

Boing! Power Lines and Structured Chaos

2005 Summer Institute
Fellows

Connecticut Writing Project
Storrs, CT

This publication was produced by the
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"Oh, You're Just a Teacher"

Kelly Andrews-Babcock

Yes, I'm just a teacher – I'm only responsible for shaping the minds of young children for our future. Yes, I'm just a teacher – I only need to teach children to read, write, add, subtract, multiply, and divide; and let's not forget all that they need to know about history, communities, and AIDS, never mind about the earth, stars, planets, and the weather just to name a few. In the small amount of time left, I need to teach young children how to get along with each other, how to be kind and patient, how to take turns, behave in social settings, work as a team, and—let's not forget—how to say please and thank you.

Some children need to be taught that it's not OK to throw furniture at others when they're angry or to have a tantrum when they don't get their way. They need to be taught the various ways to express anger that are socially acceptable. Other children need to be taught that it's OK to love others. They come from places that are without love. They learn to accept love and give love. Imagine . . . just a teacher taught them this. Others need to be taught trust and confidence. They need to know that there are adults who can help them.

Some children need to be taught values, something once taught at home. They need to learn it's not OK to steal from your teacher or classmates, that being a bully and harassing someone is not acceptable. Tolerance is another thing I need to fit in as well. Not just tolerance of another annoying child, but of academic differences, physical handicaps, cultures, religions, and ethnic backgrounds. They need to know persistence, best work, taking responsibility for your actions, becoming an active participant in learning, and meeting high expectations will insure success.

I give hugs to a mother going in for chemotherapy treatments for the third time as her depressed child quietly cries. I am next explaining to Jose that his father won't be home for an unknown time because he's been taken to jail on drug charges. And Maria's crying because she doesn't know if there will be anybody home to feed her dinner tonight – her mom works the streets. But I'm just a teacher. I call Miquels's house again today to see if mom can look at the notices in his backpack so that she can know my concerns about his performance. No answer.

And then . . . there's the task of teaching a child how to read and write. That may mean teaching an 8 year-old his alphabet sounds and, at the same time, finding a reading book for the same aged child at a 5th grade level. I'm next forced to make a DCF referral because I discovered a burn mark on my non-verbal autistic student. In the meantime, an SED student with OCD, ODD, and ADHD is making animal noises and screaming in Spanish with his eyes rolled back in his beautiful face. But me . . . I'm just a teacher.

Well, all this time and I haven't mentioned the CMT, have I? That's our state's mandatory standardized test: the test that measures student's ability to comprehend reading, writing, revising and editing as well as 25 strands of math objectives. These scores now reflect whether or not your school's performance is acceptable or not, as well as your own. I'd better hurry and get the new student who just moved back from Puerto Rico and missed three months of school caught up. She needs to begin speaking English again. She'll be tested in English.

Just a few more things before I head out to the PTO meeting (I'm a Co-President); Samuel is upset because he couldn't attend his sister's Confirmation because he and his twin brother didn't have anything to wear; he needs some comforting. And Pat has made it for two weeks now without running away! A quick phone call to assure Cynthia's mother that I will assign her an at-home project so that she will be challenged enough.

Being just a teacher can be a bit stressful at times, and I often have to ask my colleagues for help – of course they are just teachers, too . . . but together we can bring all children from where their learning capabilities are to as far as we can take them.

I'm just a teacher, but my role goes further: mother, father, trusted stable adult, social worker, hug-giver, the person who sets high standards and expectations and is consistent with praise and consequences. So, in my days of showing my beautiful children how to think like a scientist, to have social awareness like a politician, and to acquire the interpersonal skills that they will need to cope in today's society, I also need to be sure they can not only read, but also understand what they read, that they are life-long writers and that their mathematical skills are going to help them to function in the real world.

I'm just a teacher, but I might be the one who could help to break the cycle of poverty this child has been born into. I might just be Juan's best hope. I might be the only stable person in Ariana's life. I might be the only one to show Silvio his strengths. I might be the only one to show Amarylly the road to the future. I might be the only one Carlos can hug. I might be the only one who really understands why Anna behaves the way she does. I might be the mediator between Jose and mom to help her to understand how better to help him. I might be the one to show Victor that his feelings can be expressed through writing rather than his fist. I might be the one who introduces Valerie to a book that changes her life. I might be the one to teach a child who may become a doctor, lawyer, accountant, engineer, or . . . just a teacher.

I'm Sorry Sylvia Plath

Diane Ayer

Metaphor

I am a riddle in ten syllables,

A mad scientist, extracting symbols,

Mining for the meaningful metaphor.

Pinning each down for examination.

Chalk-dust fingers command glaze-eyed zombies!

For this they roll and writhe in their cold graves

Awaiting the summons to analyze,

Critique, substantiate, suck the piece dry.

Poignant Plath cannot escape dissection –

Boarded the bus there is no getting off.

Being a Child at Heart

Patty Cassella

I know there are some nightmares in some closets.
I know about ice cream and crumbling cookies into it and stir, stir, stir.
I know climbing to the top of the slide and flying down.
I know laughing.

Remember yourself when
That slide looked as tall as a building?
Remember that nightmare of being lost?

Now and then
Knock on the door of your heart.
Call to the child.
Roll down a hill,
Cheer loudly,
Wiggle and get dizzy.
Let your child take you to the back of the room and stand you there,
When staying seated for another moment is too much to ask,
And yet polite grown-ups are still asking.

Follow your dog around and talk to him.
Pretend you and he are partners on a bold adventure.
Hug him often and whisper to him that he is a MIGHTY dog.
Let him pull you down the street and laugh that you are flying
In the wind.
Listen to his eyes tell you that YOU are MIGHTY too
And on a bold adventure.

Have heroes,
And applaud your heroes with gusto.
Pretend you are them.
When the waitress puts crayons on the table, draw.
When the music plays, dance.
Dance often whether someone asks you to or not.
Smile at the possibilities.
Say "yes" whenever you dare.
Remember as a tall grown-up,
The little child.
The little child that loaned you this body.
"There, now, you take care of it!"

Buy that child a balloon now and then,
And fresh flowers.

Treat that child to ninety-nine cent bubbles that float through
The air to be popped and chased.

Hand that child some candy,
A kind that "melts in your mouth, and in your hand."
And some that are round sour lemons, coated with sugar.
For the little child inside you,
Have chocolate in the freezer.
Toast marshmallows.
Journey through amazing books.
Linger inside the pictures.
Laugh out loud and say your prayers
Before you go to sleep.
Hop like a bunny, spin like a tornado,
Wish upon a star wherever you are
And hold hands with the child inside you.

And all the grown-ups that surround you
And all the children
Will know that you have a special
Joy,
A joy life can't seem to remove.
They will know it from your heart,
And your laughter and your voice.
They will know it because the child
Within you will whisper,
"It's okay. I'm still alive."
And all of them will throw back
Their heads in glee,
Laugh out loud in quick surprise
And boast and make a toast
That they
Remember, too,
The child within . . . them.

Successes and Failures

Sara deBeer

Part I: The Country School

Student

I begged my mother until Father said, "Oh, all right,
You might as well let her go with the others.
She's too little to be much help around the farm."
And I was proud to carry my book
Just like my sisters
And we all had boots, too,
Not like those boys who come to school with dirty feet.

My sisters had said, "You'll just have to wait on the babies' bench
Until the teacher has time to show you your letters."
I thought they were just telling stories
To keep their school to themselves.
But I showed them. Father said I could go, too.
We went into the building where they had all learned to read.
Now it was my turn.

But all I've learned is how to sit, hands folded,
Primer on my lap,
As I try to ignore the sobbing boy beside me.
Our teacher is so good at pretending he isn't there.
So are my sisters, and the older girls, too.
This is my lesson, day after day,
Muscles weary from the hard wooden bench,
Ears ringing from the chanting voices of boys reciting lessons,
Exhausted from pretending that I never want to cry,
Never wish to throw down this book,
And run home to the home I was so anxious to leave.

Teacher

They send their youngest ones to me and my job is to train them.
Once, I might have yielded to the imploring eyes, the muffled sobs,
But in this room of mine, I must be strong
Or I will break into too many pieces
To do the job I was hired to do.

Before I journeyed to this place their parents call a town,
I thought I'd spend my life in box seats, listening to the soaring orchestra
Stir the air, and there, baton in hand,
All eyes his to command, stood the conductor, tall and regal.

Like him, I turn to one section, then another.
Each waits for my signal to begin.

Part II: "Piano Lesson"

Student

She sits so far from me she could be part of the furniture
But she leaves that tapping metronome on the piano.
I don't know if her statue of a nude woman is placed so close
To distract me or to remind me of how she used to sit beside me on the bench,
Smiling and nodding, placing my fingers where they belonged.
The music was easy, then, and I could tell she was pleased with each note I played.
I played to give her pleasure.

These days she blends in with the wallpaper.
The notes I play might reach her
But I cannot tell. I have only the metronome's heartless beats
To guide me through etudes that are harder and harder to play.

Teacher

I can only teach the young,
The ones who gaze up trustingly,
Whose pudgy fingers do not tremble at my touch.
I cannot teach them when they grow
So tall, so bold, so self-assured.
They start to play the notes as if they wrote them.
I move my chair farther and farther from them.
They play the pieces the same way whether I am in the room with them
Or in the next
Or halfway down the stair to greet a round cheeked child
Slipping her hand into mine,
Trusting me more than the cold banister
To guide her up the stairs
To our time together.

Part III: "Blackboard Lesson"

Student

It wasn't half as scary
To walk, desks on either side,
All the way to the vast expectant blackboard--
Why did she call it a blackboard when it was ashy gray?
Why did those twisted chalk-white faces shout at me
When I was wearing my red pleated dress that my mother had pressed last night?
It wasn't half as scary
To pick up the white chalk--

Careful, careful, it breaks if I press too hard-

It wasn't half as scary to turn my back on all those staring eyes,
To reach up with the chalk,
Knowing my dress was too short
And I had to be sure not to reach too high
But no one could see if I wrote too low--

It wasn't half as scary to try for the answer
When all three of us faced that board together.

If at least one of us wrote the right answer,
We could turn and face down the smirks on those sure faces,
Impatient hands waving wildly, eager to erase our answers,
Prove our errors, demonstrate how far we were from knowledge.

Back at my desk,
It was twice as hard to keep from crying
Over my too short dress, my too hungry mind,
My failure to live up—come up—stand up on my own.

Teacher

How could I fail, every day, to find the courage
Equal to theirs? The rich warm darkness of their outstretched arms
Showing how chalky and dusty this board we call black really is.
They could be my teachers but I am slow and scared
Of the sea of cruel young faces echoing their parents' lessons.
I keep my wishes to myself.

I wish I could buy them brand new dresses.

I wish I could buy them new houses in a new world

Where those boldly colored too-short dresses,

Red, yellow, blue,

Might answer any questions about differences.

Part IV: "Invitation to Learning"

Teacher/Student

Look around and see

The feast we've spread for each other
To discover.

I'm trying to hold back.

So quick, begin,

Before the amazing swirl of worlds

Launches me into more explanations

Than you need. All you need

Is to begin, and whirl around--

So many finds are waiting to be found

By you, and when you each are through,
We'll dance and sing
Our celebration of each newly discovered thing.

NOTE: "Successes and Failures" was inspired by four works of art

Part I: "The Country School" by Winslow Homer

Part II: "Piano Lesson" by Henri Matisse

Part III: "The Migration of the Negro, Panel 58" by Jacob Lawrence

Part IV: "Picture Album" by Paul Klee

Early Lessons

Eileen M. Dolan

On the Long Island of my childhood,
kitchen cabinets hung with
neatly pressed plaid school jumpers
and clean cotton blouses.
The Beatles sang from
a brown box radio above the stove
where my mother boiled glass baby bottles
till they were squeaky clean.

Sunday lunch was hard rolls
with ham and potato salad,
hot soup and fish cakes
on the side.

Nine of us heaped our plates
and planned the day:

"How about watching
the boats in Bay Shore?"

"Or, let's go for a swim
at Fire Island!"

My father's work shoes smelled
Of oil and metal shavings.
He would put up his feet till dinner,
then shuffle in to lead us
in grace.

Later, he raced us
to the basement place
where he taught us to
dip paper in pans of fluid and
watch our images appear.

On Long Island,
Italian and Irish
and Polish and German kids
spent long summer days at our house.
We made costumes
from old sheets and
painted props in the garage,
and neighborhood mothers paid a nickel
to sit in the driveway and see
The Greatest Show on Earth.

We wanted Darlene to come, too,
but her parents taught her
names like

Lace Curtain Irish

and Shanty Irish.

My mother told us,

"She thinks we're poor."

True Romance

Mindi Englart

I've always been a reader. I believe my mom taught me to walk by the time I was one, toilet trained me at one and a half, and taught me to read when I was three, just as my sister was born. That way I could go get myself a book and entertain myself while she slept. She wasn't much of a caretaker. Luckily my father was extremely energetic. When he wasn't at work seven days a week, he went food shopping, did laundry, and occasionally found time to take us to Great Adventure or a movie, at which he promptly fell asleep, snoring loudly.

However, because of my parents' split schedule, certain "normal" things of a child's life fell unnoticed, through the cracks.

My mom grew up at a bad time. Not as bad a time as it was for her mom, who had to leave her plush life in Poland, with servants and furs, to walk across her country with others, losing family members in the process, to board a ship for America, arriving with only her best jewelry sewn inside her coat lining and a chocolate bar handed to her at Ellis Island. No, my mother didn't have it that bad. She merely grew up in 1950's America. So, although she wanted to be a doctor and travel around the world helping people, she was given the same choice so many women her age were given: become a teacher or a nurse. When she pleaded with her father for his permission to pursue medical school, insisting she would find a way to pay for it herself, he told her that there was something very wrong with her mind. That she would never be a doctor; that she should want to marry and have a family, and that, no he would not support such dysfunction in her, financially or otherwise. My mother was not made of steel, but of soft skin and flesh. She went to nursing school, married a young man in her neighborhood that she'd known all her life, and had three children.

This did not sit well in my mother's psyche. No it did not. She worked at the hospital nights and slept in the daytime. My father watched us at night, and mom was home in the day. It was an arrangement that could have worked had my mother not felt so suppressed, so lost, so unevolved. Instead of traveling the world as a doctor without borders, mom took to spending almost all her time in bed. When she was not sleeping, she listened to the Mets or Knicks games on AM radio, drank sugary tea, and most of all, read romance novels.

I once calculated that, at an average of five books per week, over a period of 50 years, mom has probably read about 13,000 romance novels in her life. She could have bought herself a lot of flowers, candy and trips to Paris with that money. But the fantasies were more real to her than any kind of romance that could be shared with an actual human male—especially if that male was my father, a shoe salesman from Jersey City.

Over the years, my mother's room became a fortress from which the king was banished. My father took up permanent residence on the couch in the rec room downstairs. Alone, my mother kept the blinds drawn and the door closed, the steady hum of sports scores like a ventilator keeping her alive. The romance novels piled up, first on her shelves, then spilling over into piles against the walls and near her bed, each a brick in the fortress that left one inch less room for

reality to enter. Other things piled up as well: clothes, mugs, empty prescription bottles for her persistent headaches.

My mother's addiction to romance novels had one happy effect for me. Each Saturday, she took me to the corner bookstore in Union to trade in her weekly stash. Whatever money she made, she handed to me, and I got to buy whatever book I wanted that week. At first I read every Nancy Drew, then Judy Blume book. After I saw that mom wasn't going to stop our weekly trips, I began to allow myself to experiment. I chose books I didn't care if I liked. I chose books because I liked the name, because the cover appealed to me, because the older sister of a friend had mentioned it. Come to think of it, these are still some of my favorite reasons for choosing books.

These days, with her children grown and her house paid for, my mom is different. She is not a recluse. She is involved in the lives of her children, has dinner every night with my father, and goes on vacations. She still reads those romances though. And these days I am still an avid reader, though I have never read a romance novel. I am also a writer, hoping to continue the tradition of nurturing others through the written word.

My mom knew that she didn't have the energy to nurture, so she gave me ways to nurture myself. It was the best she could do and in many respects it has worked for me. Books provided me with all the things my mother would have wanted me to have—safety, adventure, love, learning, relationships, and more. *The Little Prince* taught me to revel in my wonder and to express my creativity and love. *Go Ask Alice* was a cautionary tale about drugs. *1984* taught me to be leery of power and to be a passionate, active person who stands up for what I believe. *The Diary of Anne Frank* made me think about humanity and my place in it, made me think about resilience and hope during adversity. There were thousands of lessons for me in books, and there still are. I haven't calculated how much I've spent money on books in my own lifetime, but whatever it is, it's been worth every penny.

Hungarian Thighs

Stephanie K. McKenna

She paid the lunch lady, a gray-haired, smiling old woman, and turned to walk into the cafeteria; it was the Freshman lunch. Frowning at the taco with some kind of red meat and wilted lettuce, she jumped when somebody called her name.

"Jessie! Wait up!" This confused Jessica slightly, because she hadn't been called that name since elementary school. She turned around and saw him. Jason was tall, taller than Jessica remembered. In elementary school, they were the same height. They always had to stand in the back row for those class pictures each year. "I've seen you around school a lot lately. How's it going?" He smiled at her; his teeth were very white.

"Good." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I saw you at the basketball game last night. You were looking pretty good. Did you come to see me play?" His teeth were so white, she thought, he must use some kind of whitening stuff on them. They were always so dirty when he was little.

"No. I just happen to like basketball." Jessica was pushed as everybody was trying to get past them into the 22 minute lunch period.

"Even better! That's my sport, you know. Seems like we have a lot in common." He kept smiling at her. She didn't know what to do. His white teeth, dark skin, light eyes, and muscles were overwhelming; but so was his cologne. "Wanna go out some time? I got my license and my dad got me a car. I could pick you up." Jason Butkus was asking her out on a date in front of everybody - in public!

Jessica's heart pounded and her throat seemed to close up. She could feel her cheeks getting red. She felt sick to her stomach. For nine years she had known him, and these were the first nice words he had ever said to her. She thought back to those six years of elementary school and the torment he put her through.

Jessica always looked forward to going home each day from JFK Elementary School. Mom always knew if it was a good day or a bad day for her daughter. Sometimes Jessica would get off the bus looking relaxed, but most of the time she strutted off the bus with her head held high and her lips in a straight line. She always waited for the front door to shut until she burst into tears. Her mother, skinny and pretty, would hug Jessica; she didn't even have to ask what was wrong. Six years of teasing by one boy had gotten to both Jessica and her mom. Mom had called the school repeatedly and asked for advice or help on how to get this boy to stop; the school always promised to "look into it."

Even though her mom never told her, Jessica knew when her mom called the school. Depending on the grade, her teacher would give her a hug or a pat on the back and say, "it'll-be-ok-he's-just-being-a-boy-teasing-means-he-really-likes-you-he-has-problems-of-his-own-he's-really-the-

one-you-should-feel-sorry-for-you're-a-strong-girl-you-can-handle-it." Of course Jessica always smiled and thanked the teacher politely, but things never changed. By the sixth grade, she began to physically get sick before school just thinking about the way Jason teased her.

Every day before she left for school, Jessica gave her mom and dad a kiss good-bye. Her dad would always look at her and say, "you're a beauty, but hit 'em hard with your brains." Her mom would always say, "love you, baby." Although she was in sixth grade and felt too old to be called "baby," she still liked it. Jessica's sister, Vanessa, had already left for high school; she was six years older. She wouldn't be back home until after nine pm; she went to work right after school. Vanessa had to make money for her one-year-old daughter; Vanessa and Jessica's mom had quit her job so she could take care of her granddaughter while her eldest daughter finished school. Jessica gave her niece a kiss good-bye and hoped today would be a good one.

She walked down the block and waited for the city bus, just as she did every morning. After automatically showing her bus pass to the driver and exchanging the daily "Hi Jessie" and "Hi Luther," Jessica sat down in the front seat, behind Luther, dreading the next stop. She took out her most recent favorite author, Judy Blume, and began reading *Forever*. Jason got on the bus, loud and rude.

"What's up, old man?" He shouted at Luther, who had perfectly good hearing. Luther looked in the mirror at Jessica and smiled at her, showing it didn't bother him. As Jason walked by Jessica, he stomped on her flip-flop clad foot. She closed her eyes and stifled a scream; his boots must have weighed twenty-five pounds. She opened her eyes and felt the tears welling up. "So sorry," Jason sarcastically bowed. "Not that it matters. I'm sure you haven't seen your feet in at last five years. Not with that belly of yours." Jason laughed as he moved down the aisle. Luther suddenly stepped on the gas, and Jason crashed into a seat. He swore loudly. A tear slid down Jessica's face.

"It's always good to take the high road, Jessie. But sometimes you gotta take the low road. I'm sorry, he shouldn't have done that to you." Luther smiled sadly as he looked at Jessica in the mirror.

"Thanks, Luther." It was funny he said that, because her mom always told her to take the high road and ignore Jason.

When the bus pulled to the stop closest to school, Jessica rushed out with a quick wave to Luther. She wanted to get through this day without another encounter with Jason. But that wasn't going to happen. Today her teacher decided to switch seats. She always allowed the person with the highest average to pick the first seat. Jessica did the math quickly and figured she had a twenty five percent chance of getting to choose; Luis, Nancy, Sal, and she were always in the running for it. Luis got good grades, but he could hardly speak a word of English. Kids teased him because he stuttered when he spoke; he'd only been in America for two years. Nancy was a pretty girl, but her thick glasses prompted jokes from other students. Sal was a pale boy who always coughed and seldom smiled. The four of them concentrated on school rather than dwell on their daily attacks by teasers. Today Jessica got to pick the seat.

She picked a seat in the second row. Because she was so tall, her previous teachers always assigned her to the back. Jessica hated sitting in the back. Since she, like everybody else, hated to sit in the front, Jessica chose the second row. Her teacher then pulled random names out of a hat and allowed each student to pick his or her own seat. The second person who got to choose was Jason. He chose the seat directly behind Jessica; she felt her throat close up, dreading the next few weeks of sitting in front of this thirteen-year-old bully. As the other students picked their seats, Jessica and Jason sat there quietly. She felt a little nervous that he hadn't said anything to her or pushed her or kicked her or anything. Before the last student picked his seat, Jessica took out a clip to put her long hair up. That was when she felt the knots.

While the students had been picking their seats, Jason had been tying Jessica's hair into tiny little knots. His fifteen minutes of work had caused irreparable damage. Jessica went up to her teacher and showed her; she was sent to the nurse to see if there was anything to be done. Jason was sent to the office. Unfortunately, the nurse and principal were in offices next to each other. Jason and Jessica had to walk down the hall together. But she refused to walk next to him. Jessica, for the first time in her life, broke a school rule. She ran down the hall to the nurse. As she ran, Jason yelled, "Stampede!" And she cried when the nurse had to cut the knots out of her hair. Jessica spoke to her mom briefly on the phone. No, she didn't want to go home. Yes, she would go to Religion class after school. Okay, they'd go to the hair salon that evening.

When Jessica returned to class, her teacher moved her seat to the back row "so no one can sit behind you and do that ever again". But Jessica wasn't teased and bothered by "no one"; it was Jason. She would make it through the day, the teacher wouldn't ask much of her since she had already been through so much. She would ignore Jason when he returned to class and mouthed a nasty word at her before he sat down in the seat he had got to choose and keep. No, she would take the high road. Then she would get to leave school and go to Religion class across the street from her elementary school. Jason didn't go to Religion class; Jessica doubted he even had a soul.

After school, Jessica, with her raggedy hair, walked across the street. The sixth-grade Religion class didn't start until 3:30, so they had about twenty minutes to unwind. Jessica took out her book and read quietly in a corner, enjoying some alone time. At 3:30, they all gathered in the kitchen for cookies and Hi-C before they began class. The Religion teacher cleared her throat, always a sign that she had an announcement before snack.

"Welcome, guys and gals. We have a special guest today. He is a friend of Chris, and we would like to welcome him to our group." She clapped her hands, and the "guys and gals" were expected to do the same. Chris was a beefy dumb kid who hung around with Jason: Jessica prayed, fearing the worst. Sure enough, Jason walked into the kitchen, beaming. Jessica couldn't even eat the two cookies allotted to each kid. She hoped Jason wouldn't say something about how he was glad she was on a diet. But, thankfully, he didn't talk to her at all. During class, which focused on the "golden rule," Jessica caught Jason looking at her. He didn't say anything or make any faces or nasty gestures. Maybe he was going to treat her like he wanted to be treated. She ignored him, because she wanted to be ignored.

Even when they got on the bus, Jason stayed away from her. Maybe he felt bad about having her hair cut. Maybe he was changing. She sat in the seat behind Luther, pretending to read her book and hoping Jason wouldn't say anything the rest of the bus ride home. He didn't. But when she got off the bus, he stuck his head out the window.

"Did you feel that?" He shouted out. "I think the bus just went up about a foot when Thunder Thighs got off."

Jessica could feel the tears welling up. But when she looked at the front door, she saw her mom wasn't waiting there as usual. She was relieved. Sometimes Jessica felt her mom was more bothered by the teasing than she was. When she got into the house, Jessica saw her mom was changing the baby on the kitchen table.

"Oh, sweetie, we'll have Auntie fix up your hair in a few hours. You could get a grown up haircut in time for middle school. Don't worry about it, baby." She smiled her 38-year-old smile at her daughter while cleaning up her granddaughter. Jessica could see the frustration in her eyes.

"Mom, do you have to do that on the kitchen table. We eat there!" Jessica grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter. She heard feet pounding down the stairs. "Who's that? Did Vanessa call out of work today?"

"No, honey, that's your father. He wanted to be here when you got home. I called him at work right after I spoke to you."

"You didn't have to do that, Mom, I'm fine, really."

"There she is!" Jessica's Dad gave her a huge hug when he got into the kitchen. "Come on, let's go have a chat." He took her hand and led her into the living room. "I heard what happened at school. You okay?"

Jessica nodded yes, trying not to tear up. Usually her mom gave these chats, not her dad. She could tell he felt uncomfortable.

"So that boy's been teasing you a lot, huh?" He waited for her to nod again. "You know, I had a lot of people tease me when I was a kid. Boy, they would be really making fun of me now." He grabbed his rather large stomach and bellowed, "Ho ho ho - bowl full of jelly, right?" He laughed, hoping she would do the same. Jessica let out a fake giggle; she knew he was trying to help. He turned around and shook his rear end, "Check out this booty, eh?" Again he laughed and she did too, for real this time. "That's it, girl, you'll be okay." He hugged her. That hug made her feel so much better than the little chat did. "Come on, let's cook up some dinner, then Mom'll take you to your aunt's salon to get a new do." Together they made some pasta and salad. For a few minutes, Jessica forgot about Jason.

After dinner, Jessica and her mother walked the few blocks to Frannie's Salon. Jessica pushed the carriage that held her niece. Fran gave each of them a kiss and promptly sat Jessica down in

the chair to wash her hair. Technically, the salon was closed, but when Fran received a call from her brother, she knew she would stay late to help. She knew what her niece was going through.

"Julia, why don't you go take a walk?" Jessica's mom didn't even hesitate; she immediately got up and headed towards the stroller. "I'll keep an eye on the baby. You need some alone time. Go get a coffee and come back in an hour. The three of us will be fine."

"Ok, I'll be back." She opened the door. "Thanks, Fran. For everything." The sisters-in-law smiled at each other.

Auntie Fran went to work. Silently, she combed, clipped, cut, styled, moussed, hairsprayed, and shaped Jessica's head until she looked like her old self. She knew what Jessica both wanted and needed without even asking her. Then she and Jessica sat in the waiting chairs, silently enjoying each other's company.

"Your sister takes after your mom. But you know that." Fran and Jessica both mused about the long skinny legs and shapely bodies of their relatives. "And you take after me." Jessica looked at her aunt, whom she always found to be beautiful, and silently wondered if she was right. "And your niece takes after you."

"Auntie Fran, how can you see that? She's only a year old, and I'm twelve."

Fran stood up and grabbed her thighs. "Look at this? See the 'chubbiness'? Look at the baby." Fran lifted up her legs and pinched the chubby thighs. "Stand up." Fran then pinched Jessica's thighs, and they both laughed. "They're all the same. We're born with them. No exercise, diet, or miracle cream will take away these thighs. Believe me, I've tried. They're Hungarian thighs, and we'll have them our entire lives. So instead of feeling bad about them, feel proud of them. It links us together." And a link had been formed. One that repaired the damage caused by a mean boy. Jessica looked from her aunt to her niece, thinking that she might give this same talk one day.

Just then, her mom walked in. "It's past both of your bedtimes." She smiled looking relaxed and happy. Jessica smiled back, feeling the same way.

"See you soon, girls!" Fran shouted as she shut off the lights.

"Thanks, Auntie Fran. For everything." Jessica couldn't express her gratitude or relief.

This one day, three years ago, rushed through Jessica's mind as she stood in front of Jason Butkus. She was the same weight she was then, but she had grown almost a foot.

"Really, Jessie, you look good." Jason kept smiling at her.

"Thanks. But no thanks." She smiled back at him.

"What? What?" He had never been rejected before. "Why?"

Jessica just walked away. She headed towards her usual table. Luis, Sal, and Nancy, along with some other friends they made in middle school, saved her seat. She could feel Jason's eyes watching her back as she walked away. She knew she looked good in her favorite pair of jeans; they accentuated her Hungarian thighs.

Big O

Tom Rameaka

The ballpark spoke most clearly to him in the morning, when the only sounds it uttered were the scratching of the rakes and the steady *whump, whump* of the mowers' whirling blades. And he spoke back, using one word whispered under his breath a thousand times an hour—*perfection*. Owen C. Dempsey, the king of groundskeepers, or just plain King, or as the players called him, Big O, held more power than the bat of the Sox mightiest hitter. He could absorb the heavy rain so the seats could stay filled or cut the grass just a shade too low, eradicating those frustrating infield hits.

Management called him Money, for it was Owen's magical skills with grass and dirt that really determined whether to play ball, delay for the rain—or the worst—call the game, sending away thousands of disappointed fans. Fenway was his domain, and he ruled it like a tyrant. He was descended from a short list of only two other groundskeepers since the park opened ninety-three years ago. Every blade of grass—sliced to his expectations. His crew hated him for his demands but basked in the sunlight of his and the field's reputation. Owen was simply the best groundskeeper in the league.

He stepped lightly on the grass in right field, taking care not to crush or flatten the tapered green blades. He slipped the tape measure off of his belt to measure the freshly drawn foul line for the seventh time in the last ten minutes. The sour smell of lime assaulted his nostrils. He crouched gently, noting that the line was still two and one half inches wide. He knew it wasn't going to change yet the need to measure and then measure again descended upon him like an unseen mosquito, demanding action. *Move along*, he urged himself, jamming the tape back into his pocket and willing his feet to move away from the foul line. *I've gotta move to left field*. He sensed the sidelong glances of his crew, the hushed asides, and their barely suppressed chuckles while they observed his silent battle. He didn't really care what they thought, and they didn't dare voice any opinions. The King exiled more people than he could remember, lopping off their careers and making it impossible for them to find work in another park. He craved and at the same time hated this need for perfection, like an addict loved yet abhorred heroin.

His feet finally responded and he began the trek to the opposite field to repeat the task. But he didn't make the quick, shortcut across center field. Instead, oblivious to a long stare from Javier, his second in command, he slowly counted out his steps from Pesky's Pole to home plate and then up the third base line. His crew didn't dare interrupt him, their heads down, each attending to a different task. Owen knew that three hundred and two steps would bring him to the corner of the Green Monster, the thirty-seven foot high wall in left field. Again, the two and one half inches hadn't changed, but a small breeze had caused the white lime to drift into fair territory. He spent five minutes using a small whisk broom magically extracted from his back pocket. He rationalized that this wasn't the same as stepping on only the even treads of the stairs to his small apartment, or touching the doorknob three times before wrenching it open. No one witnessed him struggle getting every piece of fringe on the living room carpet perfectly straight. Well not anymore, since *she* had left him three years ago. This was different. This was *his* kingdom, *his* realm, *his* dream job. This was Fenway Park, and he was the Head Groundskeeper. It was the

most perfect ball park in America. And Fenway didn't judge or diagnose him. It didn't use acronyms for God's sake! He felt only gratitude as he presided over its acres of green. He could almost hear whispered words of thanks when the wads of tobacco and sunflower seed husks washed down the drain in the dugouts each day.

He knew he had to leave soon. The first players would be arriving, scraping, digging, spitting, even scooping up the infield dirt, destroying the smooth, finely chiseled carpet that had been so painstakingly spread before them. He couldn't bear to watch. He timed it perfectly as he turned off the hose, waved for Javier to take over and disappeared like a mole into the underbelly of the stadium before he could witness the desecration of his masterpiece.

Two hours later, in his office, he again thought of ways to avoid tonight's ceremony. Should he finally tell management that his perfectionism had a dark side? What else could he do with his life? Go home and garden? There was no way out. He was empty of excuses. They were doing this for him, and he knew he should feel grateful, but he only felt a panicked ball in his gut.

He was to be honored for thirty years of service during the seventh inning stretch. In fact, he had never stayed out on the field once the game started. All of his decisions, he relayed to Javier from his office, where he watched the game on a TV screen. It was safer than watching the three-dimensional destruction of his pristine field. But tonight, he would *have to* step across smeared foul lines and fresh clumps of torn sod. How could he ever do this? The doctor had told him this was an opportunity to attack his demons head on. The new medication seemed to work better than the last, although for some reason he was using the bathroom more than ever.

Just then, Joe, the club house attendant appeared at the office door. "They're waitin' for ya King. Big night! Break a leg!"

Owen tapped the pill bottle exactly six times on his desk, pried off the cap and doubled his usual dose. *That oughta get me through this*, he thought as he headed toward the field, pausing for a second as he felt an ominous twinge in his bladder.

A Teacher's Journal

Dana Ritter

January 4th-Monday

Today we returned from Winter Break. I can't tell you how nervous I was . . . their Christmas experiences are so different from mine. Who knows what their holidays held? We're in the second half of the year and beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I've got lots of exciting things planned for these seniors. I hope the kids respond.

The first period of the day, I sip my coffee as I take in the class. Evelyn seems to have grown even bigger over break, the Baby Phat mini-tee stretched over her maternal belly. Wilfredo proudly shows off his new tattoo as the girls crowd around him. Xavier and Milton discuss the different changes they've made to their cars. Kim and Mo'nisha trade lip glosses and talk about the CD that Whitnee burned them as Christmas gifts. Others sit with their heads bobbing to the music which issues from their enormous headphones. Many students have their hoodies pulled down over their heads as they adjust to the early hour. Conspicuously missing is Sol, who has been spending my classes giving Evelyn a play-by-play oral version of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* from her own personal experience.

I begin class slowly, trying to ease them back into class discussion with a chat about what we did over vacation. Knowing that getting their attention after a long break will be difficult, I then progress into a lesson using Usher's song "Confessions" to revisit issues of male-female relationships in August Wilson's play, *Fences*. About thirty minutes into our eighty minute class, the students are listening to the familiar song and singing along with the lyrics. Some students melodramatically serenade the ladies in the class as the girls roll their eyes, flirting back.

"Everytime I was in L.A. I was with my ex-girlfriend
Everytime you called I told you,
"Baby I'm workin'." (No!)
I was out doin my dirt (Oh!)
Wasn't thinkin' bout you gettin' hurt"

In walks Sol, three-year-old daughter in tow. I press PAUSE on the CD player and the students are unexpectedly yanked out of engagement.

"I had nowhere else to take her," Sol explains as she looks pleadingly at me.

"Well, take off your stuff and we'll figure something out," I respond automatically. Sol's daughter makes funny faces at the other students as Sol pulls the little feet out of the bright pink snow boots. I go to the phone and call the principal—no answer. I call her secretary who tells me she's out of the building today. I call my Assistant Principal—voicemail. I call the Dean of Students—in a meeting, cannot be disturbed. I try to reach my Department Head—she's in class. Sol's daughter is sitting on her mother's lap as the other students crowd around them. "Alright,

alright . . . Sol, I'll set her up at my desk and try to keep her busy for the period, but you've got to arrange for something else for the rest of the day."

"Thanks Miss. My mom was supposed to watch her, but she wasn't home when I got there."

I lead Sol's little girl across the room and prop her up on my desk chair. I get paper and crayons from my art supply closet. "What's your name?" I ask her.

"Esperanza," she answers back shyly.

"That's a beautiful name," I say. "It means hope, doesn't it?" She nods her head so enthusiastically, her little pink barrettes clack against each other. I write her name in big purple letters across the page. "Can you draw me a picture of yourself for my bulletin board?" I hand her the crayons. She excitedly accepts them.

I go back to the CD player and press PLAY and again Usher's voice pours into the room:

"Now this gon' be the hardest thing I think I ever had to do
Got me talkin' to myself askin' how I'm gon' tell you
'bout that chick on part 1 I told ya'll I was creepin' with, creepin' with
Said she's 3 months pregnant and she's keepin' it"

In the room, both boys and girls sway and snap to the music. I wonder if they know what they're dancing to, I wonder where Esperanza's father is and I wonder . . .

"Here," Esperanza declares as she pushes the paper up toward me. It has a stick figure on it, with three legs and huge eyes.

"Where is all your beautiful hair?" I ask. "And where's your cute smile? And you've got to put some clothes on . . . you're naked!!" I joke as I point back to the desk. Esperanza giggles as she hurries off to make the corrections.

The class continues on, with Sol participating like I've never seen before. The discussion goes fairly well despite Esperanza's continually changing self-portrait (which needs constant encouragement) and her complaints that she's hungry (I dig a breakfast bar out of my purse). As the bell rings, my phone does as well and I race across the room, hoping to have an answer to my question: *What do I do with Sol and her daughter?* But instead it's the teacher next door, with no suggestions. When I look up, Sol and Esperanza are gone, leaving the distorted crayon character on Sol's desk.

January 5th-Tuesday

I didn't hear back from any of the voice mail messages I left about Sol. I called Sol's other teachers and they say she never showed up to their classes. I guess none of it matters anyway. Sol had had a bad day, and I helped her out. A one-time thing, right?

Wrong. As the morning announcements begin, Sol arrives . . . with Esperanza.

"It was alright yesterday," she argues. "What the fuck am I supposed to do with her?"

Esperanza runs across the classroom and hops into my desk chair, arms waiting expectantly on my desk, eyes shining at me. Reluctantly, I cross to the child and dig another breakfast bar out of my purse. I place the run of phone calls again . . . again with no response. *At least she's coming*, I rationalize. I watch the snow drifting down steadily outside my window. *Where would the two of them go if I turned them away?* I nod my approval to Sol, requiring that she stay after class to talk to me. She takes her seat, and again I begin to play preschool teacher/high school English instructor for the next eighty minutes. The class goes better than I could have imagined. Sol is participating like mad, the rest of the class seems touched by my gesture, and Esperanza draws on the chalkboard as high as she can reach.

At the end of class, Sol holds Esperanza on her hip as we discuss options.

"What about the father?" I ask.

"What *about* the father?" Sol responds.

We run through a full list of her relatives. Nothing. We talk about babysitting services in school. They cancelled that in October. I tell Sol to come see me at lunch time, but she doesn't come back. I repeat some phone calls. Again, I hear from no one. Later, I call her other teachers who say Sol never came to their classes. I email everyone I can think of and then look up Sol's mother's phone number in the database. When I call the number, a chipper woman informs me via recording that *THIS NUMBER DOES NOT ACCEPT INCOMING CALLS*. I go searching for some administrator, anyone, after school to see what we can do about the situation. I find the Dean of Students only, who empathizes with me over the difficulty of the situation and promises to call Sol's mother with the newly-revised phone number this evening.

Later that night, as I push my cart down the aisles of Stop n' Shop, I toss in a box of breakfast bars, just in case. I then toss in some apple juice, some bread, some peanut butter, some jelly, some yogurt—just in case. I'm allergic to peanut butter . . . but I can not stand hearing Esperanza's little belly grumble. I find myself hoping to see her waddle into my classroom, her snowsuit keeping her limbs dangling awkwardly from the rest of her body. I love how she shrinks to half her size by the time the thick outfit is removed.

January 8th-Friday

Sol and Esperanza are sitting on the floor outside my locked door when I arrive in the morning. Sol is in tears. Esperanza, uncertain, holds a picture up to me. It is me, sort of . . . my long Burnt Sienna hair trails on the floor behind me. . . I can also recognize two Periwinkle Blue eyes. I lead these two children quietly into my room and begin fixing Esperanza's breakfast as Sol pulls off the small snowsuit. She will not speak; she will not look me in the eyes. Her daughter stands at the door of my room, shaking hands with all my students as they enter. She's the center of attention and loving it. I check my phone—no messages, I check my email—nothing. Though Sol doesn't speak through the class, she hands in all of her work. I've gotten more work from Sol in this past week than I got throughout the entire second marking period. She's a smart girl, when she plays the school game. Our class discussion is animated: arguing about the

different stereotypes associated with each race. Esperanza seems to pick up on the vibe of the room, and I see her scribbling furiously with her stubby crayons. Before they leave, I slip Sol two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, which she accepts silently. When I return to my desk, I find Esperanza's masterpieces: one picture colored completely black, another colored completely red, and a third left blank. . . white.

That night, I make a special trip to the mall to get some coloring books (one with the alphabet demonstrated through animals and toys, and another with numbers up to twenty. . . one doll, two shoes, three bananas). *Am I encouraging this? How many little ones will I have by the end of the year?*

January 14th-Thursday

It's been almost two weeks now. Evelyn has left to have her baby, so the seat next to Sol is empty. Esperanza, the newest member of our class, can now sit next to Mommy and eat her yogurt and apple juice. Sol reaches over and draws quick pictures on the coloring book which keeps Esperanza occupied. There seems to be a huge weight lifted off of Sol. She is smiling and listening to other students. She's being patient with her answers. I feel like I've found a magic solution. My students are controlling themselves under the ever-present eyes of this innocent little girl. Sol's grades are sky-rocketing and she's mentioned plans for after graduation. . . she wants to be a hairdresser, and maybe go to school somewhere. Students take turns bringing Esperanza to the bathroom. The entire culture of the class is changed. I believe Esperanza has truly brought HOPE to my classroom.

After the bell, Esperanza trades a hug for the two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I throw in an apple, you know, to keep the doctor away.

"Bye Miss," she sings as she skips out of the classroom.

Hours later, as I sit at my desk eating *my* lunch, my Assistant Principal walks into my room. She spots the coloring books and tells me that I cannot "be doing this" and mentions all the legal issues that may arise. She tells me that my students cannot possibly be getting the education they deserve if my attention is split between them and a demanding toddler. Though I see her argument, I point out how much better my class is running with the presence of Esperanza. She repeats her directions for me to end it, to tell Sol that tomorrow is the last day to bring her daughter and that other arrangements must be made over the weekend.

January 15-Friday

An icy rain is falling as I maneuver my way to work. I am dreading the conversation awaiting me in my classroom. What will Sol do? How will the class react? Will they think I have betrayed Esperanza?

When I see Esperanza's sweet face and feel Sol's enthusiastic welcome, I am unable to say what I'm required to say and continue the routine and fix breakfast. When I return from making my copies, Sol and her daughter have found my CD player and are dancing in the front of the room to an Usher song. They are laughing--this kills me. The rest of the class soon arrives and we continue with the lesson as scheduled. The class is writing a letter from the perspective of Rose, Troy's betrayed wife from *Fences*. I couldn't think of what else to do with them, I barely slept

last night. During a quiet moment, I ask Sol to step out into the hallway with me so that I may inform her of her monumental homework for the weekend. I apologize but tell her that the situation is unrealistic.

"I'm sorry Sol, but it has to stop. Administration is worried about legal issues. And, what would happen if Evelyn brought in her newborn?"

The analogy is lost on her as she wrenches the door open. She grabs her stuff, including her daughter's arm, roughly.

"We gotta go," she snaps at her daughter who still holds a crayon in her hand, "She don't want you anymore." And they trail off down the hallway, a loud "BITCH" echoing in the hallway behind them.

The class is shocked. My heart is pounding. *What do I do?* My mind races and my eyes gloss over the classroom, ending on Esperanza's snowsuit, dripping in the corner.

The class was never the same again. They blamed me for what happened. Evelyn had her baby, a little girl, and never came back to school. Neither did Sol. For the last five months of school, their desks remained empty. No more gorgeous illustrations to decorate my bulletin board, a half empty jar of peanut butter in the refrigerator, a tiny pink snowsuit lying in the Lost and Found box.

On the Sea of Uncertainty

Debra Sims

Much like a ship's captain, the teacher cannot have favorites among the crew lest she dare to face mutiny in the classroom. While coping with the rocky sea of my first year of teaching, I clung to that thought. Most days left me drenched in tears and trembling with doubt as I relentlessly wondered if I had made the right choice. I embarked on the voyage with hardly a life vest, but endured the suffering and even encountered a few pleasant surprises along the way.

Within a month of my journey, I had fallen out of the boat and began gasping for air. I was drowning, and several of my students were holding me under. Anthony, one of my eleventh graders, consistently wrote nasty comments to me on the reading pop quizzes his class forced me to give on a daily basis. His disrespectful remarks on my teaching inability often upset me so much that I dreaded seeing him in class and in the halls. Exasperation at the lack of respect I encountered caused a greater difficulty, especially once Anthony began to verbally argue with me in class instead of passively on paper. Other students, like sharks sensing blood in the water, soon followed suit. I felt hated by my one junior class, the class I had most been looking forward to while I prepared lessons over the summer. My plans fell on deaf ears because the group of fifteen eleventh graders entered my classroom each day with scowls on their faces, ill-prepared to discuss literature, and with illogical demands that we not read or have homework assignments.

Anthony spent weeks thrashing around me like a foul zephyr, and I desperately tried to ignore it. On a particularly stormy day, however, I snapped. I fought the waves with my only weapon – words – and demanded that he make good on his comments with proof and evidence. He backed down, "There's no way I can win an argument with an English teacher." I felt I had won a small battle and spent months trying to befriend this adversary. I invited him to play his guitar for the class when we discussed the Jazz Age. I sat with him in the halls to keep him on track when he had a project due. I tried to include him in the class discussions by elaborating on his often-irrelevant additions. He regularly declared, "I don't read," and I joked with him when that was obvious. But I think he must have been reading and paying attention to our dialogues in class because he successfully completed assignments and passed most tests. Anthony did not make me feel like I made a difference, but I was pleased that he behaved in a more civil manner toward me for the remainder of the year.

Carl was also in that eleventh-grade class, but only for the first semester. He was miserable and spent the entire period talking with his friends or sleeping. He was such a disruption in the class and fought me constantly because the material was just too difficult for him – he was unable to read at grade level and had actually been placed in too-advanced a class. I conscientiously tried to help him, but he always pushed me away, wanting instead to spend testing time in the Resource Room. Other teachers had expressed that the Resource Room might not be the place for Carl to take his tests because it is noisier than the classroom and, according to these colleagues, the aids in the Resource Room have a reputation for helping their charges a little too much with assignments. I gently suggested that Carl remain in my room for tests, and his mother agreed as did our Special Education Director. I expressed my desire to help Carl truly succeed in

my classroom, but it was a losing battle. He grew to be such a negative influence on the group that I was able to come up for air only when he was taken out of the class and permanently assigned to a one-on-one situation with a Resource Room aid for his English class. The rapids dragged me under each day I dealt with Carl, and I am still disheartened that I was powerless to help him.

As I struggled with Anthony, Carl, and other students like them, I had a lifeline with Samantha, another eleventh grader, but one not enrolled in any of my classes. Another student introduced Samantha to me, and, on the first day we met, she fiercely complained about one of her teachers. I listened empathetically and offered my advice, which Samantha actually took and ended up succeeding in that difficult class. She then returned to chat with me on a regular basis, consistently leaving her classes to visit me during my free periods. I gladly helped her then and after school with her English and History assignments, which actually provided a break for me. Samantha often left gifts and thank-you notes for me on my desk, but what she doesn't realize is that she threw me the life vest when I felt I was sinking. We never spoke of issues I was having, but Samantha was and is someone who can pick me up when I'm down with her lovely smile and a kindhearted "Hey."

Most of my Period 1 College Prep. freshmen came bearing life vests for me as well. I always looked forward to seeing that class and really missed them on the days the school's rotating schedule did not allow for a meeting. The dynamic group worked well together, and many stars shined to light the way when I was lost. The waves calmed when I saw them, especially grade-conscious Diane, professional singer Lori, gifted Sean, talkative Corey, smiling Alex, conscientious Joe, talented writer Marcie, quiet Avery, intelligent Cathy, the list goes on. They each provided me with a piece of joy and hope that I was doing a fine job.

Only when Jordan spoke his mind in that class did I again crash into those choppy waves. Over the course of the school year I tried my best to teach him how to curb his sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, ageist, and downright rude and ignorant comments. He pushed me over the edge one day when he called me a Nazi. I sent him to the office only to find the next day that there had been no repercussions from the administration. I took a breath and continued along with this boy, finding that whenever Jordan held his tongue and did not throw the class off with his remarks, he was inevitably playing cards or working on his Spanish assignments. I desperately held out the oars to engage him in our discussions and, as a result, was often flooded with grief when I considered his overcast home life and the reasons he held such strong opinions about anyone unlike him.

I desperately continued to stay afloat during the daily strains with Molly and her mother. The eleventh-grade student did not complete homework assignments and began the year with failing grades. Like a piranha with jagged teeth, Molly's mother assaulted me on Open House night with callous words. She pronounced that I was not doing my job, and her daughter was suffering because of it. Little did she know that her daughter was doing the same thing to me. Mother, daughter, and I held several meetings throughout the year to discuss Molly's progress and lack of effort. Her mother continued to remain defensive, but Molly slowly began to come around. By the second half of the year we buoyed each other to the surface and she completed the year with a high B average. I felt so proud of her achievement and our collaboration that I awarded her a

certificate for Outstanding Effort. In return, but unexpectedly, she appeared at my door on the teachers' last day of school with a card containing one heart-warming message from her and one from her mother, along with a lovely wind chime I can display in my classroom next year. To me, Molly is a true success story.

Other students came around and, it seems, grew to appreciate me as the year progressed. Barbara, Sandy's mother and the library aide at the high school, informed me one day of what her daughter told her. "I *really* didn't like Mrs. Sims at the beginning of the year, but I totally love her now." Alexis and Audrey from my Writing Workshop and English class completed a survey on the flight back from their Florida chorus trip. Upon their return to school they proudly told me that when they responded to the question, "If you had to pick a teacher to live with, who would it be?" they unanimously exclaimed "Mrs. Sims!" I felt so satisfied that I returned to my modest boat and gently paddled my way through another month.

Donald stood in the way of that serenity. Like a bearded walrus, he loafed around on his own island and barked all day long, without ever lifting a flipper to do anything. My boat crashed into that island and shattered to bits. He was a senior in my Writing Workshop class who failed to submit a single assignment all year during his third attempt with the required course. I had given him numerous opportunities to complete the work and remained in constant contact with his mother, who consistently assured me I should give him zeros, because "that is what he deserved." He skipped 27 of our 80 class meetings, and when he did appear, he hooked my other students and attempted to drag them down with him. On June 16, Donald's Writing Workshop folder materialized in my mailbox, complete with most of the year's tasks. What was I to do? I was in the midst of final exams and lacked the adequate time to grade the work. Did Donald even deserve credit for pieces that were ten months late? My principal directed me to concentrate on the larger papers that were worth 50% of each marking period grade and refrain from grading the small assignments. Donald's last-minute mediocre attempts at the work, however, did not warrant a passing grade and he failed for the year. He did not graduate. Somehow, I feel I failed him.

At times I wonder if I failed Jennifer as well. She came from a difficult home life and lived with friends in town. In April, however, the family ejected her from their house and the only place she could go was to her boyfriend's basement apartment in Branford. She did not own a car and missed several weeks of school. Concerned, I approached Jennifer's best friend, and Amber initially explained what had happened. I verified the details with the Guidance Department and the school counselor, offering to help in any way I could to make sure this senior returned to school and graduated. For about a month I drove twenty minutes out of my way to pick her up, bring her to school, and drive her back home again. Once she purchased a car of her own and no longer felt obligated to attend school because her teacher drove her, she began missing my classes and ceased speaking openly with me. She did complete her requirements and graduated, but I lost a special connection to her and did not even see her on graduation night to wish her luck. I hope she'll be all right.

Teachers are not supposed to have favorites, but many of my students last year could have easily taken the title. On the last day of school, though, it happened. Elisha was my favorite. She was a ninth-grade Honors student in my Writing Workshop class that seemed overrun with seniors.

Elisha rarely spoke up in class and I had difficulty eliciting responses from her. The writing she produced, however, was exceptional, and I felt I could offer little to help her improve. I was a bit jealous that I did not teach her Honors English class because she produced such ornate writing that was a pleasure to read. The helpful comments I felt forced to make focused on the cosmetic. I truly sensed that she disliked the class and only produced pieces to please me and get through the required course. For the final exam, I assigned the class a two-page reflection on the year. Elisha's three-page composition was charged with honesty and sincerity as she detailed every little thing I did to assist her craft. Elisha explained how intimidated she felt surrounded by all those seniors but also gave specific examples of things I did for her and expressed her gratitude for them. She closed the piece with, "Thank you so much Mrs. Sims! You've really helped my writing improve and have been my favorite teacher this year. Thank you for everything." On graduation night Elisha's mother approached me to show her own appreciation. She was so grateful that I embraced her daughter's flowery writing, for which most teachers reprimanded her. Mom and I both shed a tear or two as we spoke with joy of my favorite, Elisha.

Like the waves on the ocean, life ebbs and flows at a different pace every day. There were times, particularly early on in the year, when I felt I was drowning deep in the trough with no hope of swimming through the obstacles. Other days, however, I seemed to glide along in a boat on the peak, enjoying the sunshine. Looking back on the year, I see my immense growth as a person and as a teacher. I fully realize that I float along on the sea of uncertainty. I imagine I will continue to struggle with certain personalities, but I hope the pleasant surprises along the way will provide me with the oars to paddle my way through any challenge.

Apron Strings

Leslie Stewart

It seemed like my grandmother, who I adored, was making pasta sauce and baking apple pie one day and the next she had forgotten who she was. I am sure that it did not truly happen that way. Pieces of her memory probably fell away bit by bit. I was busy falling in love, planning a wedding, living a life, while hers was simply fading away.

My grandmother's smile had a little of the devil in it. She looked as if she, and only she, had just heard the punch line to a great joke. She had a head of thick, pure white waves, and a laugh that you knew was always close to bubbling over, much like the pasta sauce simmering on the stove just below a boil. People who met my grandmother did not tend to forget her. Since I saw my grandmother through a child's loving eyes, I always thought of her as a great beauty. I assumed others saw her in the same light. But others found something entirely different that was attractive about my grandmother.

I remember once I was at the dentist, a place I have always dreaded and want to get in and out of as quickly as possible. The dentist had recently seen my grandmother. My visit lengthened as he sat in his chair, instruments in midair, while he mused about how beautiful my grandmother was. I remembered thinking that my grandmother was an old woman at the time, and I found it a bit unusual that a much younger man would be thinking of her in terms of her beauty. He continued to talk about how warm she was and how she made him laugh. She had told him he should stop by for a good meal one day. The truth be told, I think my grandmother was an outrageous flirt.

Recently I met the boy, now a grown man, who used to pack her groceries for her long ago at the local IGA supermarket. So many years later he still smiled and remembered Rose. He told me my grandmother used to make him laugh and always joked about wanting to "fatten him up." She would be happy if she could see him today . . . someone did fatten him up.

My grandmother loved to dance and sing. I remember spending weekends sleeping over at my grandparent's house. Dean Martin, Andy Williams, and Vic Damone played on the stereo while my grandmother sang along and suggestively danced around my grandfather who pretended, as only he could, to ignore her. Finally, she would surprise and delight us by suddenly dancing out of the bedroom, a tambourine in hand, lifting her skirts in an elaborate can-can and openly flirting with her husband. He would shoo her away but, young as I was, even I saw and understood the look in his eyes. She called herself his little gypsy. My grandmother was all about passion.

My friends all wanted to be Italian on Sundays, and so my grandmother adopted them. They came throughout my school years finally coming with boyfriends, fiancés, and husbands. My grandmother welcomed them all in her ever-present, handmade apron that seemed to be a part of her. It was always worth sticking around for supper when she pulled out her home-grown, bottled hot peppers, and the boyfriends thought they would show off and pile them on their

sandwich against her many warnings. Watching them turn purple and gasp for breath was one of the girlfriend's favorite pastimes.

I was afraid that the joy of my grandmother's food would be lost one day, so when I would come home for college breaks, I would spend a day helping her make sauce, carefully recording each addition to the pot. As she tossed in the handful of salt I would thrust a measuring cup beneath it. I measured each and every ingredient and wrote directions down in as much detail as possible. I watched and wrote . . . how her hands lovingly shaped each meatball, first wetting her palms a bit and then gently rolling the small ball between both palms.

"Too much rolling and too much pressure and the meatballs will be tough," she warned.

By the time my grandmother reached her eightieth birthday she still looked beautiful to me, except for her eyes . . . and the laughter . . . and, of course, we couldn't let her cook any more. She no longer knew who I was. She no longer remembered the recipes. Her aprons lay washed, ironed and unused in the drawer. Sometimes she would be polite and distant when I visited. Other times she was hostile. The best visits were when I brought my sons with me. She connected with them, as she was now more child than woman, and they had not known her any other way but as this shadow grandmother.

Eventually my grandmother was moved to a home. She no longer seemed to notice the changes from day to night, from solitude to company. She didn't know anyone who came to visit and lived her life in a world apart from those of us who adored her. Eventually . . . regretfully . . . I stopped visiting.

My sisters and I took on the job of cleaning out the house. My grandmother did not have anything of great value, but each of us found a little piece of her to take home for safekeeping. Tracy took the ceramic rooster that used to watch over us as we gathered around the dining table. The rooster has since been joined by a whole family of unusual roosters. Claudia took my grandmother's dining room set so that our family can continue to gather together just as we had for as long as we could remember. And I took the handmade aprons – the essence of my grandmother.

My grandmother had passed on more to me than a mere apron, for I am the official maker of *the* sauce. Each holiday finds me stirring the pot, soothing the guilt of missed visits, feeding my family.

Shortly after my grandmother died, our family gathered together for Christmas. We thought we had come to the end of what we laughingly call "the never ending great gift exchange" when my sister, Claudia, said there was one more gift for Tracy and me. She handed each of us a small, spiral bound, cook book—"Gramma Rose's Recipes." She told us that when we had all been together cleaning out my grandmother's house, she had stumbled upon a tiny black binder filled with scraps of recipes written in my grandmother's quickly scribbled scrawl. She had not told us about her find. Instead she snuck the treasured discovery out of the house unbeknownst to us. My sister had found many more of our favorite dishes – Lentil Soup, Candied Sweet Potatoes, Mrs. Wood's Coffee Cake, Brown Betty Icing, Peach Delight Jam – thirty recipes in all. She had

carefully typed them all up and put them in a book of delicious memories. Each of us read the inscription and was comforted by the presence of our grandmother:

Dedicated to my sisters, Leslie and Tracy,
who share with me the many joyful memories
of dinners at Gramma's. The smells . . . the tastes . . .
but mostly the love.
(Compiled by Claudia ~ 1992)

Frank and Steiner

Laura Toffenetti

My husband I have two dogs, Frank and Steiner. Yes. Frank and Steiner. We already had Frank when we got Steiner. We had thought about naming them Frank and Beans, Frank and Furter, and Frank Lee-my-dear-I-don't-give-a-damn.

Frank

Frank is a Heinz dog, part Rottweiler, part Shepherd and part Sheltie. He is the smartest dog I've ever had. He once brought me a wrapped piece of chocolate and smiled when I called him my favorite son. We got him when our house was brand new. We had become very good friends with our builder and so named our dog after him. That was supposed to be a compliment until Frank started peeing on the carpet. When he was a tiny puppy, a little ball of fluff, I would sit on the floor and he would climb into my lap, up my arm, onto my shoulder and then on my head for a good lie down. I'd watch TV thinking, *I have a dog on my head.* A sweet but mixed blessing.

Frank, because he's smart, is an escape artist. His favored form of escape is climbing the six foot fence that surrounds the dogs' yard. We went from a three, to a four, to a six foot fence. He likes a challenge. My dad says I'll have to get turrets and armed guards if we really want to keep him in. But he comes joyfully when called, so it's not that serious a problem.

Frank, with his great brain, is afraid of unexpected noises. He knows enough to know an unexpected noise when he hears one. Frank considers a lot of noises unexpected. He has the usual doggy fear of thunder and has added to that slamming doors and wind blowing through the screens. He's figured out that if the wind is blowing through the screens, then that means there is enough wind to slam the door. There are days in the spring and fall when it is easier to close all the windows and stifle rather than putting up with this phobia.

The Fourth of July, therefore, is our least favorite holiday. The Fourth of July comes in, well, July, the middle of summer. When all we are wearing are shorts and T-shirts. So when firecrackers start to scream and pop on, say, July 1st at noon, and July 2nd at 5:00, and July 3rd from 8:00 until 10:00, and July 4th all day and all night long, ending with the really cool rockets that sound like zombies screaming at the moon, well, Frank feels compelled to react in the only way he can. He'll patter into the room, toenails clicking across the wood floors to where I am peacefully watching TV or reading a book. He'll be all a-tremble. Nervously he'll circle around and circle around and then climb into my lap. Once there he will again circle around and circle around and then climb onto my head. Yes, you read right. Climb onto my head. Part Rot, part Shepherd, part Sheltie. Not what one would call a small dog. His attempts to reach great heights are imbedded in my shoulders and thighs, nails grasping for hold on my tender flesh. It is never easy explaining to friends the strange black and blue marks that bloom across my body in early summer.

Steiner

Steiner is a Husky and five years Frank's junior. He's the dumbest dog I've ever had. Well, that's not very nice, and maybe I did have a dumber dog once, but he's at least the dumbest dog I've had in a long while. He is a beautiful blond with one golden eye and one blue eye. Old blue eye, I call him. He's not motivated by food, which makes him difficult to train. Not that we ever really train our dogs. They usually just learn their good manners and bad habits from the older dog. Frank always comes when you call. He learned to do that from his mentor, Martha.

Steiner never learned. Which means you can never take him off a leash. That's a shame because he loves to run. I know this by the way he sneaks out under a closing garage door and takes off for parts unknown. This sounds like a smart move, right? But he never really goes anywhere. He runs in circles from my north neighbor to my south neighbor, back and forth, back and forth. If I leave him alone he'll come home in half an hour. If I go out to get him he will stay out longer because what harm can he come to if mom's watching or some doggy psychology like that.

However, he will gleefully run up to any stranger and greet her as if she were his long lost buddy. This includes my neighbor, Joy. I know she's not a stranger, but in Steiner's mind anyone he doesn't live with deserves the hero's welcome. Joy and I have an arrangement. Whenever I call to let her know he's gotten out, or if she sees her cats climbing trees, she steps out on her porch. Steiner will immediately make a beeline for her. While she's busy scratching his tummy and playing with his ears I walk over with the leash. He never makes the connection that if she's petting him his run is over. The truth is I don't mind the occasional jaunt as it's a good excuse for Joy and me to stop and have a chat as he tries to pull my arm out of its socket, Huskies being natural pullers.

During one of his escapes, though, he ended up being hit by a car. The ligaments in his right front leg were severely damaged. He's fine now, but for a while he had to be taken to the vet on a daily basis to have his bandage changed. He LOVED going to the vet. Now I ask you, how many dogs do you know LOVE going to the vet? My husband and I hardly ever take our dogs in the car so they usually learn pretty fast that a car ride ends in a shot. When Frank is in the car, he is properly somber, worried, and trying really hard to be good so we won't feel compelled to punish him by taking him to THE VET.

Steiner, on the other hand, LOVES going to the vet. He's all smiles getting in the car, during the ride, getting out of the car, peeing on top of all the other dogs' calling cards before we walked in the door. He happily visits with all the other dogs and people and then lets the nurse take him in the office, tail in a delighted curl. He is THRILLED to go with these lovely ladies. And he continued to be thrilled daily for the two weeks of visits to get his bandages changed. The nurse always made me sit in the waiting room. There would be silence and then I'd hear him start to wail; woowooowoo! The song is pitiful and evokes great sympathy from any who hear it. Then I'd hear the doctor say, "I haven't even touched you yet!" Day after day he went through this routine. He never connected the ride, the office or the nurse with the dreaded vet. Dumb and chicken. And musical.

Frank and Steiner

Frank and Steiner love to sing together. The first time Frank sang was before Steiner's time. He was in the yard barking at some bold adventurer who dared ride a bike down his street when Frank was overcome with doggy joy. He threw back his head and started to howl. I happened to be sitting near the window at the time and looked out at him. I swear the look on his face couldn't have been more surprised than mine. He filed that new song away and used it only on very rare occasions.

When we got Steiner, all of that changed. Huskies are natural singers. They don't really bark but yap and howl. When the dogs discovered this shared ability, it turned into a daily event. My husband and I love it and feel compelled to join in. We felt a little silly at first but it's really a very freeing couple of minutes when all of us have our noses pointed toward the ceiling and are howling our hearts out. There are all kinds of textures they put into it. Frank's tail is wagging the whole time as he checks to make sure that we are fully participating. If we aren't actively yipping and yapping and singing away with our chins pointed skyward, the song starts to falter. Steiner has more variety in his renditions, with interesting phraseology and range, but he always lets Frank sing the lead. We'll all be gleefully singing this unholy opera when suddenly, with some invisible signal, the song stops as soon as it started, and we go back to reading the paper, drinking our coffee, and keeping an eye out for bike riders. I suppose it's worth pointing out here that we live in a rural community, and there is a good distance between our neighbors and ourselves.

The only time this duo really gets monstrous, Frankensteinerish, is when they shed. I had never owned a dog that shed as badly as Frank. He gets this soft, light, puppy fur under his overcoat and when he sheds it comes out in handfuls. Literally. I could make an afghan with it, if I wanted an afghan that smelled like a dog. Then we got Steiner. His shedding is worse than Frank's. Clumps of it lie on newly vacuumed carpets like fluffy, white, downy . . . I'm searching for some beautiful analogy to go here, but I'm coming up short. The truth is there is hair everywhere. All the time. Every season. Sometimes it's Frank shedding in clumps. When he stops, Steiner picks up the slack. Once and while, just for variety, they do shedding duets. In desperation, I take Steiner outside and back rub him with my fingers. He is, of course, piercingly, woowooingly fearful of the comb. This technique dislodges so much hair that the first time I did it, my husband thought a bunny had been killed. I make sure I only do this on a windy day and in clothes I was planning on washing right away or I'd look like a short Sasquatch. The birds, on the other hand, gather it up in clumps like cotton balls to pad their nests.

I've tried to make peace with this. I am not someone who finds housework fulfilling, but I have to admit that vacuuming my fur-covered rugs is pretty darn satisfying. It's not like some homes where you can't tell if they have vacuumed or not because it always looks perfect. And I confess that I've made peace with the fact that the stairs have gathered a nice collection of hair tumbleweeds. What is hard to take is the hair covering the couch, the chairs, the beds, our food and our clothing. Never wear dark clothes in my house. It just isn't worth the effort. I've been known to put on that perfect black outfit in the garage where there are no dogs allowed. And then leave. Immediately.

I know it is insane to let two animals run our lives like this. But the truth is we're not the leader of this pack.



Connecticut Writing Project
Storrs, CT