you firmed that up?"

"Oh. I meant to mention that earlier. I asked both Jack and Richard, and they both said yes."

"Of course they did." I see her smile, imagining white teeth and red lipstick. "No one can say no to you, Kay. Who else are you thinking of asking?"

Is there another name she wants me to say? I can't think of one, except the obvious—Max. And of course he can't be on my committee.

"That might be it," I say. "I can't think of anyone else who needs to be there."

Hair untangled, I rub some styling cream into it. I don't know why. I rarely style my hair.

"Well it might be nice to have someone from outside the department, outside the college, even." See, I knew imagined-Ellie would want another committee member.

I hope she doesn't say that. Please don't say that.

"Do you have any ideas?" I ask. What I really want to do is say no. Why can't I do that?

The Ellie in my head does not respond.

I get the ironing board out of the laundry closet, plug in the iron, twist the knob until the little arrow points to the word cotton. Which pants should I iron? Gray or brown? I settle on the brown ones. A better match for my sweater.

No longer able to stand the silence, I continue: "And I'm still planning to write comps in the fall. I wanna take this summer to finish up with reading I haven't gotten to, meet with the committee to talk about questions. Those are the next steps I think."

Shit. Maybe I shouldn't mention comps. Gotta bring it up subtly.

"Have you been thinking about the questions? What have you and Richard been talking about?"

Richard is a professor and a member of my advisory committee. He is supervising one of my independent studies this semester. We're reading and discussing critical and post-structural theories of reading.

"We've been talking about reading. And memory. And non-reading. And re-reading. I've looked at Derrida, Attridge, Shusterman, Bayard."

"So one of the questions will focus on reading theory?"

"Definitely. But I haven't gotten it narrowed more than that."

"Well think about what it is you want to know. What is it about reading practices, the theories that intrigues you?"

Unable to answer I see myself sit quietly, watch myself examine my fingernails. I shouldn't do that when I am with her, I think.

"Shit." I say it out loud this time, the force of the word almost causing me to drop the iron. "I can't even control an imagined conversation."

"I'm not really sure," I finally answer, again, out loud, trying to say it to the wall without looking down.

"Maybe you want to take a look at Colleen's comp paper," she says. "She's writing about reading as a technology of the self. It might be helpful."

Ellie will be on my side, I tell myself; she wants to help.

"Sure. If you think she won't mind."

Ellie fiddles at her computer, looking for a file. The printer hums to action.

"Just think about what it is you want to know. It has to be interesting to you. You have to be passionate."

Will she say passionate, I wonder, knowing where I am in my life? Will she think about the word before she speaks?

I pull on my ironed slacks. Blouse, sweater and watch follow. I walk back into the bathroom, where the mirror is unfogged enough that I can see myself in it. I apply deodorant to both armpits.

"And the other questions? What about them? Any thoughts?"

Stop, I think. How did the conversation end up here? I look at myself in the mirror. Max says I am beautiful, but I just look tired. I dab eye cream underneath my eyes in an effort to hide the dark circles.

"For the methodological one, I'm thinking of writing about writing. That's where the autoethnography comes in. Actually, what I want to do is write something real. Instead of writing *about* writing, I mean. Something like the final paper for your theoretical frameworks class? That's getting published in *Qualitative Inquiry*, you know."

Qualitative Inquiry is an important journal in the field of qualitative research; still, I can hear the pause. She's not saying anything.

"You liked that one, right?" I prompt.

"Oh, yes, yes. It was lovely. Like I said earlier, you're a beautiful writer."

"Thank you. That means a lot, especially coming from you."

Listen to me. Always saying what I think I should say even when I'm thinking something else. I sound hollow, I think. Maybe I should smile as I say, "especially coming from you."

I grab a rubber band, tie my hair back from my face, try to smile at my reflection. It doesn't work. My stomach rumbles. I go to the closet, pull out my sneakers.

"Time to get this over with," I say and walk down the stairs to my Prius. I drive to the College of Education in a fog, walk into Ellie's first-floor office.

She smiles at me and says: "You look good today. That's a great sweater."

*****

April, 1999

I write this paper with excitement, one of the first major class papers I have written as part of the Masters of Education program I have matriculated at the local university. I've finally decided to follow in the footsteps of Mama, of Nana, to pursue my professional destiny, the one I've been fighting so hard to deny. I'll try my hand at teaching high school English.

I'm completing my first year of education courses, and for the final paper in my Writing Pedagogies class, I've outlined how I intend to teach composition once I enter the classroom the following fall. After creating a kitchen sink list of process-based approaches to and strategies for teaching writing, I end with this implications section:

So why bother to teach writing from a process-based, student-centered perspective? Wouldn't it be far easier to assign topics, set deadlines, scribble my comments all over a student's draft, and look for improvement next time? Wouldn't it be easier to follow the same lesson plans year after year, class after class with no changes? Wouldn't I have more authority if I told students exactly what they needed to know? If I sat behind my big desk and maintained the separation between them and myself? If I gave multiple choice tests to which I alone had the answers? If I treated all students the same regardless of their backgrounds? Wouldn't it be a lot simpler to teach explicit skills without ever considering what I teach implicitly through my actions and attitudes? Maybe so. That was the way a majority of my own high school teachers taught me, after all. And hey, I turned out okay.

But a lot of my peers didn't turn out okay. A lot of them never learned to read critically. A lot of them never wrote anything of which they were proud. A lot of them

hated every moment they were forced to spend in English class. I want to spare my own students the horror of the traditional English class. I want to teach differently, and so I will.

This project has helped me formulate a plan for how I will make things different. The concepts outlined in this project are just a beginning—the ones I will first try to implement in my classroom. From my readings and observations this semester I have learned that flexibility, spontaneity, and dynamism are essential to creating a different style of classroom. So are trust, vulnerability, and relinquishing control. Everyone in the classroom, myself included, has a lot to learn. Everyone in the classroom has a lot to teach. Building a literacy community is probably the most important thing I can do to help my students. Leading them to trust me as a reader, a writer, a listener, a speaker, and a learner, and leading them to trust each other, and ultimately themselves, is my goal as a teacher of writing. I want all of my students to have the opportunity for success—even those who have been denied access for years. I want all of my students to feel confident that they can meet the challenges offered to them by a literate, and quickly changing, world. Most of all, I want all my students to see writing as a means of living a creative life, of making sense of the things going on around them. I don't want to perpetuate the status quo; I want to help change it. This is my goal as a member of society, and this is my goal as a teacher.

I am white-hot, ready to go, armed to take on the institutional establishment and come out on top. I have educational theories to support my pedagogy. I have the naïveté of the newly initiated. This will be easy. I know what I want to do and am convinced I

can do it. I stand on the precipice of teaching and prepare to change the world, to dash the status quo, to take on the system.

Then, I enter the classroom, and suddenly, things aren't so easy.

*****

June, 2008

For this Teacher, *The Class* Feels Like Home

The winner of this year's Palme D'Or prize at the Cannes Film Festival is *Entre les Murs/The Class* (2008), a film by Laurent Cantet based on a best-selling autobiographical novel, written by French teacher, François Bégaudeau, who works in an inner-city middle school in suburban Paris. Bégaudeau, who also stars in the film, teaches a class composed of students from the melting-pot of modern working-class Paris. The film shows his struggle to gain students' respect while asking them to think critically about their lives and educations, and it recreates, with startling accuracy, the classroom in which I, my colleagues, and thousands of other U.S. teachers teach. *The Class* is real.

Part of the reason for the gritty realism is that director Cantet spent hours in Bégaudeau's actual middle school, observing the interactions between students and teacher, students and students, students and curriculum, teacher and institution, teacher and teacher. Many of the students in Bégaudeau's school, who have no prior acting experience, are cast as students in the film. Bégaudeau plays a fictionalized version of himself, called, in the film, Monsieur Marin. There's a reason we feel like voyeurs as we watch this film; we are.

The performances by the young actors who play the students work. Nothing feels forced. No character rings untrue. Stereotypes are quietly undermined. Boubacar,

Esmeralda, Louise, Wei, Khoumba, and Souleymane are kids I taught, or they could be. Just as easily, their names could be Emeka, Monica, Gayatri, Stephen, LaKeisha, Moussa. They are from working class families, immigrant families, families that have been asked to trust that the system of public schooling will give their kids a way out of the ghetto. Yet the kids themselves don't quite buy it. Boubacar does just enough work to get by, while egging on the misbehavior of fellow students. Esmeralda taunts Mr. Marin with her sassy comebacks and wasted intelligence. Louise is bored; Wei almost deported. Khoumba is volatile and scared. Each of them struggles to learn French, whether at the conversational or academic level, and wonders why they must learn to use the subjunctive tense, as Mr. Marin insists they should.

When students ask, Mr. Marin himself doesn't have a ready answer to the question of why learning this skill is important. Faced with his students' challenges, disinterest, and open rebellion, he interrogates his own pedagogy, asking himself why he teaches the content and curriculum he does and what effects his instructional and managerial decisions have on the students he is charged with teaching. He interacts with fellow teachers in faculty meetings, with parents and families on parent-teacher conference night, with custodians and lunchroom workers, with the school principal who vacillates between supporting the teachers and suspecting their pedagogical methods. He works long hours and often leaves the school after dark. Like many of his counterparts in the U.S. and around the world, Mr. Marin works within and against a system that circumscribes the kind of teacher he is, the kind of teacher he can become.

The film is character-driven and the setting thickly enacted. What passes as a plot culminates when Souleymane, a recent immigrant from sub-Saharan Africa, engages in a

verbal and physical confrontation with Mr. Marin as a result of a misunderstanding between the students in the class and their teacher. The string of ensuing actions and decisions—personal, institutional, monumental—produces difficult choices for both Souleymane and Mr. Marin. No one in the class remains untouched. And yet, as always, the school year ends. Students and teachers play football together in the yard, celebrating the end of yet another term, wondering just what it is they've all learned from each other.

Hint: it's not how to conjugate the subjunctive. But they have learned about life, Mr. Marin, perhaps, most of all. Though the students recite math formulas and historical events and scientific equations when asked during the last session of class what "they've learned in school this year," what they've really learned is that their lives are rich and complicated and interwoven; that their decisions have material effects on other people; that no one family, race, or religion has a monopoly on truth and beauty; that a lot of the so-called learning in school is a sham; that moving up the class ladder is almost impossible. One brave student confesses this when she says that she hasn't learned anything at all that year, that she's afraid of what her future holds if she cannot pass the required test to enter high school. I think of my own student, Nicole, a fifteen-year-old who stayed after class one day, and in a voice I could barely hear, asked me if I could teach her to read.

Whether watching *The Class* has as profound an effect on non-teachers as it did on me is questionable. As I left the theater, deeply moved and teary-eyed, I overheard a U.S. student encapsulate what might be a common reaction to the film: "I don't get it. That guy was supposed to be a *good* teacher?" For in a world such as ours, in the days of *No Child Left Behind*, of labels and rankings, of good teachers and bad teachers, good

schools and bad schools, perhaps Mr. Marin was not a good teacher. Maybe he was never supposed to be. But he was a real teacher. And those of us who teach know just what a challenge that can be.

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December, 2004

I should have never agreed to teach an Improved Communications (IC) class. Not like I had a real choice, since each member of our department is teaching at least one section, but I could've at least fought Paige, our department head, a little harder, volunteered to teach more sections of Literature/Composition 9 in exchange for getting out of this teaching assignment. Instead I have an IC class during third period, the lunch period, the longest period of the day.

Improved Communications is a new course my department has been offering for only the past two years, in response to the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB*). Students take the course as a precursor to Literature/Composition 9 during fall semester; it is designed to give students who read two or more grade levels behind extra time to work on their literacy skills before facing the End of Course Test (EOCT) that comes at the end of Literature/Composition 9. The percentage of students who pass the test figures into the formula from which our school gets its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) score, mandated by NCLB. Whether we make AYP determines if we are a Needs Improvement (NI) school for next year. Being an NI school is not good. Three consecutive years of NI means that reorganization begins and teachers lose their jobs. We are in year one.

"For the love of God, please just sit down and shut up! Stop acting like assholes!" I yell at my students, just back from their 25-minute lunch break, full of sugary iced tea

and sodium-laden chicken fingers. They refuse to take their seats or give me any attention whatsoever. Each of them is either black or Latino. Seventy-five percent of them are male.

"Hey! Nobody tells me to shut up. Not my mama, not my grandmama, and sure as hell not you," Rashid replies.

"I tried asking nicely," I say. "But nice don't work with y'all hardheads."

The class is smaller than average, with only 15 students who attend regularly, but each of them requires the attention I normally devote to three students. In my fourth year of teaching at Piney Creek, it would seem I'd have figured out a thing or two about managing a class. But this class takes me back to my first year teaching and makes me doubt that I've learned anything during my years in the classroom.

"Who you calling a hardhead?" Deon stands up from his desk, looks at me menacingly.

I stare at him with my teacher eye, a facial expression I have finally mastered, and he sits down.

The collection of students in this class includes many who have chronic behavior problems. They have been labeled Behavior Disordered (BD) since elementary school and come to school primarily to make money by selling marijuana or candy or to see friends. Though the students in the class should be 14 years old, many of them are 16 or older. A handful of them are just back from six weeks at STAR Institute, our district's punitive alternative high school; a handful of them are just waiting until they turn 16 so they can drop out.

Others in the class are students with a different label—Learning Disabled (LD). Many of these students read on a third or fourth grade level as determined by the Standardized Reading Inventory (SRI) that I'm required to administer during the first weeks of the semester. They have no hope of scoring high enough on the EOCT, even if they make tremendous progress. My job is to help them demonstrate at least some improvement. I teach them for 18 weeks.

"If you would all sit down, get out your workbooks, and open to page 98, maybe we could get started and I wouldn't have to sit up here and insult you," I reply to Deon, to the class. "How would that be? Y'all down with that?"

"Man, this shit boring as hell, though," Timmy says. "Why we gotta read about Jackie fucking-Robinson? Don't nobody care about that man. We been reading about that man since fourth fucking-grade."

I am sitting on a stool at the front of the room. In front of me is the seventh-grade edition of *Interactive Reader* (IR), a literature textbook designed to provide supplemental support materials and direct comprehension strategies for below-grade-level readers.

"This is just the kind of passage you might see on your End of Course Test. I'm trying to help you get ready. Don't you want to do well?"

Timmy laughs in response.

The class settles in, finally inured to the inevitability of reading the passage and answering the corresponding questions. Once students have decided to either complete the work ('cause that's what you do in school) or go to sleep, I can leave my perch at the front of the room to walk around the classroom and help students individually.

"Did you try sounding it out?" I ask Makeeta, who is struggling to figure out a word she has never seen before. "Did you look at the context clues?"

"'Scuse me, Ms. A. Can I go to the bathroom?" Nicole interrupts.

I sign her pass book without looking up to see her, without reminding her, or even acknowledging to myself, that students aren't supposed to be given bathroom passes during third period. My eyes quickly dart to my watch, and my hand scribbles down the time beside my initials. Nicole leaves the room.

I return my attention to Makeeta: "Look at the words before and after it, the sentences before it and after it. Do you know what they mean? Can you use that to help?"

I continue to circle the room, assisting those students who work on the assignment. Just before the bell rings to signal fourth period, when the noise level has escalated as students anticipate their release from class, I return to the front of the room, near the door. I notice that Nicole is missing. Can she still be gone to the bathroom and I haven't even noticed? It's been more than 20 minutes since she left.

"Okay, guys. Stay in your seats 'til the bell rings. Butts on blue." It is a phrase I have picked up from Annie, another experienced teacher in our department who serves as my mentor. The seats of our students' desks are dark blue plastic, thus the descriptive shorthand.

"Don't forget to turn in your reading records on the way out. They're due today."

The bell rings and students rush madly through the bottleneck of the classroom door and spill into the hallway. Most of them deposit reading records in a plastic basket on the table by the door.

As the last of the students leaves, I collapse behind my desk, exhausted. By some dumb luck, I have fourth period planning this semester. I put my head down on top of my closed laptop. I'll allow myself five minutes of recuperation time before I start looking through the reading records students have just handed in.

As I look through the stack of stapled reading records on which students keep track of their daily independent reading, I notice that several are missing. Some of the students who haven't turned in a record don't surprise me—LeMons never reads, Juan was not in class today, Jamal forgets to turn things in. But also missing is Nicole's record, which is unusual. I never see her read during class, but she always turns in a record of some sort.

I open my laptop, double click on the file for third period, and place my cursor over Nicole's picture. I see that her fourth period class is physical science with Coach Holman.

Holman's room is at the complete opposite end of the building and downstairs. I take my time as I walk over, stopping by the office to check my mailbox, saying hello to Mr. Terry, one of the guidance counselors.

I finally come to Coach Holman's room, knock gently, try to get his attention through the small pane of class beside the door. He waves me in.

"Yes, Ms. A? What can I do for you?"

I look around the room, spot Nicole sitting at a lab table alone. Her eyes are red and swollen; she's been crying.

"Can I see Nicole for a minute?" I ask.

"Good luck. I can't get a thing out of her today."

Nicole reluctantly follows me into the hall.

"What's going on today, Nicole? You skipped half my class and didn't turn in your reading record? How come? I'm supposed to write you up for things like this, you know."

Nicole inhales hard, tries to pull herself together enough to speak.

"I'm sorry, Ms. A.," she says, looking at my chin. "It's just… Well… They come and took me away from my mama last night. I have to go back to the foster home."

No longer able to keep the tears at bay, she lets fat drops roll down her cheeks. Her eyes are black with running mascara.

"Oh, baby!" I hug her instinctively. "I'm so sorry. What can I do?"

She shakes her head against my chest—nothing. She's right. Nothing I do will help. Still I try to absorb a tiny bit of her pain, take it into my own chest. But I know, after all, that I'll leave school today and go home to a comfortable house and one of Michael's home-cooked dinners. No matter how tired and frustrated I get, I have that. Nicole doesn't know where she will sleep tonight.

After several seconds of quiet sobbing, Nicole pulls away.

"Just a minute, Ms. A. I'll be right back with my reading record. I forgot to turn it in." She walks into Coach Holman's classroom, dragging her feet, and all I can do is blow my nose into the sleeve of my sweater.

*****

August, 2009

Ellie has recently redecorated her office. Plush beige carpet covers the floor, an antique desk sits in one corner, and three brown chairs of varied styles fill the other

corners of the room. One slim bookshelf sits behind the door, the top shelf filled with dissertations she has supervised.

"Well, I really think you should keep your options open," she says. "You might think that you don't want to teach now, but who knows what life will bring your way a year from now?"

I have just told my committee that I might not look for academic jobs for the following year. Max wants to introduce me to a literary agent he knows; he thinks I can turn my dissertation into a novel.

"You're right," I reply, only half believing her. "I should keep my options open."

Maybe I actually *should* keep my options open. Maybe Ellie knows best.

And the refrain doesn't come just from Ellie. I hear Richard echoing her advice. And Jack. The four of us are seated in Ellie's office for my dissertation proposal meeting. Jack gets the comfy chair this time. I have a legal pad in my lap. Occasionally I scribble some notes.

We have made it through the tough part of the meeting. Richard, and especially Jack, have asked me some difficult questions about my proposed dissertation topic, which is still amorphous. Ellie has been mostly silent, having given me most of her advice already, in writing.

"Who do you envision reading this?" Jack asked, the usual friendliness gone momentarily from his voice. "You think teachers will want to read it? Members of the academy?"

"I guess I was imagining that teachers would be the primary audience. I know that I would have enjoyed reading something like this during my first years of teaching.

Something to let me know I'm not in this alone," I replied. "But maybe teacher educators too."

Now those questions from Jack and Richard are answered, if not eloquently, at least to their satisfaction, and we discuss my job search.

"The professoriate is a really good group to be a part of," Jack says. "Where else can you get paid to read and write and teach two days a week? It's a pretty good deal."

Jack has been doing this for a while. He should know.

And it's what I've always wanted. I journey back to Nana's sofa, take a momentary look through child-eyes and see myself all grown up, wearing a tweed jacket and a beret, carrying a stack of paperbacks and a leather briefcase, walking down a tree-lined path toward an austere Georgian library. It seems so romantic.

"You're almost there," Richard says.

"You have publications. You know what you want to write." From Ellie.

"Even in this tough job market, you can get a job. You're writing is superb," Jack adds.

"Then why don't I want to get a job?" I don't have the nerve to ask this question out loud, of course, but it whirls through my head, a never-ending tornado.

"So graduation in May, right?" Ellie's question brings me back to the present moment.

"That's what I'm thinking. I think I can finish by May."

"Of course you can," she says.

Ellie shifts in her chair, becomes distracted by something on her computer screen.

Then she says, “So I guess that’s it. You can consider your dissertation proposal officially approved.”

“Is there any paperwork to fill out?” I ask

“Not today. Just make sure you’re reading all those announcements from the grad school. They have important information about deadlines.”

I stand unsteadily; a nervous smile hides my misgivings.

“Thanks, Jack. You asked some really good questions. I have a lot to think about.”

We shake hands.

“Thanks, Richard. I chose my committee well. You guys are great, so supportive. Thank you so much.”

“And you just let us know when it’s time to write those letters of recommendation. That’s part of our job. We’re happy to do it,” Ellie says.

“Okay,” I manage to say. “I will.”

I give Ellie a loose hug of gratitude and stand back, trembling.

I walk out of the office ahead of the rest and rummage in my purse for my cell phone. I cross the hall, walk into the shoebox-sized office I share with Catherine and dial my mother’s number.

“I made it through the proposal defense! I’m a doctoral candidate now,” I say when she answers.

“Oh, hon. I’m so proud of you. You know I don’t really know what that means, but I’m so proud of you all the same. I just wish Nana were here to see this,” she says.

“Me, too.”

And then she says, after a pause, “So does this mean you can start looking for jobs now?”

I stifle a sob. I’ve yet to find the courage to tell my family that I’m not sure I want a teaching job.

“Yes,” I say, finally. “It does. I can start looking for jobs.”

*****

September, 2009

“Oh, look. An opening at Arizona State. That’s a good school, isn’t it? An R-1?”

I click on the hyperlink that takes me to the job announcement and quickly scan the desired qualifications. I’ve been sitting in front of my laptop for hours, searching the job listings at *The Chronicle of Higher Education* web site.

“I’ve never been to Tempe. What’s it like?”

Max sits across the table from me, his laptop open, his fingers furiously typing emails. He gets more than a hundred emails a day, most of which have to be answered. Apart from being a full professor with a two-two teaching load, he is the director of a film festival and two study abroad programs, not to mention the associate director of a prestigious national award in broadcasting. This semester he has agreed to direct a television pilot and is working with a fellow professor to establish a low-residency Master of Fine Arts in screenwriting. He barely has time to breathe.

“You’re so good at finding procrastination strategies,” he says. “There’s a new one for every day of the week.”

"I'm not procrastinating! Looking for jobs is not procrastinating. Reading about *Jon & Kate Plus Eight*? That's procrastinating. Watching *Saturday Night Live* digital shorts? That's procrastinating. Searching for jobs? Not procrastinating."

"You're not gonna get a job unless you finish your dissertation. You can't forget that little detail."

I sigh. I haven't written anything new in six weeks, hard as I try. I am dried up. The words won't come, and the pressure is starting to become unbearable.

"And besides that, I thought you had decided not to look for jobs. When did you change your mind?"

"When I added up my debts and saw the total. I have to look for jobs. I'm tired of being broke."

"You'll never write your novel if you take a teaching job. You should enroll in an MFA writing program instead. Like Iowa."

"But I'm good at teaching," I say. "I like it. And I can't do more school now. No way."

Most days I like teaching. Not all days. Not the past few weeks. Not at all this semester, to be exact. But then, what I'm doing now doesn't really qualify as teaching. I'm organizing and facilitating the series of seminars that the undergraduates in our English education program are required to attend. They don't see me as one of their teachers. I'm an outlier.

"Well, I'm good at teaching high school. Teaching future teachers is something else altogether."

"I agree—you're good at teaching, no matter who you teach," Max says. "You know what you're doing, unlike me. But you're better at writing. Have many times have I heard you say—"

"I know, I know. I just wanna write fiction. Forget this academic bullshit."

"Remember what it's like to interact with people outside the academy? You know how happy it makes you. Remember how much you laughed in France?"

I look down at the light honey colored table. We are sitting downstairs, at the dining room table, working. Usually we work upstairs, in the office, but Tessa is with us this week. Tessa, my twelve-year-old dog who splits her time, like I do, between Max's apartment and Michael's house has arthritis in her hips and no longer climbs stairs without considerable help. We find it easier to work downstairs when she is here.

"Then what's the point of finishing this goddamn degree? What's the point of a Ph.D. if I'm not gonna teach? Why am I wasting my time?"

"It's not a waste of time. Just think…you never would've gotten to know Foucault without this program. *The History of Sexuality*, part one or part two." He smiles.

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Yes. It is. Lighten up, please. Smile?"

"I'm just trying to keep my options open."

I repeat Ellie's line as if it is my own.

"And one of those options is to write. You can do it. You have the talent."

Another talent I inherited from Nana. Not only was she a teacher but a writer. The column she wrote wasn't a big deal, but her name was in print, something I aspire to.

"But I need more than talent to make money writing books," I say. "You know that. You, of all people, know that. What are the chances of me writing a *New York Times* best seller? That's what you have to do to make money writing novels."

He doesn't reply. His book sold only a few hundred copies on Amazon. I continue to browse the *Chronicle* web site.

"Where is Utah State? Is that in Salt Lake?" I ask.

"You don't want to live in Utah. I don't want to live in Utah."

"But it's beautiful! Look! Snow-covered mountains."

Outside the door, a stray cat cries impatiently, painfully. It's a gray day, though the rain has finally tapered off. We've had seven days of straight rain. Lake Sydney is at full pool for the first time in eight years. Half of Atlanta is underwater. I keep expecting to see an ark appear.

"Want some chocolate?" Max asks.

"I'm not hungry."

"Snap out of it. Please?"

Tears fill my eyes as I push my chair back from the dining room table, walk toward the sofa and collapse onto the faux brown leather. I want to join the cat in chorus. She sounds as miserable as I feel.

"Tomorrow. I'll write tomorrow. I promise I will."

"I know you will, sweetie. I know you will," Max replies.

I lie on the sofa, crying soundlessly, as Max continues to type.

Tessa walks over, puts her chin on my chest. I look down at her and manage to smile. It's the only one of the day.

*****

October, 2009

The paper is a part of my dissertation proposal, an explanation of why I'm choosing not to use the traditional methods of qualitative research in favor of writing as a method, my only method of inquiry. The conference is small, but well-established in the field of curriculum theory.

My paper is one of three delivered in this breakout session. In addition to me, there is a young man, a doctoral student from Regina University, and an older man, a professor at the University of Dayton. The young man writes about poetry and book clubs and qualitative research. The older man presents the four paradigms of qualitative research, as he sees them.

I'm gravely afraid my paper won't be well received. My stomach flips, as I sit in the front row of chairs and wait for start time. My watch seems frozen.

I almost decided not to attend the conference, even after my paper was accepted for inclusion. The site of the conference is Dayton, Ohio—not the most exciting city—in October—not the best time to visit Ohio—and is attended mostly by graduate students—folks in the same position as me. Few big names with whom to network. But a presentation is a presentation, I finally decide, and I buy my airline ticket.

Now, even the new dress I bought for the occasion and my high heeled boots, which make me look tall, aren't enough to give me a shot of confidence. I slouch into my seat, willing myself to disappear, wishing for all the world that I was Samantha on *Bewitched*, able to wiggle my nose and be gone.

"I guess it's about time to get started," the older man, who takes the position of de facto moderator, says, looking in my general direction.

"Okay. Who's going to go first?" the Canadian scholar asks.

"Well, my presentation is sort of an overview of the field," the professor says. "I volunteer to go first."

The young man and I lock eyes.

"I'll go next," I say.

The room is filling up. There are more people here than at any other conference at which I've presented a paper, even though I have presented at bigger conferences, the most prestigious ones in the field of educational research, over the past several years. I sweat through the first paper, not able to listen to a word the man says. He has a Power Point presentation—photographs and timelines. That's all I remember.

Suddenly I feel Max, who is attending the conference with me, give my hand a gentle squeeze.

Then, I'm standing, on stage, facing the audience, paper in hand. I smile, look down at the pages of text. I'm standing beside a folding table, not behind a podium, and I reach out to grab the table's edge, in need of support. I teeter on my heels, and begin to read.

I am a hardscrabble girl. Appalachia infuses my bones. When I dream, accidents happen. When I love, people die. When I run, stories unfold, and then stories inside of stories fold back on themselves in myriad iterations. I can't stop the proliferation. Still hegemonic structures insist, producing me and my stories in predictable ways no matter

how hard I resist. I live with hair in my eyes. I do laundry on Sundays. I serve Moroccan spiced tea. Sometimes, however, I manage to subvert. Most times I just get by.

After reading the first couple of paragraphs, I begin to loosen up, people laugh at my jokes, I feel a swell of energy lifting me up. I read the paper like I've never read it before, like I've never heard it before, with confidence, knowing that it is a good paper no matter what kind of response it gets. When I read the last words, the crowd in the room applauds, not in the polite, because-it's-expected way, but out of excitement. I smile.

And now, almost a dozen conference attendees wait to talk with me about the paper, about my work. Two professors ask for copies; they want to share the paper with students. My head feels light on my body, weightless, wispy. I experience a sensation of floating. Is this the feeling people describe as euphoria? Could academics be interested in my work? I find it hard to believe, yet here stands a line of people, all with compliments and encouragement.

I'm not a rock star, but for a few precious minutes, I know what a rock star feels like. This is it. Total admiration.

Granted my "fans" wear clunky shoes and coke-bottle glasses. Their clothes are not fashionable but practical and mismatched. The smells of ink and spearmint gum fill the room. But for a few minutes, I'm the center of attention. Me. A timid girl from the South, making a name for herself. If only Nana were here to see me now.

"It was just mesmerizing. Transformational." The words of bearded professor spoken just a few moments ago echo in my head.

Max and I walk from the small conference room where I've delivered my paper down a long hallway to the larger auditorium, my feet still not touching the ground. I forget where we're headed.

"Time to meet your hero," Max says as he steers me in the door.

Three luminaries in the field of education and qualitative research—full professors with impeccable publication records—will engage in a discussion of the future, each answering the question, "What are you working on now?" One of them was a committee member for Ellie, my dissertation advisor. She instructed me to introduce myself to her.

We walk into the auditorium and find chairs. There aren't many left as the room fills quickly, and the three women at the front of the room are mobbed by graduate students; they're the real rock stars, of course. I sit down, arrange my briefcase, remove a spiral-bound book in which I can jot notes, take a long drink of water, a longer, very deep breath.

It was just mesmerizing. Transformational, I write in my notebook.

"Are you Kay?" a woman asks, as if I should know her. Then I remember we're wearing nametags. I look at hers and don't recognize the name.

"Yes." I hesitate. "Can I help you?"

There is a smile on her face.

"I'm Ginny Stansfield, the chair of the committee that decides on the outstanding graduate student paper award. I just wanted to let you know that I read your paper, and, well, it's lovely. Just lovely. I really enjoyed reading it."

I blush, unaccustomed to being sought out in a crowd.

"Cool," I say. "I'm glad you liked it. I wasn't sure what kind of audience it would find."

"Oh, this is an accepting audience," she smiles. "We have good taste, and we're not stodgy."

I laugh.

"You'll be hearing from me," she continues.

I hope so. First prize in the competition is publication in the online journal that is associated with the conference. Another publication would help my vitae.

"Great," I say. "I look forward to it."

"I'm gonna get back to my seat," she says. "Looks like they're about to get started. I just wanted to introduce myself, say hi."

"Well, hi. Nice to meet you." I pull my shoulder blades down and back, making myself look taller, feeling myself grow more confident by the minute.

I look at Max, who is beaming.

"How does it feel to be a star?" he asks.

"Give it a break," I reply. "I'm just Kay from Donalsville. Nothing more. Nothing special."

"Oh, but you are," he says. "When are you going to accept that? When are you going to realize you can do anything you want to?"

"Maybe I already do."

He likes it when I act cocky, though it doesn't happen very often.

The lecture starts, my pen poised to take notes.

"I could get used to this," I think to myself. "Wouldn't be hard at all."

*****

November, 2009

"So I sent out my job applications on Friday. Seven positions. And there might be more to come—schools don't stop posting announcements until the first of the year or so."

I'm sitting in Longhorn Steaks with Daddy, my sister, Terri, and brother-in-law, Lee. Mama is home watching Gracie, Terri's eight-week old daughter. It's pouring outside and Mama refused to let Terri take her out.

"That child will catch her death of cold! Y'all go eat, and I'll stay home. You can bring me something when you come back."

So the four of us have gone to Longhorn Steaks and are waiting for our food to arrive.

"I tried to personalize as many of my cover letters as I could," I say. "Like the one for Harrison Elder College. I told them you're an alum."

I smile at Daddy as he begins to laugh.

"That might not have been such a good idea," he says.

The laugh turns to a guffaw.

"I hope they don't look back at my transcripts. Let's see. Remedial English—C; Basic college math—C."

"Stop," I say.

Daddy completed two years at Harrison Elder before moving on to the university where I am a student.

"Do you really want a job there?" Terri asks. "I mean, there's not much to do in Harrison Elder."

Harrison Elder is a tiny private liberal arts school located in the mountains. It is totally isolated from just about everything.

"Sure there is. There's a country fair and a bluegrass festival and…" Lee stops. He has nothing else to add.

"It would be a teaching job. Not so much a research job. I'd be running a teacher ed program, similar to what I've been doing as a teaching assistant for the past four years. I don't know if I'd like that or not."

"Probably wouldn't have much of a chance to write," says my sister.

Terri is perhaps the only family member who knows not just my talent for writing but my passion.

"No, probably not. But some of the other jobs I applied for are research-one. Tennessee. Washington. Penn."

"Knoxville's not bad," Daddy says. "It's less than a three-hour drive from here."

He and Mama would like to see me close to home. The family is tight knit. There was a near mutiny when one cousin decided to move to Birmingham. More than a mutiny when it was discovered she was going there to live with her girlfriend.

"But could you even pretend to be a Tennessee fan?" Terri asks.

The server deposits our appetizer and salads, refills our glasses of sweet tea. We nibble as we continue to talk.

"No. I wouldn't even try. And I don't know if I could take all that noxious orange."

"You'd have to break out your clothes from the Piney Creek days."

"But Tennessee orange is different. Paler," I say. "Like the color of pee when you've haven't drunk enough water."

"We're eating!" Lee says. "Please!"

I reach for another fried shrimp, dip it in the spicy ranch sauce that is served along with them.

"So those R-1 jobs would give me more of a chance to write. But on the flip side, more pressure to conduct research," I explain.

"And you'd like that better?" Terri asks.

"Honestly? I don't know. I can't decide what I want to do."

I should tell them. I should say, "I just want to write novels. I think I can do it. I don't want a job." But of course I don't say any of that.

Our steaks arrive. The conversation stops as we dig in.

"Mmm. This is good. I haven't had a steak in so long," Daddy says.

Like many 62-year-old men, he's battling high cholesterol. Red meat has become a no-no. But tonight, Mama's not around to monitor.

The job conversation doesn't reignite after we finish eating. Instead we talk about other things—the baby's vaccinations, the prospects of the seventh-grade basketball team Lee is coaching, the spread of swine flu at the high school where Terri teaches biology and chemistry.

"I want to take Gracie up there to meet my friends, but there's no way I'm going with this swine flu."

"That's smart," I say. "You don't wanna take a chance like that."

We sit and look at each other, not sure what else to say. The silence lingers. Mama is not around to fill the gaps with meaningless chit-chat. The rest of us are quiet people, unable or unwilling to say what we think.

"Well, I guess I better get home to feed her. She'll be getting hungry," Terri says.

"We gotta wait for Mama's to-go order. Let me remind the waitress," I say.

Just then, the waitress walks over and deposits a Styrofoam container on the table.

"Here's your to-go order folks. Anyone interested in dessert?" she asks.

"I don't think so," Terri answers for all of us. "Just the check."

"I'll be right back with it."

The check arrives, and Daddy looks it over, checking closely to make sure we haven't been overcharged.

"Can you help me figure the tip?" Daddy asks. He is still a banker, though he's considering retirement.

I round up, tell him to leave fifteen dollars.

We stand, put on our rain jackets, move toward the door. Then we open our umbrellas into the torrent and head toward the car.

After the short drive back to Terri and Lee's house, Mama greets us at the door.

"Y'all get in here and get dried off. I don't want none of y'all getting a cold and passing it to the baby."

We all obey her orders, even Lee.

After removing my wet jacket and boots, I walk into Gracie's room, scoop her from her crib, hug her tight.

"Why can't life be this easy?" I think to myself. "Why do I have to grow up?"

*****

January, 2010

As often happens when I see a movie that profoundly affects me, *An Education* takes a while to settle into my bones. I see it one unseasonably warm night at the local art theater, with Max, and afterward, I'm not sure what I think, whether I like it or I don't. I'm immediately in love with the performances, especially Carey Mulligan's portrayal of Jenny, the main character. But can I tolerate the pat ending? The uneven pacing? The predictability?

But though I watched the film weeks ago now, I'm still thinking about it today. About Jenny and the dilemma she faces and how her predicament mirrors the one currently presenting itself in my own life. *An Education* lingers, because it poses the same question I'm currently asking myself—an education or a life?

Jenny is younger than I am, barely 17, studying for her A levels, hoping to matriculate at Oxford; I just turned 36, am finishing my dissertation and applying for faculty positions at more than a dozen universities. She lives in suburban London in the 1960s; I live in a small town in Georgia in the 2010s. The contexts are certainly different. But each of us faces a decision that feels hugely important, a decision that will determine the next phases of our lives. That decision: continued participation in formal education or an embrace of life as the only sort of education we need? Oxford or Paris? A university town or Cannes? Hard work or love? Why so many binaries? Why can't Jenny choose both? Or all? Why can't I?

Like any dilemma, Jenny's is not as simple as it looks. David, her cosmopolitan elder and suitor, is not what he seems to be; in the end, he can't offer Jenny the worldly

education she so desperately falls in love with. He lives in a realm of fine art and gourmet food and easy booze and excitement at every turn. He introduces Jenny to people unlike any she's ever known and to a cosmopolitan world overflowing with unimaginable sensual delights. But David also lives in a world of exploitation and fear-mongering. He makes money though being a "different kind of clever;' he's a scam artist and worse, renting flats to West Indians in order to drive down property values in some of London's most posh neighborhoods.

Against the dolce vita that David presents Jenny—Paris in the spring, dinner in fancy restaurants, entertainment in jazz clubs—is the potential of another life, one of formal education, of academia. For Jenny is brilliant, destined to be someone; she will certainly attend Oxford if she remains in school and passes her exams. She sees education as a way out of the stifling community in which she's grown up. This escape is what she's always imagined for herself, telling her friends that once she gets to Oxford she will wear black and read whichever novels she wants.

But then Jenny meets David and the world opens up, a Technicolor dreamscape in front of her eyes. Oxford is no longer an escape but more of the same tedium—school—she already knows. For a young woman of Jenny's station and time, a formal education leads to only two places—a job as a teacher or one in the civil service. David offers her a world outside of the academy, outside of boredom and hard work, and such a world entices her to the point of delirium. Jenny becomes drunk on fashion and travel and danger and refinement. Wearing black and reading books suddenly pales in comparison to wearing gold and making love.

Is Max my David, I wonder? Am I under the same sway as Jenny, blinded by the beautiful waters of the Mediterranean, by the opportunity to drink champagne with Sean Connery and shake hands with Johnny Depp, by the prospects of meeting a literary agent on Park Avenue and an editor at Random House? Is the world that he offers too good to be true? Can I release myself into it enough to believe it's real? Can I break with my family's teaching tradition? And if so, how will I tell them? Will the sweet light abandon me when I least expect it, as it did Jenny? Leave me without a profession? Without any options? Penniless on the Champs-Élysées?

In the end, Jenny chooses to take her exams and go to Oxford, in part because she learns that David's world, while brilliant, is messy, deceitful, not at all what it appears to be. She decides to study, risking continued boredom, and pursue formal education instead of allowing herself to be educated by life, to be seduced by the romantic pulse of the cosmopolitan. The final scene of the movie takes place in Oxford, among tree-lined streets, with students on bicycles. Somehow it now feels romantic, more so than the life of danger, of adventure and beauty, that Jenny shared with the mendacious David.

How many budding artists, writers like Jenny, destined for great things, choose formal education, choose teaching because they have no other option? Because it is available, safe? Because it will lead to opportunities, that, while they may not be dashing, at least pay the bills and offer a certain comfort, a certain anonymity, a surety of foot? Because it beats the alternative of suburban housewife/mother to which Jenny seems destined without an education?

At the end of the film, Jenny's voice tells us that she meets a boy in Oxford, that she discovers love, but we don't see her ten years on, teaching in a school for girls. Will

she look like Miss Stubbs, the spinster English teacher? Will she be a housewife? Will she tire of her husband? Or will she somehow beat the odds, follow her dreams, become an artist and reenter the exotic world she glimpsed at David's side? We don't see, don't know, can't guess. Does she make the right decision? I wish I knew. I wish I could learn what happens to her, so I'd have some idea of what might happen to me, what I should do now.

For me graduation doesn't just beckon; it looms. With no academic job prospects on the horizon, perhaps my decision is easier. Or maybe I should continue to look for positions in the academy, continue to define myself as teacher? Since when did teacher become a bad choice? Maybe I can find a university job and coax myself into believing that I can continue to write fiction while teaching. Maybe I can have it all—Adrienne Rich did. Or maybe I can be brave for once, fly without a safety net. Can I make my livelihood outside the world of academia, relying on the art of my writing rather than the craft of my teaching? Do I want to? What would my family say? What would Nana say?

The questions wear me out. Can I stop asking them for even one second?

*****

February, 2010

"Hey, girl," Amanda answers her phone after only one ring, eager to talk to me.

"What up?" I ask.

"Not much, just transcribing like a monkey in heat. These headphones have become a permanent part of my anatomy."

Amanda is in Minnesota, collecting data for her dissertation on family history genealogists, or something like that. The winter has been brutal. She's been snowed under for most of three months.

"You should take a break. You can't work all the time," I say.

"You're right. I need to take more breaks. So… have you heard yet? I told Dimitri to be nice to you."

"No, not yet. Still waiting."

I have just been on an interview and campus visit to a research one university, my first "big" interview. By this point I've done several phone interviews and two visits to smaller campuses in Georgia, but this interview is of a different caliber.

Dimitri is a former doctoral student in our department who is on the faculty at the university where I interviewed. And not just the faculty; he is also on the search committee for the job I've applied for.

"Well, how'd it go? What do you think?" Amanda asks.

"I think it went really, really well. I mean, not many people came to my job talk or to the class they had me teach, but Sharon said that was typical for all the candidates."

"Who's Sharon?"

"Head of the search committee. Really, really cool. I liked her a lot. Could totally see myself working with her. Sounds like they have a pretty cool program."

I like several things about the position. First, I wouldn't be responsible for supervising student teachers, which depresses the hell out of me at the moment. I'd actually get to teach instead. Second, a two-two teaching load. Doesn't seem too burdensome. Third, the students are all pursing a Masters of Education, so they already

have a bachelor's degree and are older than the students I've been teaching, and therefore, I assume, more eager to learn. And lastly, they would want me to continue my research into teacher subjectivity, to continue to practice writing fiction as my methodology. Or at least that is what I thought I heard them saying.

"Awesome news," Amanda says. "I'm sure you rocked it out, chickadee."

"Well, we'll wait and see. If I've learned one thing so far, it's that you can never tell."

I've gotten only one job offer so far, at Harrison Elder, the tiny liberal arts college Daddy attended. It's not an offer in which I'm interested. I'd be designing the secondary teacher education program from the ground up. And teaching a four-four schedule. Clearly, I'd have no time to write if I took that job.

Amanda doesn't reply. A moment of awkward silence drifts across the connection. Minnesota to Georgia. Quite a far distance.

"What I mean is…," I say. "It *always* seems to go well but that doesn't mean you're gonna get the job. You know what I mean?"

"I hear ya."

"It's about fit. Nothing to do with how good you are."

At least that's what everyone says.

I turn on the faucet in the tub to fill the reservoir on the humidifier. I always have to be doing something while I talk on the phone. Can't just sit still.

"I mean, Dimitri said as much when he was driving me to the airport," I continue. "You did well, but…"

"Oh, something will work out. I got no doubt about it. You're an awesome writer. An awesome researcher."

Amanda's spoken vocabulary revolves around the words awesome, rad, dude, girl, and way, as in way-good, or way-bad. She also likes rock star.

"You know, I really don't consider myself a researcher," I say. "Every time someone asks about my dissertation, I start out by apologizing. It's not traditional qualitative research…"

"Don't be silly. You're a rock star!"

The reservoir filled, I turn off the tap, walk toward the machine, adjust the dial.

"I'm not being silly. I mean I get the writing part. I get the teaching part. But research? What I do is write. What I want to do is write fiction. I can't pretend to be interested in education anymore. I'm just over it. It's too fucking depressing."

"Maybe you should look for a job in qual instead of English ed."

Amanda can't think outside academia. For her, there is no other world, no other measure, no other ethical profession.

"Maybe. Or maybe composition or English," I reply.

"Or maybe not at all," I say to myself but not out loud.

I imagine Amanda all bundled up, sitting on her parents' couch, drinking a glass of red wine. Her black cat Amelia curled tightly in the armchair.

"Whatever you decide, you'll be rad," Amanda says.

"Thanks, dude," I say, wondering why I always mimic whomever it is I'm talking to.

"Hey, listen," I continue. "I better get going. We'll talk again soon. I'll let you know if I hear anything."

"Cool. Have a good evening."

"You too."

Three days later I get two pieces of mail. One is a Hallmark card from Amanda. Written inside: *You go, girl! You finish that dissertation! Rock it out!* The other is a letter from Sharon at the university. *We really enjoyed meeting you and wish you the best of luck in your future academic endeavors, but we've offered the job to someone else. It just wasn't the right fit. Good-bye.*

*****

March, 2010

I write this fast, in one sitting, the words pouring out in a massive vent. What triggers it? I don't know. I was surfing and ran across Roger Ebert's blog entry about two movies he saw at the Sundance Film Festival. I read the entry and all the reader comments. My ire piqued, I write without thinking, without pausing, like the ten minute writing exercise I used to have my students do:

Dear Roger,

Your recent blog entry, "A Superwoman for Kenya but America is still waiting for Superman," comparing two Sundance documentaries—Waiting for Superman *and* A Small Act*—has me riled. Both sound like interesting films that raise important questions about my professional field—education. My anger stems from the apparent central argument of* Waiting for Superman*, as you present it in your review. The idea that so-called "bad" teachers, and the teacher unions that protect them, are somehow*

responsible for the "failure" of the American public education system is simplistic, at best, and, dangerous at worst, and, frankly, just plain wrong.

Teachers are an easy group to blame. In a profession that has been feminized for more than a century, teachers have very little political or economic power and have historically had a difficult time standing up for themselves against the stronger lobbies of the textbook and standardized testing industries, Congress, and the school board, just to name a few centers of power.

But the level of teacher bashing I have observed in the popular media over the last few months, as exemplified by Waiting for Superman*, has risen to new levels of extremism. Not only have I read your blog entry and every one of the 300+ responses it provoked, most of which agree with your blaming teachers for the woes of the U.S. public education system, I've read articles in* The New Yorker *(August 31, 2009),* LA Weekly *(February 12, 2010), and* Newsweek *(March 15, 2010), all of which blame the failures of U.S. education squarely on teachers—"bad" teachers. As if that is some clear-cut category. As if the U.S. educational institution would magically be fixed if only we could fire all those "bad" teachers.*

In few, if any of these debates, are practicing teachers consulted or interviewed. For you see, everyone knows how to teach better than an actual teacher. It looks easy from the outside. Even a dummy could do it. Or so the story goes.

And this "blame the teachers" discourse is not limited to media publications; Arne Duncan, President Obama's Secretary of Education, subscribes to a similar mindset. President Obama's "Race to the Top" program requires that the states that receive these extra federal funds implement programs that define "good" teachers as

those whose students perform well on standardized tests, a metric that has been called into question time and again by educational researchers. The first two states to earn the funds—Tennessee and Delaware—included merit-based pay for teachers as a central component of their winning proposals.

As teachers face the prospect of merit-based pay, a system in which they are not rewarded for years of experience in the classroom or for obtaining advanced degrees and additional professional training, but instead based upon the standardized test scores of the students in their charge, the "teach to the test" mentality becomes harder and harder to fight. I witnessed the change in my own school, my own classroom. This obsessive focus on test scores is hard to resist because the alternative, poor test scores, means loss of federal funds, school reorganization, or worse, losing your job.

Most serious educators know that standardized tests are largely biased toward white and upper-middle class students and that they measure recall as opposed to critical thinking skills, the skills that are so highly prized by employers and post-secondary options. We know that students who have historically been disenfranchised in public schooling—poor children of all races, black and Latino children, the children of immigrants—continue to lag behind their wealthier counterparts on most standardized measures.

So what's the big deal, you might ask? Why are teachers so scared of being measured by the test scores of their students? What do "good" teachers have to fear? If a teacher teaches properly, her students will score well on tests, right? Well, in a utopian world, yes. But in the world in which I taught, where my students frequently came to me grade levels behind in reading comprehension, without eating breakfast, working late

hours at minimum wage jobs to help support their families, providing child care for younger siblings while parents work, shuttling between foster homes or the homes of friends and relatives, etc., etc., etc. the idea that my effectiveness as a teacher can be described by how well my students do on tests designed by Educational Testing Systems, whose very objective is to make some students winners and others losers in the educational game, is scary. Because no matter how well I teach, my students will never score high enough on those tests. It may be sad, but it's true. So that means I'm a "bad" teacher. I don't believe in my students' ability to learn, and I'm unable to teach them. If only I could be fired, everything would be right in the world of education. Pardon the sarcasm, but I'm pissed!

You see, I do believe my students can learn. Every single one of them. But each of them has to make the choice to do so. And I simply can't motivate all of them to make that choice. Other factors, like those listed above, over which I have no control, work against me. This is reality.

And school administrators can *release ineffective teachers, contrary to the argument made by* Waiting for Superman*. It may be true that not many teachers are fired each year, especially in big cities, but I've seen ineffective colleagues in schools where I worked asked to resign by administrators as recently as two weeks ago. Teachers have no union protections in the state where I teach. This means that we are forced to forfeit our planning periods to cover for teachers who are absent and without a substitute. It means that we can be asked and expected to take on extra responsibilities like coaching, sponsoring clubs, mentoring student teachers, all of which add hours to a work week that often stretches to 60 hours with no extra compensation. The big, bad teachers' unions*

and the much-criticized tenure for K-12 teachers do not guarantee a job for life. Tenure simply means that teachers are entitled to due process so that we cannot be fired at the whim of an administrator who disagrees with our politics. We can't be fired for teaching evolutionary science in the middle of the Bible belt.

If we fire "bad teachers," the supposed silver-bullet remedy to all the ills of public education, who, exactly, will step in to take the places of these teachers who have been let go? I don't see professionals who receive higher pay and more respect in the private sector lining up to become public school teachers. Who will take the vacant teaching positions once all the "bad" teachers are eliminated? Will class sizes go from 35 to 55 to absorb this loss of teachers? Will schools consolidate?

Well, the argument goes, professionals from other fields will step in; we just have to provide an easier path into the profession (dodging those good-for-nothing colleges of education) and better compensation. Don't make me laugh. First off, if better compensation were a possibility, why not offer that to current teachers? And secondly, with the state budget crises we are currently facing, teachers are simply not going to be better compensated, at least not in the near future. In fact, the opposite is happening. During my five years in the classroom, yearly raises barely covered increases in cost of living. In my state, teachers have been forced to take more than six unpaid furlough days this year because of the state's budget shortfall. God forbid we raise taxes so that teachers can be paid a living wage. After all, they're the problem!

The idea that public education in the U.S. is failing is a popular refrain, and we're often compared to countries where students score higher on standardized tests. But what the public rarely recognizes is that the U.S. is the only country where every student

is educated and tested as if s/he is going to attend college. No other country attempts to do what U.S. teachers and school systems do—universal, mandatory, equitable education for all, no matter what their situation, ambition or level of poverty.

I challenge any policy maker, pundit, journalist, or movie reviewer to enter the high school English classroom where I taught and teach for a year. Then you tell me whether you're a "bad" teacher or a "good" teacher. Look at the scores of your students (if you want to know) to tell you. Perhaps you might just get an inkling of how complicated teaching is, how difficult, how time-consuming, how overwhelming, how underappreciated. Take my challenge, and I guarantee you will change your tune about the solution to the current education "crisis." Go ahead. I dare you.

I press "send," without reading what I've written. A reckless act. I feel somehow liberated. The joy of writing, writing as release, as catharsis. I wipe the sweat from my forehead.

Then I wonder: Will Roger, or anyone, read my words? Will they make the slightest difference? Will Ellie stumble across them, by chance, while surfing?

*****

April, 2010

"Okay! Let's go ahead and lie down on our mats. Time to work our backs," Lisa, who is one of the group fitness instructors at the local fitness club where I am a member, says.

"Don't forget the balance track." I remind her. I know this routine, a fusion of yoga and Pilates, as well as the instructors do. I'm here three or four times a week. Helps with the stress.

"That's right. You're right. It's not time for the back track yet. We have to do the balance track," Lisa says to the class. "Stand back up."

"You know you could teach this class," she says. To me.

Lately I've been thinking the same thing. A little supplemental income that also keeps me in shape. Not a bad idea. A chance to teach something I enjoy to people who are motivated to learn. Teaching doesn't have to happen in a classroom.

We continue with the balance track, the back track, the abs track, the folds track. I move with the music, instinctively and with muscle memory, gliding from pose to pose, forgetting that Lisa is in front of the group, giving us instructions on how to move, which asanas to take. By the end of the hour-long class, I'm sweating, rivulets of perspiration running down my neck, between my breasts, behind my knees.

I carefully roll my mat, trying to maintain the mindfulness of the practice, moving slowly, with purpose, savoring my sanctuary. Like in the shower, nothing can go wrong in the yoga studio. I'm free of the strictures that keep me tightly bound. I feel the same release, the same rush of endorphins when I'm writing.

"Thanks, Lisa," I say, as I walk toward the door of the studio. "That was a great class."

"I'm not kidding, you know. Just let me know when you're ready to talk about teaching this class. You can so do it." She is the director of fitness for the club. If I want to teach here, Lisa is the person to talk to.

"Are you serious?" I ask, hardly believing that she can be.

"Dead serious. I'm ready for that talk whenever you are. Just let me know."

Lisa rolls her own mat, collects her iPod and jacket, places them in her black gym bag. I remain rooted to the spot, watching her, working up my nerve.

"How about now?" I ask, smiling, suddenly ready to move again.

*****

Max and I are sitting at the bar of the Peacock Hotel, drinking champagne. We are at the opening night reception for the film festival he founded six years ago and are dressed appropriately—he in gold tie and black evening jacket, I in leopard-print dress and heels. Though I usually wind up enjoying myself at these functions, I'm always hesitant to go. "I feel so out of place, so inferior," I said to him as we got in the car to drive over.

"Don't be ridiculous," he replied. "You're not inferior to anyone there. Just more beautiful."

I don't believe him, but I go anyway, understanding that he needs me to be there, that he dreads it as much as I do.

After getting our name tags and saying hello to a few acquaintances, I make a beeline for the bar, dragging him along with me. The only way I can get through these events is with a steady supply of alcohol. We sit in yellow chairs and ask for champagne. I recognize one of the bartenders but can't place her face.

"I think that's one of my former students," I finally say to Max. "But I can't remember her name."

She's definitely the right age to be one of my former high school students. Twenty-two or -three. Pretty. Blond hair pulled back in glossy ponytail, showing off the delicate pale skin of her neck and a pair of giant cubic zirconia in her ear lobes.

"She's wearing a name tag but I can't read it. I really need to get new glasses," Max replies.

Finally the name pops into my head—Ashley Henry. With her name comes the rest of the information I've been searching my brain for. She was in my senior literature class. My last semester of teaching. Five years ago. During the trial. She's busy. Not only is the festival reception here, but hotel patrons are ordering drinks and snacks.

"I'm going to the men's room. I'll be back," Max says touching my elbow. "Will you be okay?"

I nod as he leaves, sit alone; no one comes over to say hello, and I don't make any effort to reach out. Instead, I try to make eye contact with Ashley, get her attention. Finally I do.

"Excuse me," I say. "You look so familiar. Did you go to Piney Creek, by chance?"

"Ms. A.! I thought that was you," she answers.

"It's good to see you, Ashley. How are you?"

She holds a bar cloth in her hand. Orders have slowed down for a moment, and she's wiping down the bar.

"I'm doing great, Ms. A. How about you? Are you still at Piney Creek?"

"No. I left in 2005. Same year you did. I've been working on my doctorate, and I'm almost through. I hope to graduate this summer."

"That's awesome."

A man sits down beside me, asks Ashley for one Dewar's and one Jack Daniels on the rocks. As she fills the drinks, I continue to talk. Maybe it's because I'm drinking

my third glass of champagne. Sometimes I drink too much. Sometimes my mouth won't stop talking.

"I'm kinda at that point right now where I have to decide do I want to do this, teach, teach future teachers, or do I want to write. 'Cause that's what I really wanna do, for real. I wanna write novels."

Why am I saying this to Ashley Henry whom I hardly know?

"You should write Ms. A. I would read anything you wrote."

"You would?"

"Absolutely. Remember your poems you used to read us in class? They were so sweet." She hands the two drinks to the impatient man next to me. "That'll be nine-fifty."

I sit in stunned silence. Why would she say that? Does she really remember my poetry? How smart is she anyway? What does she know about poetry? If she knows so much, why is she working in a bar? How can she be so casual about it, about my life? Is she real or just my simulacrum talking back to me, saying what I need to hear? I am about to ask her, to probe her bone fides, but suddenly she's gone, off to take someone else's order.

Max returns from the restroom and stands behind me.

"You've got to come over and meet my friend Elizabeth," he says.

"Who's Elizabeth? Is she a guest at the festival?"

"No, she's not connected to the festival at all. She just happens to be staying here this weekend. Her nephew is getting married."

I simper for a moment: "Do I have to? I hate meeting new people."

"You'll like her. I promise. She's from Little Rock, is now some kind of lobbyist in DC. Used to work for the Clintons. I just bumped into her. We've been talking for ten minutes."

"What did you talk about?" I ask.

"You."

Knowing that I have no other choice, I stand, locking eyes with Ashley one last time.

"Nice to see you, Ashley. Take care."

"You too, Ms. A. You should write. I'm serious." She smiles, brimming with confidence, with ease, as I step away from the bar. I wish I were her.

"What did I miss?" Max asks as we walk toward the other side of the lobby, where an elegantly dressed redhead stands waving. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost," I say. "Just a vision of me."

Max doesn't pursue this. He'll ask for an explanation later. Instead he says, "Kay, meet Elizabeth. Elizabeth, Kay."

Elizabeth hugs me tightly, draws me immediately into her warmth, her excess.

"It's so nice to meet you, Kay. I was just telling Max that the two of you should visit me at my villa in Tuscany in June. It would be such a beautiful place to write."

I smile, remind myself to breathe.

Her hand lightly touches my arm, and she looks straight into my eyes.

"Scots-Irish," she says. "Max is a lucky man."

How does she know?

I'm not sure what to say. She is older. There is an aura of life lived full about her, a generosity, a kindness, a compelling curiosity. One more temptation from Max's world. I blush.

"Max says you're a writer. Tuscany is magical for writers. We'll have a butler, a cook, a masseuse who also teaches yoga. Come write among us in June."

"That would be lovely," I hear myself say. "I can't imagine anything lovelier than that."

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