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Wrestling Windmills

Christopher Girman
University of Texas-Pan American

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WRESTLING WINDMILLS

A Thesis

by

CHRISTOPHER GIRMAN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2010

Major Subject: Creative Writing

WRESTLING WINDMILLS

A Thesis
by
CHRISTOPHER GIRMAN

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Jean Braithwaite
Chair of Committee

José Skinner
Committee Member

Philip Zwerling
Committee Member

May 2010

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ABSTRACT

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This manuscript explores the teaching process by following the protagonist's four year journey at a middle school in Edinburg, Texas. The narrator passes through four distinct phases: first-year angst, pedagogic subversion, converting the natives, and, ultimately, personal and professional acceptance. Daily interaction disrupts the narrator's worldview, complicating his relationships with peers, colleagues, family, and the local community. In a series of moves designed to make himself more accessible to students, the narrator encounters sexual, racial, and gender bias—much of it his own. Finally, after a serious accident in Central Mexico during Spring Break, the protagonist relies on his students to oversee his physical and emotional health. He ultimately drops labels, such as “inconsistent liberal” or “neocolonist,” in favor of a personal pedagogy dominated by vulnerability, Eros, realistic goals, and flexibility.

DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to all the students at B.L. Garza Middle School.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the members of my thesis committee for their patience and helpful recommendations throughout the process. I would also like to thank my students for reviewing parts of the manuscript from inception to final draft. None of this would be possible without them.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I. Introduction

“This was the journey he remembered. The actual journey may have been quite different, but the actual journey has no interest for education. The memory was all that mattered.”

Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*

The modern genre of creative nonfiction tells a story using facts, yet relies on many of the techniques of fiction to convey emotional vibrancy and share a compelling story. Early writers of creative nonfiction, including Jack London and Ernest Hemingway, used characterization, scenes, first-person narration, compressed information, minimal dialogue tags, active verbs, and—often—the present tense, to convey the poignancy of The San Francisco Earthquake and Spanish Civil War, respectively. Although it is difficult to offer a precise definition, creative nonfiction’s leading practitioner Lee Gutkind argues that creative nonfiction uses “scenic construction and other strategies of dramatic immediacy” to convey emotional experiences like those associated with fiction, yet culled from real life (Gutkind 19).

Ira Glass iterates that good creative nonfiction writers act as both reporters and entertainers ensconced in the thrill of discovery and the pleasure of trying to make sense of the world (Glass 4). The following words, offered by Glass in his introduction to *The New Kings*, a collection of the best creative nonfiction writing, neatly convey my goals in

the following manuscript: “By making stories full of empathy and amusement and the sheer pleasure of discovering the world, these writers reassert the fact that we live in a world where joy and empathy and pleasure are all around us, there for the noticing” (14).

The trouble is, how? The roots of creative nonfiction run deep in literary, historical, and reportage tradition. Modern creative nonfiction encompasses a variety of styles and subgenres including, says Bruce Hoffman of the University of Pittsburgh English Department, “autobiography, biography, history, speculative or personal essay, new journalism, [and] investigative reporting” of the type seen in *The New Yorker* or *Atlantic Monthly* (Hoffman 2). Besides Hoffman’s list, a variety of other forms exist, including travel writing, ethnography, personal memoir, “gonzo journalism,” and the “nonfiction novel,” each possessing a formidable artistic, intellectual, and critical tradition. Likewise, each form possesses its own syntactical, semantic, and thematic concerns. Choosing a style in which to ground a work depends on the goals of the manuscript itself. In other words, the initial task in developing a nonfiction manuscript about the teaching profession lies not in deciding what to write, but which form of creative nonfiction best conveys the spine of the piece. What is my central point?

The purpose of this piece, like many others in the teaching genre, is to document the physical, emotional, and cognitive development of a new teacher struggling to understand a system—or, rules of the game—at odds with his general disposition. This manuscript is defined by desire. In reading the relevant literature of the teaching genre, I encountered a variety of goals and objectives inspiring the final text: a “how-to” piece such as Rafe Esquith’s *Teach Like Your Hair’s on Fire*; a humorous account of the disheveled first-year teacher and her students, as Bel Kaufman accomplished in *Up the*

Down Staircase; Evan Hunter's fictitious chronicle of urban youth in *The Blackboard Jungle*; riveting exposes, such as Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age* or Neil Postman's *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*; or, finally, a retrospective or "autobiographical" memoir as that offered by Frank McCourt in *Teacher Man*. Ultimately, I chose to incorporate the above works in a pastiche approach, or a new form of tourism that isn't "so much as looking at a view as being in the midst of one" (Shukman).

Throughout the text I address the personal, physical, and social structures of oppression encircling the students and myself. I use desire to penetrate the stifling social and moral codes at the root of this oppression. To address the personal construction of oppression, I rely on the work of Dan Klindon and Michael Thompson in *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. "The loneliness of men has to be addressed in the lives of boys," they write. Teachers must "model a manhood of emotional attachment" (254). In modeling this style of manhood, I also address how my own loneliness and emotional detachment affects my relationship with my students.

I address physical oppression by engaging in play with my male students. Closely linked to the personal oppression mentioned in the previous paragraph is bell hook's notion of Eros in the classroom, or the idea that vulnerability and love are the root of all freedom. I spend a great deal of time describing the colors, sizes, and contours, of adolescent male bodies in an attempt to address my own erotic attraction to men. The aim is to offer this type of "crush" as an alternative to repressed sexual fantasies and increase the amount of emotional connection between my students and me.

Finally, I attempt to tackle the social roots of oppression by identifying specific structures in the educational regime limiting student engagement. Public schools too often preach acquiescence and rote repetition of facts instead of dialogue, self-direction, and enterprise. I rely on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Aaron Kipnes's *Angry Young Men*, and seminal texts by Kozol and Postman, to undergird my observations in specific educational theory. My ultimate desire—the spine, so to speak: to open myself to the joys of children, to replace absence with presence, to advocate for children and, in doing so, learn how to advocate for myself. I believe this multifaceted approach adequately addresses the personal, physical, social, and ethical constraints placed upon the educational environment.

The following manuscript is separated into five sections: April 2010; September 2006; August 2007; October 2008; and March 2009. The separation is intended to demonstrate the temporal sequence of events. The developmental process is shown in five distinct phases corresponding to the five parts of the book, each delineated by a specific date written above the chapter number. I use subtle section breaks, eschewing white space or specific titles, to emphasize the ongoing process of development, which can only be separated artificially into constitutive parts or distinct temporal divisions, such as Part I or Part II. That is, I want to convey my development as incremental and forward-leaning, yet also embracing periodic discoveries contradicting or reinforcing my previous beliefs. The work at times relies on a coming-of-age, Bildungsroman motif, yet flirts with the idea of a “counter-bildungsroman” narrative, or the reconceptualization of personal and educational norms outside the colonial or postcolonial discourse.

Why postcolonial? My reliance on postcolonial literature and the refinement of postmodern concepts, along with a nod to the anthropological tradition, locates the work in the wider concept of ethnographic writing. I do this because the protagonist is acutely aware that he is an outsider—geographically, ethnically, and sexually—in the South Texas community in which he teaches. Initially, I know nothing about the Texas History I am entrusted to teach. Instead of focusing on “valid designs, competent researchers, minimizing risks, random selection, and informed consent” (Denzin 274), as some anthropologists demand, I follow instead Norman Denzin’s call for a researcher who “builds collaborative, reciprocal, trusting, and friendly relations with those studied” (Denzin 275); in my case, the children. Doing so allows me to focus on the multiple, complex identities embedded in the shifting boundaries and dynamic processes of adolescence. I focus on a “performance-inflected” vocabulary of border crossings, spatial manipulation, improvisation, contingency, movement, and, especially, the embodied nature of fieldwork (Conquergood).

As a result of this approach, the following manuscript serves as both a countercultural critique of the educational system, and an embodied examination of that system itself, represented by the shifting boundaries and dynamic interaction inherent in the teacher-student relationship. My trouble, however, is balancing a concern for accuracy and rigid truth, as early anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski demanded, and recognizing and depicting how interaction itself—the play of mankind alive—modifies, moves, and prejudices personal exchanges. I fear a reliance on *verisimilitude*, or the reproduction of reality in accordance with the rules of a specific genre (Denzin 11). Or worse, *vraisemblance*: mere similarity with a given truth

(Mienczakowski 258). My students matter. The stakes are higher when you research a population to which you feel loyalty (Lewin and Leap 19).

II. When Truth is Stranger Than Fiction

“As soon as it is exposed as fraudulent, a text that had seemed powerful and original is reduced to schlock”.

Ruth Klüger

With my central design in place—the revealing of the personal, physical, social, and ethical constraints placed upon teachers and students—I originally experimented with a variety of styles informed by my previous work. A major theme, I discovered, was the accuracy of my reporting. All types of creative nonfiction possess the ultimate burden of truth. Nonfactual assertions in a nonfiction book matter (Yagoda 266). The discernible critique catches—or at the very least *suspects*—squirms, follies, hyperbole, an array of untruths. In a *New Yorker* critique of Ben Yagoda’s book *Memoir: A History*, Daniel Mendelsohn insists that “[t]he need for certain kinds of memoir to be true goes back to Augustine’s ‘Confessions’: if the anguish and suffering aren’t real, there’s nothing to redeem, and the whole exercise becomes pointless” (Mendelsohn 4). While my manuscript does not fit in the memoir genre, Mendelsohn’s next point applies directly. “This outrage tends to be exacerbated,” he writes, “when the book in question claims to bear witness to social and political injustice” (4). I discovered this firsthand in several critiques of my first published work, *Mucho Macho: Seduction, Desire, and the Homoerotic Lives of Latin Men*. The authority, identity, and anthropological perspectives I’d so meticulously constructed evaporated in accusations of inaccuracy and self-serving

neocolonial erotic discourse. I stood accused of sexual tourism. Did I, the naïve twenty-something scholar gathering data outside the university paradigm, conflate anthropological observation with enchanted exoticism, “going native,” or, worse, the curator’s exhibitionism? I ask the same question throughout this manuscript concerning my treatment of my middle-school students.

This issue is important for the present project because I express my affection for my male students in ways that, at times, suggest an erotic attraction. Again, the white narrator depicts attractive, darker-skinned males in a social setting—exaggerated perhaps by the narrator’s casual tone—in which he possesses an imbalance of power. Am I making the same mistake? I intentionally allow the reader to come to her own conclusions about the narrator’s intention in hopes of eliciting the reaction that “I, the reader” am privy to something the narrator has neither begun, nor is willing, to understand. The present manuscript continues my intention of “telling a good yarn,” or documenting the witty, playful, robust spirit of Hispanic men. I devote lavish attention to specific boys, at times falsifying the importance of events in my own mind. This is done intentionally. However, it is no longer tenable in today’s literary world to use false memories and “invented connections between unconnected things” to guide the reader to some “psychic truth” or imagined thread (Campbell 171). Danger exists in the shift toward meaning and away from truth. That’s fine, perhaps, for an autobiographical reader looking for a few good hours of entertainment, but what about the reader who hopes to learn something about the ways of the world and how the narrator responds to them (Yagoda 270)?

My next published work, *The Chili Papers*, emerged during my second year of teaching, and therefore forms a critical part of the present project. That work developed

from the journaling of childhood memories coupled with a series of romantic failures. The apex of this journaling occurred during my first year of teaching. I relied on this journal to establish my confused, alienated, and disconnected attitude during my first year of teaching. During that year, my burden of troubled loves with hyper-masculine Hispanic males dissipates in the company of prepubescent boys as innocent and goodhearted as a gentle wind. Yet I chose not to include these journal entries in the present project, and only mention *The Chili Papers* once in the manuscript, because this project focuses on the relationship between the narrator and his students. I am not writing a sequel. In *The Chili Papers*, I'd relied on a personal style—self-deprecating satire, humorist self-homage—in which the wink of my eye or tone of my voice tells the reader not to take anything too seriously (Yagoda 270). This, however, created a problem. I'd managed to give a false testimonial to myself (Goose 174) in which meaning takes precedent over truth. I'd turned truth into autobiographical fiction.

Maintaining the accuracy of the present manuscript has proved to be a challenge. Because the manuscript covers a broad time period of four years, it is impossible to remember exact conversations or specific emotions. Many famous writers transform the juice of their lives into fiction, with such works as Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1922) and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (1916) setting the stage for the ascension of the "autobiographical first novel" (Yagoda 171). Such works, including Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Ernest Hemingway's short story collection *In Our Time* (1925), used techniques traditionally employed in fiction—writing dramatically, compressing information, using active instead of passive verbs—to depict events in these author's lives. Other literary figures, such as Maxim Gorky

and W.H. Hudson, employed a novelistic style with “scenes, dialogue, and character development” to their personal memoirs (Yagoda 219). However, I was not aware at the time of this rich tradition of novelistic style embedded in personal memoir. Instead, I transformed apt humor into caricature; simple characters acquired mythical status; and story arcs jumped like boiling water. The present project aims to follow specific students, teachers, and administrators throughout their time at Chavez Middle School, and portray them as accurately as possible.

III. Wrestling Windmills

“I had the angst and didn’t know what ailed me.”

Frank McCourt, *Teacher Man*

Wrestling Windmills began on a promising note. I relied heavily on individual scenes that grew organically out of the classroom environment and involve special special-education students; frazzled administrators; bureaucratic bumbles; right-wing history curriculum; and my own cynical tendencies. I emerged, unfortunately, with disconnected dialogues and superficial portraits of a disembodied student body. I included few examples of actual student work. I only partially incorporated Gutkind’s command to fully integrate fictional techniques in creative nonfiction. Further, I was plagued by indecision on what I wanted to offer the reader; I hadn’t clarified the spine of the piece.

I emerged with a piece loaded with hyperbolic forays negating scenes of true emotional engagement. How did I expect the reader to react to my sorrow at the loss of

one of my favorite students, Rolan, when I had previously depicted the boy as little more than comic prop in my otherwise troubled day? Did I really expect the reader to believe that a twelve-year-old football player named Carlos would use the word “advocate” to describe how I should respond to a vacant-looking boy who regularly fell asleep in class? I’d repeated my earlier inclination toward exaggeration, perfectly fine in a work of solid satire or humorist leanings, but I then expected the reader to suspend his disbelief (eye wink; lip curl; Burroughs-esque smile) during my moments of self-reflection and intimate personal interaction with the students. You can’t have it both ways.

In *The Literature of Reality*, Barbara Lounsberry and Gay Talese list guidelines a writer must follow to produce quality nonfiction, regardless of the chosen subgenre: 1. Research thoroughly; 2. Cultivate relationships with your subjects over a period of time; 3. Never invent or change facts or events; 4. Avoid composites; 5. Aim for a clear style with rhythm, texture, color, and dramatic pace; 6. Write for real people to enrich their lives; 7. Write about real events and people to make them come alive; and 8. Have faith in the value and importance of human beings and human events. My first attempt insufficiently accessed my own stored memory and a hodgepodge of student work to “research” my student subjects (guideline one). While I had cultivated relationships with students over time (guideline two), I relied instead on composite sketches of students and administrators (guideline four) and twisted minor events into larger pools of meaning (guideline three). I did so at the expense of parents or administrators who might benefit from the real-life interaction of student and teacher, child and adult (guidelines six and seven). On the positive side, the manuscript showed faith in the importance of human

beings and relationships (guideline eight) and possessed “rhythm, texture, and color,” although intermingled with stylistic variance (guideline five).

In addition to Lounsberry’s and Talese’s normative criteria, I rely on a list of “negative” suggestions, or what *not* to do, offered by Yagoda. He lists the problems of writing about real people and events in his own hierarchy. First, inaccuracy is a problem to the extent that memoir depicts identifiable people and does so in a negative light. That is, I must be careful what I say about an obese administrator, Mrs. Martinez, because she knows who she is; likewise, I mustn’t identify individual students with too many “obvious details.” Yagoda next warns of getting “gists,” as well as details wrong. My first manuscript confused the color of my teaching cart, an obvious incorrect *detail*, while it also misrepresented the process of state-mandated testing and grievance procedures, a “gist” error. I incorrectly summarized the manner in which I was written up by my superior for testing violations in an attempt to dramatize the absurdity of such regulations. Such “gist” is easily verifiable, and should not be twisted to emphasize a different point. Finally, in descending order, Yagoda lists poor writing, self-service, and “wearing an agenda on its sleeve” as the final three ways to sabotage any work of creative nonfiction.

A scene from Kaufman’s 1964 teaching bestseller, *Up the Down Staircase*, eventually led to the spine that binds my narrative together. Kaufman writes, “I had used my sense of humor; I had called it proportion, perspective. But perspective is distance. And distance, for all my apparent involvement, is what I kept between myself and my students” (302). Kaufman’s work, however, is fiction—there is no staircase. However, *Up the Down Staircase* makes use of a narrative strategy mixing snippets of faculty

memos, student writing, directives from the principal, notes between teachers or, as Salmon Rushdie summarizes, “scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved.” A messy, postmodern impulse propels the work. In Kaufman’s book, student perspectives take center-stage, with notes from the “suggestion box” sounding true to life:

“Can You make the chalk stop from squeeking?” —Nervous

“Fuk. Screw. Crap. Goddam. Nerts to you.” —Unsigned

“Don’t call the Roll so early.” —Late Bird

In Kaufman’s world, humor is key, love is divine, and the children are capable of speaking for themselves. I adopt my own version of Kaufman’s narrative style in my first section, *September 2006*, to introduce a particular method of articulating children’s voices—a pastiche approach full of dialogue and occasional student work—that reoccurs throughout the manuscript, although not as often as in Kaufman’s model. I attempt to integrate student voices with the narrator’s contemplative demeanor (this merging becoming a major theme in the story) in my opening scene:

You’re a fool. Can’t you see, Dammit? Social Studies is where it’s at. Geography. Climate. History. It’s the whole world, fool. Learn how to learn. Think for yourself. Make a right or left, Belle. See you in Patagonia. Surviving in Salvador. Notes of a Native Son. Oh hell, Forks is good enough. Get there while you can. I’m not going to tell you again—read, fool. I’m a crap-detector. You can’t fool me.

Jackie likes the *Twilight* reference: “That’s what we read.”

“It’s too fancy.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I hate *Twilight*.”

“That’s for girls.”

“What about Wednesday word scrambles?”

“The poetry.”

“No, no—the slave narratives.”

“From Cuba?”

“Yeah, the black guy.”

“No, the indian.”

“You mean Indian like ‘native’?”

“Yeah, um . . . I guess.”

“Say indigenous or—”

“Sir?”

“Yes, Fernando?”

“Indígena”

“Thank you.”

“I still think *Twilight* sucks.”

“Thank you, Fernando.”

I begin the manuscript with a dialogic final scene as a way of drawing in the reader to an array of likeable, and historically-informed, student voices. The student voices are self-confident, self-directing, flexible, enterprising, humorous, and open to evidence

outside themselves, the model of educational achievement advanced by Postman's *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, and used by me as a model for my fifth and final section, *March 2009*, which the first section is intended, temporally, to follow. The students reference specific elements—like the slave narratives and the proper way to address native populations—that inform the final section of the book. I try to surprise the reader by introducing section two, *September 2006*, in a tense, awkward tone in hopes of peaking interest in how the distressed, disconnected narrator in the second section ultimately constructs the friendly and genuine classroom environment depicted in the short, dialogue-rich opening scene, *April 2010*, itself a reflection of the manuscript's final section.

IV. September 2006

*“Dear Francesca,
I hate to have to switch gears from the magic music played by children
and their happy teacher on imaginary flutes to the miseries of high-stakes
testing”*

Jonathan Kozol, *Letters to a New Teacher*

Section two, *September 2006*, begins with a depiction of my first day at Edison Middle School. I begin in the middle of a scene, rather than in prolonged narrative mental meanderings, in hopes of introducing the reader to some of section two's central characters. The first words, “*Nervous! Who, me?*” establish the narrator's faux-relaxed tone and introduces his italicized narrative asides that garnish the text. These asides

become important in cementing the casual tone of my intended narrative voice, particularly in later scenes depicting more serious topics, such as gang violence, teenage pregnancy, and my own traumatic head injury.

I use Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man* as a model to establish the breezy tone of this manuscript within more serious discussions of the social and personal impediments to an improved educational system. McCourt's book nicely balances his authorial voice and that of his students. His "autobiographical narrative" relies on authentic dialogue, absent quotation marks, and stylistic idiosyncrasies unlikely—if done sloppily and inconsistently—to please the average reader:

Yeah, sí, Well I'm going back to PR. Don't like English no more. Too hard. Hurts my throat.

But George said, Hey Irishman. Not your fault. You hell of a good teacher. All you guys come to the kitchen for a piece of peach pie (135).

The *Teacher Man* does not hide behind a mask. McCourt's casual tone allows masculine camaraderie to emerge throughout the text. Even his own angst. "In the back of your brain you'll always be that pissy-assed kid from the lanes of Limerick. Find out who the hell you are" (163). The dictates of text will not determine McCourt. He is vainglorious, just, and funny. The trick, however, is how to sprinkle the text with stage-direction, italicized inner thoughts, and long swaths of short, punchy dialogue without coming across as "gimmicky." A novice writer must first earn his keep, careful not to sacrifice a carefully-constructed text to a fanciful exploration of personal style.

Vainglorious and egoless prose must work together. McCourt demonstrates how this can be done effectively, and thus offers a productive strategy, along with Kaufman, in which

to model the tone and style of my own work: “domesticity and coziness combined with the grand manner” (*Wrestling Windmills*, 160).

I establish myself as an outsider early in the text. The seventh-grade principal, Mrs. Martinez, is already on a first-name basis with another new teacher, Debbie Santos, while I desperately try to find my students in the hallway. I’m not given a room; instead, Mrs. Martinez rolls a cart at my feet and wishes the staff a good day. “You’re going to be roving,” she says, thus establishing the narrator’s man-without-a-home motif, which continues in various forms throughout the work. I am not native to the area in which I teach, thus justifying my anthropological approach to teaching. I explain this stance early on in the text, reminiscing about my previous travels in Central America (*Wrestling Windmills* 81), and introducing the subtle distinctions between anthropologist and tourist, which I revisit later in the section through a class discussion of exploration, colonization, and race—three topics important to the narrator and his teaching. Authenticity depends on an accurate depiction of the manuscript’s location, particularly from an outsider such as myself. I explain that the district is one of the poorest in the United States and sprinkle the text with occasional Spanish phrases, some formal and others more idiomatic to the area in which we live—Texas’ Rio Grande Valley. The manuscript would benefit from a more thorough exploration of the region outside the school doors.

Likewise, the ridiculous stretch of school bureaucracy is represented in the mind-numbing instruction for “Bell Schedule One” (*Wrestling Windmills* 39) and hundreds of student compacts filling up the narrator’s cart. In addition, I’m forced to wander from classroom to classroom due to classroom shortages. I also emphasize in this second section how other teachers—including the teacher in the pink shirt in Chapter Two and,

later, Ms. Ruiz—appear to have total control of their students, thus offering readers the notion that my own lack of preparation, not student behavior, is the cause of subsequent first-year chaos. In addition, Chapter Seven reveals the extremes of standardized testing, and illustrates how my natural disposition towards disorder affects the success of my students.

The naming of my cart, Betsy, and my developing relationships with Brian and Roxanne underscores the importance of developing friendly relationships with students. Brian becomes my first friend, of any age, in the school. I want to establish early in the text that the students have the ability to rescue flailing teachers, which becomes an important motif in the fifth and final section, *March 2009*, when the narrator nearly loses his life in a mysterious Spring Break accident in Mexico. The narrator, of course, is not aware of the importance of these early interactions.

My initial concern for my physical appearance is reflected throughout the second section as a point of reference to my later illness and temporary physical decay. I emphasize smell early in the text—“it smells like honeysuckle in room 309”—because the narrator ultimately loses his smell. Also, as early as section two, I amble down the hallway. “Ambling” becomes a theme in later sections of the text. No desire can flourish in the midst of decay. Furthermore, I establish the physical motif of the text early, describing Brian’s small hands on my lower back, calling a boy in a Cowboys jersey “cute,” and referencing a boy with “big, strong legs.” I attempt to establish the intimate tone early. I move this tone to the girls later in chapter two: “. . . surrounded by *walking talking texting* girls.” Girls will capture the narrator’s attention in a different way than the boys—a more social, emotive context. I also try to establish my degree of comfort

with the girls, breaking into a long stretch of first-person monologue with them as I describe how I arrived in the teaching profession.

I've struggled with the concept of "vainglorious" prose throughout this project. At times I worry that my stylistic flourishes will jeopardize my emancipatory intentions. I believe in the most modern form of creative nonfiction, the ascension of the writer as a non-negligible entity in the developing storyline. I am present in each scene of the first three chapters. I worry, though, about dominating the book, about presenting myself as unique and dazzling, or jaded and flippant, revealing a "certain obsessiveness and vanity—a quality of preening," as offered by Jay Kauffmann in his article *Egoless Versus Vainglorious Prose* (49). Kauffman argues that stylized, overly-poetic, richly-emotional prose occupies a feminine vainglorious position, while so-called egoless prose embraces an understated, formal, detached masculine style that comes across as a mask. I worry that my desire to put the kids first will move my prose into the expressive, emotional realm, not such a bad thing, but that in the process I will adopt an overly-simplified prose style mirroring the language of my students.

My juxtaposition of rapid-fire student comments (as demonstrated by the opening scene and Chapter Four's lengthy discussion of paint colors), italicized narrator comments not clearly marked as silent thoughts or articulations, and the narrator's intimate interaction with his male students takes a vainglorious position. I worry about sliding into the "exquisite, feminine, showy, and personal" (75). To counteract this tendency, I use a plethora of dialogue to blunt my narrative presence. Too much dialogue, however, brings charges of inauthenticity. Ultimately Kauffman argues for a middle position of revelation and personality on the one side, and absence and

mysteriousness on the other. I agree. This balance can be accomplished both in subject matter, i.e. the amount of time spent on my background and personal life, and a prose style that is, he says, “an extension of desire”—to offer my unique teaching vision, be admired, share children’s voices, save the schools, look inside myself. That’s what I hope to accomplish in the style in which I reveal my past to my fifth-period girls and the reader.

On page 48, I introduce the concept of stories: you never know which version to trust. I want to nudge the reader, perhaps winking, and acknowledge that my version of events is not infallible. I’m aware that subsequent interactions can be interpreted in a variety of ways. “We’ll have plenty of time to retell history,” I explain to my fifth-period girls. I emphasize this concept of multiple voices and stories to my students throughout the text in my teaching of history, thus cementing a teacher-student bond, or determination, to get their stories heard. One of the first assignments I give for homework is the creation of student life-lines aimed at prodding the students to think about the importance of trends and significant events in their own lives. Together, we embark on our lifelines.

In Chapter Three, I fill in the blanks of the story I left out in fifth period. “I embellish,” I write. “I leave things out.” (*Wrestling Windmills* 58). Subsequent pages depict the narrator as mired in his own detachment. Poor kids in *AmeriCorps* brochures do not move him. The predominant theme in section two, *September 2006*, is my lack of emotional response, neither excitement nor despair. Things simply happen; I am skeptical (*Wrestling Windmills* 60).

I introduce Don Quixote as a way of locating my story within historical narratives of madness. My cart becomes my Rozinante, which reminds me of Roxanne, becoming both a burden and a blessing. I initially conceive of the children as windmills, mental images of what I expect trouble to look like. I want to emphasize to the reader that the trouble exists primarily in my own mind, thus implicitly introducing the idea that perceptions and attitudes determine much of the teaching process. I confuse the students with my heady language.

At the end of Chapter Three, I introduce my fellow teammates on Team 77: Monica Ramos, Clarissa Masterson, Virginia Ruiz, and Mrs. Bermuda. They become an important part of the text and an opportunity for me to resist my detachment and form sustainable bonds. They also become role models for a hysterical combination of intellect and mirth emerging from our female students. Likewise, I introduce in Chapter Four the boy with the long eyelashes (*Wrestling Windmills* 98), who influences my eventual outlook on the teaching profession, my conception of appropriate teacher-student contact, and appears in the final section, *March 2009*, as a high school student. The boy, Rolan, occupies a similar position as Kaufman's Ferone, prompting Kaufman's narrator Sylvia in a chapter entitled "Love Me Back" to declare, "I was the one who needed [Ferone], to make me feel" (Kaufman 304).

The children ask prying, personal questions—as seventh graders are apt to do—forcing me to address questions such as who cares for me when I'm ill and who, exactly, do I think I am (*Wrestling Windmills* 94). I, myself, introduce the discussion with a non-sequitur, "For what is my appetite?" in the middle of class discussion. To assuage my confusion, I touch Javier's shoulders and reminisce about the number of friendly

Guatemalan men I'd met on previous travels. This motif of relying on the children as proxy memories of past romantic attachments, and the emotional pleasure inherent in such relationships, dominates much of the manuscript. I attempt to establish this motif early in the text. Likewise, I introduce more poignant questions: From what am I running? Am I here to help or merely to escape? Anthropologist or wandering tourist? Have I exoticized the other? Or worse, romanticized the Other (*Wrestling Windmills* 98)? The line, "I can't believe he's talking to me," in chapter five (*Wrestling Windmills* 107) introduces the self-conscious undercurrent that plagues the narrator throughout the text. In this case, it refers to my joy and embarrassment of befriending the handsome defensive coordinator, Gerry, of a local high school football team. I try to depict my own fear and self-consciousness in the presence of attractive men and boys—not a denial-laced, closeted loneliness, but a fear of rejection and a return to my own awkward middle school years, the pain of which forced me to buckle-down and cultivate a masculine, sporty disposition, which resulted in the emotional detachment observed in the first-person narrator. A key question emerges at the end of Chapter Five: "How do I express my love for these children in an appropriate and satisfying manner?" Further, "Will my romantic longings undo me" (*Wrestling Windmills* 114).

Section two does not answer the above questions, but ends by offering two different impressions of the first-year teaching experience. "I can do something," I say. "Call me Sancho. Call me whatever you will" (*Wrestling Windmills* 122). The next scene takes me to the principal's office, where I'm reprimanded for veering off course. Section two ends with important advice: *have patience young man*. Those words set the stage for the remainder of the manuscript.

V. August 2007

“If they are truly committed to liberation, their action and reflection cannot proceed without the action and reflection of others.”

Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Pablo Freire

Jonathan Kozol’s *Death at an Early Age* illustrates what happens when an idealistic first-year teacher goes too far in his critique of the system. Yet had I even begun my critique? Kozol’s philosophical treatise relies on only six months of teaching experience in a racially-segregated Boston school. While it is important to remember that Kozol taught in the 1960s, a time of extreme racial prejudice often illuminated in the school setting, Kozol’s method of challenging this condition—heavy-handed, accusatory, often dull prose—perhaps alienates, even bores, readers: “Only the authority of visible character demands respect. No other kind deserves it. No child in his heart, unless drugged by passivity, will pay obeisance to authority unless authority has earned it” (182). True, yes. Does Kozol demonstrate this sentiment? Does he depict how things run in his Boston school? Only tangentially, at least in this first book. An idealist like him can barely remain in the here-and-now: “‘Wicked men obey from fear; good men from love’—this comes from Aristotle. And: ‘Obedience is not truly performed by the body if the heart is dissatisfied,’ which comes from the Talmudic scholar Saadia . . . If [these teachers] were honest I do not see how they could have avoided holding both themselves and each other in some portion of the same contempt” (180). Kozol’s work is famous, and for good reason, yet his stylistic approach is different than my own.

While my manuscript does not take this heavy-handed approach, I learned from Kozol to expect more from the kids, get involved in their lives, and don't be afraid to stand up for something you believe in. Unfortunately, I had yet to uncover Kozol's subsequent works, *On Being a Teacher* (1981) and *Letters to Young Teacher* (2007), among others, which have dramatically altered the foundations of modern public education. The previous section, *September 2006*, treats the kids in a comedic manner, while this section, *August 2007*, aims to depict the narrator's increasing emotional, social, and educational bonds with the students. *September 2006* does not fully follow the progress of Brian and Roxanne because the narrator is too wrapped up in the chaos of first-year teaching. My relationship with Rolan and other boys dominates this next section, *August 2007*, as I begin to understand how to reach struggling students, including those engaged in gang activity, and surge out of my emotional detachment into dialogic engagement. I thank Kozol for this, however weakly I accomplish this objective.

Rafe Esquith's *Teach Like Your Hair's On Fire*, like Kozol's book, depicts an idealistic teacher, this time in the Los Angeles school district of the 1990s and years beyond. Esquith's book serves as a "how-to" teaching manual, including dozens of lesson ideas, web-sites, and specific illustrations how the author incorporates these ideas in his classroom. The kids take center-stage in Esquith's text, not as themselves but practical illustrations for educators hoping to improve the quality of their teaching. I implemented several math games, writing contests, and word scrambles directly from Esquith's text.

Unfortunately, Esquith's book is non-transferable. He performs *Henry IV*, takes the kids on cross-country college tours and Broadway reviews, feeds the homeless,

installs a professional stage-lighting in his classroom, and even has his room registered as a non-profit corporation to solicit community donations. Yes, a non-profit! His fifth graders write like professional authors—he provides an essay to prove it—and never lets the reader forget that if their children, or students, do not perform at this high level, it is, unequivocally, the adults' fault. Esquith is a miracle-worker, no doubt, but his text becomes vainglorious, a personal testament to his precious strengths, a how-to manual that, like Kozol's initial texts, may alienate readers who'd like to see a wink and a smile every so often. I use section three, *August 2007*, to ground my text in Freire's theories of oppression, Postman's subversion, Kozol's challenging social critique, and—simultaneously—the witty, breezy outlook favored by Kaufman and McCourt.

I begin *August 2007* in year two, in a new classroom. I am exhilarated, confident, and blame “ignorance and ineptitude” for my first-year failures (*Wrestling Windmills* 152). I challenge myself to rein in the boys' aggressive behavior. Quickly the administration questions my new classroom décor and alternative teaching style. I shift from ineptitude to aptitude. I'm accused of having too much fun with my students, holding illegal fundraisers, and partaking in anti-establishment behavior by questioning the state's conservative approach to history. I befriend the boy with the wild eyelashes, Rolan, who is now in my seventh-period class. I watch the boys' football games after school, and Rolan quickly transforms himself from troublemaker to favored student. That he does not read well, yet knows so much about history, causes me to think about what I expect from the educational system and to examine what I expect from myself.

I follow Postman's concept of giving feedback to students and maintenance to the system, as outlined in his book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. No judging. No

single right answer. Let the kids decide. Unlike the previous year, however, I rely on more texts to bring the kids into the teaching, and ultimately, the learning project. I question white, biased state standards and begin my own version of revisionist history, punctuated by the postmodern, poststructuralist, National Public Radio version of learning emphasized in my master's degree courses at the local university. I listen to the students: "Does Alfredo see something I've missed, the continual process of making meaning visible—the flexible, inquiring, creative mind which faces ambiguity without disorientation? Is *he* the crap-detector? (*Wrestling Windmills* 192).

Raising Cain provides further pattern for this section. I model manhood by becoming emotionally engaged with my male students. No more detached teacher trying to calm his nerves. I'm startled by my students' trouble with words, and ask the question, "[h]ow does one frame the creative experience within functional literacy?" (*Wrestling Windmills* 189). The book *Reviving Ophelia* provides a model to address the needs of girls struggling in a "looks-obsessed" culture. Esquith's book shows me that student work must predominate, and I attempt to detail student achievement on the walls, outside, and through class discussions. Ultimately, during the new tennis season, I'm convinced that the kids need me

In this section, I also make connections to my own life. I mention the concept of "transsexual" in class one day, and realize how I had previously become my own example of detached manhood. The narrator realizes he's concerned about more than the students in his classroom—he's concerned for himself. He's beginning to feel more comfortable in his own skin, and aims to do the same for his students.

Ultimately, after our final tennis match against rival East Middle School, I realize that cheating does not feel so good. Maybe I'd sacrificed a quality education in hopes of getting to know the students better. My students' test scores are abysmal. Perhaps I'd misunderstood Pablo Freire's idea of conscientization, or the manner in which education shapes the person and society. Maybe my attempt at praxis—informed action—leaned too heavily on practice at the expense of theory; that is, I might have been too soon to let the kids explore themselves when their skill set is so low. I attempt to show throughout the section that the administration might already know this, and they are merely demanding from me the personal discipline to abide by rules and regulations, and expect me to teach my students the same thing. This section ends the following October, when Ms. Ramos and I attend the eight-grade football game. Rolan is gone. Something has happened.

V. October 2008

“You sonofabitch . . . you rotten lousy filthy sonofabitch”

Evan Hunter, *The Blackboard Jungle*

This section borrows from Freire's model of the unsuccessful teacher. I become that teacher. I become “Anti-dialogic,” or obsessed with conquest, manipulation, cultural invasion, and divide and rule (Freire 207). I am cold, closed and have no time for other people. My life is a regimented structure of work and the university. I receive few flirtatious stares at the university gym, despite my appearance strengthening via my

disciplinary regimen. I expect the same from my students. The word scramble, suggestion box, and weekly outdoor review games are cancelled.

In this section, I decide the administration was right to complain. These kids are not crap-detectors, just lazy, dumb kids not wanting to do anything. I shift my focus to the GT kids, and deplore my earlier reliance on books such as *Angry Young Men* and *Raising Cain*, both of which preach a more accepting attitude toward masculine aggression. The narrator has no tolerance for *gang-lites*. I dominate and compel my students' recognition of me; they are dependent on their master. I insist I am now "Converting the Natives" and "Guarding the Tower" (Shaughnessy).

Further, I tire of my professors' model of allowing my classmates to turn in mediocre work—in this case, poems and fiction. I remain polite, but inwardly resent my time being wasted on a community of underachievers. I implicitly blame a local culture, almost exclusively Mexican, for failing to instill an ethic of work in their children. Education takes second or third place behind family and religious life, and "looking cool."

Why the change? I find out from Ms. Ramos in Chapter 22 that Rolan is beaten unconscious on the bus by high school gang members. The shock devastates me. The following paragraph summarizes my change of attitude evident in section four, *October 2008*:

I'll say it again—I'm through. No more outside games; no depicting vocabulary concepts in informal pictures; no three-dimensional maps several days in the making. If you can't read properly, it's your parents'

fault. Lonely boys. Poor boys. Bored boys. *Who isn't?* Restless Boys. Angry boys. Violent boys. *Take a number.* I've got more important things to do than breed boys to be slaves to their primitive instincts. Bad choices shouldn't be rewarded, and every voice—despite what my professors insist—does not deserve to be heard. Those who listen get rewarded. It's about time I start converting the natives and guarding the tower. I never did Rolan any good. (256)

Rick Dadier, the young narrator in Evan Hunter's *The Blackboard Jungle*, fluctuates between likability and nastiness. I use him as a model for the *October 2008* section. In the opening chapter, Rick keeps his hands tightly clenched “because he knew they would tremble if he loosened them” (7). Later in the novel, Rick slaps a student, and he finally decides the kids “are all rotten, and they're all bastards” (295). I approached my final draft weary of such extremes, yet ultimately arranged my manuscript in sections based on the narrator's temporary approaches to teaching. Hunter's text reminded me that the narrator representing the so-called *Other* in text must stake his position clearly as that of an outsider, similar to that of an ethnographer. Too close an identification with the native population risks exposure as self-serving, wearing an agenda on one's sleeve, and, especially, inauthenticity. I'd become too close to my students and needed Rolan's tragedy to remind me that I'm neither Mexican, thirteen years old, nor attracted to middle school girls. I travel to Mexico to forget entirely about my students and work on my fiction portfolio for class.

I summarize the goals of my new teaching philosophy towards the end of the section:

It's good to be an anthropologist again. It's like dissertation fieldwork. This time, though, I'm filling in the gaps: I'm not appreciating a tribe, but integrating them into the middle-class way of life. Empty vessels waiting to be filled. Perhaps that's why Jose appeals to me so much. And all the GT girls, even talkative Gabby. I'm the steady flow of truth, and I appreciate how, this year, they listen. I don't need to connect what I'm teaching to what my students already know. Prior knowledge is a scam! We're trying to get what you know *out* of your head (293).

VI. March 2009

“But how does one address positive action on the social level?” I ask the class. I nod at the professor. “Without becoming so controlling?”

Wrestling Windmills

This final section begins in a hospital bed in San Miguel de Allende. I've been severely injured. In the process of dealing with my injury, I realize that I had been an inconsistent liberal in my second year of teaching, followed by a conservative asshole the following year. I'd never fully implemented the dialogic, postmodern model advanced by Postman, hooks, Freire, and Kozol. After a difficult adjustment period, my injury

forces me to be personal, communicative, and less embittered with the administration and my professors.

I think that's what my professor was trying to tell me. We've got to be present in mind, body and spirit. *Experience matters, fool*. Don't allow my students to do whatever they want, as I'd done in my second year, but guide them to a place somewhere deep within their souls. Allow them to feel a love of learning somewhere deep inside. hooks calls it "privatized passion." She says when Eros is in the classroom, love is bound to flourish. Teachers who love students and are loved by students are still suspect in the academy. Maybe that's why I backed off so much. Maybe that's why I rarely touch students anymore, both physically and emotionally.

But, hey, what's dialogue without touch? Am I going to live forever as a foreign tourist, accused in my own head of romanticizing or exoticizing the other, or will I expand and embrace everyone the way it was meant to be? How long can I hide behind these bandages on my head? (370)

The real goals of education, I realize, are a list provided by Postman, which I've summarized as subversive education combined with a grand manner. I aim to instill in my students self-confidence, self-reliance, enterprise, independence, tolerance, and openness to evidence outside themselves. I'd only managed in part three—*August 2007*

(year two)—to touch the surface of what students can do if challenged to disrupt the system within strict parameters of realistic goals, behavior standards, and a nurturing, loving environment. I follow Shaughnessey’s model of “Diving In” and “Sounding the Depths” to examine closely what basic skills my students are lacking and to plan the best way to address these absences.

What distinguishes my work from other books on teaching is the manner in which the students rescue the narrator. Because of my students’ concern and tolerance of my new physical limitations—deafness, hearing aids, imbalance, loss of smell, tinnitus—I am able to reassess my personal and professional limitations. I’d been too hard on myself; too hard on the children. Real subversion is honest writing and private feeling (Kozol 1981, 170). The following exchange with one of professors helped me to reassess my outlook:

The professor looks at me directly. “Until you start to put your body and vulnerabilities and confessions out there, you’ll forever be trapped in this colonial cycle.” *Dear God . . . lighten up.* “Your students have to know there’s a way out of chaos.” *Now he’s got me.* “The Counter-Bildungsroman hero eventually finds himself. The colonized can thrive. That’s why he or she’s a hero.” *Billy, a hero?* “Stop reading from a paranoid position of distrust.” *Start to trust?* I’ve got a titanium screw in my head, and now he tells me to start trusting? (369)

Raising Cain was right all along. Such honesty allows me to accept my new physical condition and reassess why I'd been working so hard throughout my life, both professionally and personally, with little success. *Slow down. Take your time. Have patience, young man.* The advice was there all along. *Your voice matters.* My professors make sense. Cultivating the voice is the finer part of writing. My students showed me how to slow down, while still moving forward.

Finally, and most importantly, my students were my closest friends during the recovery process. The demeanor I'd developed in my fourth section, *October 2008*, contributed to a waning of personal friendships, including my neighbor Mika, and love interests. Eventually, I learned. Instead of infatuations, I engaged the students on an equal footing. As a result, our relationships flourished. Rolan reappears toward the end of the manuscript—we share a short kiss, my first in more than a year. Instead of running, however, I come home to Guatemala, where I had planned to return the summer after my injury in Mexico. Allowing Rolan to kiss me opened my closed spirit, the spontaneity, Eros, and vulnerability that hooks calls for in the classroom. It's what I'd been after all along; I realized that perhaps I was closer than I'd thought in my second year of teaching. I had allowed the state, the administration, the security guards, and my own misconceptions to stifle my subversion. The students—their catchy phrases, bungling romantic crushes, rapid-fire speech, tolerant dispositions, restless spirit—helped me to reclaim Freire's dialogic criteria. Cooperation. Unity. Organization. Cultural synthesis. I believe my students learned much about history, and life, during the time we shared together. I witnessed their confidence soar. Nothing exemplifies better the cultural, sexual, and age synthesis I'd finally obtained than my final kiss with Rolan.

After that, the narrator finally forgives himself. Student voices rise above those in his head. *Swish-bing-boom, ahhhhhhh.*

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PART I

APRIL 2010

CHAPTER 1

The kids want to hear some of my manuscript. “You’ve been promising us all year,” says Jackie. Fine, let’s go:

You’re a fool. Can’t you see, Dammit? Social Studies is where it’s at. Geography. Climate. History. It’s the whole world, fool. Learn how to learn. Think for yourself. Make a right or left, Belle. See you in Patagonia. Surviving in Salvador. Notes of a Native Son. Oh hell, Forks is good enough. Get there while you can. I’m not going to tell you again—read, fool. I’m a crap-detector. You can’t fool me.

Jackie likes the *Twilight* reference: “That’s what we read.”

“It’s too fancy.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I hate *Twilight*.”

“That’s for girls.”

“What about Wednesday word scrambles?”

“The poetry.”

“No, no—the slave narratives.”

“From Cuba?”

“Yeah, the black guy.”

“No, the indian.”

“You mean Indian like ‘native’?”

“Yeah, um . . . I guess.”

“Say indigenous or—”

“Sir?”

“Yes, Fernando?”

“Indígena”

“Thank you.”

“I still think *Twilight* sucks.”

“Thank you, Fernando.”

“Yes, Alisa?”

“Tyler’s cute.”

“Yeah?”

“You think so, sir?”

“What about the stairway book?”

“*Staircase* book.”

“Right, that one.”

“That slave girl.”

“She’s fake.”

“It’s poetry, stupid.”

“It’s history, *flaca*.”

“Put something from the suggestion box.”

“You want me to—”

“Why not?”

“What about the gay guy?”

“Whitman?”

“Yeah, him.”

“The Civil War guy.”

“*Pues . . .*”

“Don’t do that, sir”

“It sounds weird when you do that.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Jesse?”

“*No sé.*”

“What’s wrong with ‘pues?’”

“Why can’t we say ‘crap’ in school?”

“*Usted es blanco.*”

“You just did.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Crap is a bad word.”

“You wrote it.”

“No, *senor*, no think you *es* wrong.”

“No?”

“*Es que*, I don’t understand.”

“Ay, Sir.”

“Anyone know where Patagonia is?”

“Mitchell?”

“Edgar?”

“Alisa?”

“Anyone?”

“Sudamerica!!!”

“Was that you, Marco?”

“Sí. Me”

“Good, Marco.”

“That’s the bell, Mr. G.”

“Next Period.”

“Time for lunch.”

“*Adios.*”

“*Hasta luego.*”

“I like it, sir.”

“Use my name.”

“Don’t say ‘crap.’”

“Diary of a Wimpy Kid.”

“Jacob is hot”

“Tyler!”

“Pick more stuff we’ve read”

“I’ll marry him, you watch.”

“Tyler”

“Jacob!”

“Ay.”

“Diary of a Wimpy Kid.”

“I heard you the first time, Fernando.”

“Oye, Alisa. *Tú tienes la jacket?*”

“Here *chica*. Over here.”

“Time to go.”

“*La historia es la memoria.*”

“Adios. For reals this time.”

PART II

SEPTEMBER 2006

CHAPTER 2

Nervous! Who, me? There's a long crease—from my kneecap area down to the bottom seam. I flatten and spray, crinkle and crease, turn the pants lengthwise over the ironing board as if dressing for my wedding. I'm determined to wear my gray pants. Beside me hangs a black sweater. In thirty minutes I'll be late.

I make it on time. Mrs. Martinez, the seventh-grade principal, waits for me in the library. She's easy to spot in a stiff navy suit lumpy like she's bundling seven stomachs. "Mr. Girman," she says, glancing at my pants. "You have a bit of a challenge.

"Yes, ma'am." I smooth out my sweater.

She smiles at two women to her right. "The other new teachers have been here for several days of orientation. She fingers a butterfly brooch on her shirt collar. "You didn't."

"Yes, of course," I say. "I was in Mexico—"

"Yes, yes, I know. Nothing we could do about the late notice."

"Right."

"We're putting you right in the middle of things." I stay quiet. "So you can get your feet wet."

"Yes, wet feet," I repeat.

"This is our campus plan," she says. She hands me a thick binder. "Make sure you look through it sometime today." I look at the giant white binder. Two smiling

students with huge eyes stare back at me. I open the binder. Again, they stare. The girl looks high. I see a small bag of Doritos in the foreground of the photo. “Everything you need to know are in those pages,” says Mrs. Martinez. “From attendance procedures to the dress,” and here she pauses, “the *dress* code.” A woman to my left—her nametag says Ms. Santos—stares disapprovingly at my tight sweater. I can hear children outside the library’s double doors.

“One question.”

Mrs. Martinez ignores me. “I guess that’s it. Class starts in fifteen minutes.” Ms. Santos smiles. “Any questions?”

Ms. Santos raises her hand.

“Yes, Debbie?”

“Are we on advisory schedule, Assistant Principal Martinez?”

“Advisory,” I mumble. A man in front of me in smooth khaki pants nods. I notice Ms. Santos’ large silver necklace shining in the light like a Peruvian artifact. The Gods must be crazy.

“Absolutely,” says Mrs. Martinez. I fumble through my binder. Why do children laugh so much when they’re stoned? Are they laughing at me? “Page nineteen,” she says. “Bell schedule one.” I flip to page nineteen, the first of six color-coded bell schedules. I read footnote one: “Orange schedule B is a modified block schedule during exam periods and state testing, with the exception of district testing, during which time periods 4-8 follow yellow II, reversed lunch. *Schedule subject to modification pending district approval.*” My eyes wander. I close my binder and squeeze several drops of contact lens solution in my eyes.

I look for Mrs. Martinez in the dispersing crowd. “I was wondering where, um, where I might find, you know, where I’m teaching?”

“For what?”

“My classroom.”

“Oh,” she says. She turns around and nudges a teacher in a navy Panthers school shirt. “No one told you?”

“No . . . uh, I guess not.”

Her head hangs to the side. She wants to know my game.

“Uh, no ma’am,” I say. I watch other new teachers glance at each other apprehensively. Several head toward the door.

“Have a great day,” says Mrs. Martinez. She waves in the direction of the doors. “Remember, if you need anything, just ask.” I stand up. Mrs. Martinez stares at the crease in my pants. “Because of the shortage of classrooms,” she says, her eyes inspecting my sweater, “you’re going to be roving.”

“Yes,” I say. “Roving.” I feel like a thirteen-year-old girl misinformed about her menstrual cycle. Mrs. Martinez looks at me the same way I’d look at that girl—I’ll call her Maria—with a combination of pity and nostalgia. She lowers her squared-off shoulders and exhales. “You’ll be moving from classroom to classroom.”

“For how long?”

“Well, we’re not sure at the moment—”

For the rest of your life, I’d tell Maria.

“Well . . . okay.” I try to sound enthusiastic. “Where should I go right now, you know, to start?”

Mrs. Martinez tells me, due to the short notice given to her about my hiring, that she had no time to add a room number on the kids' new schedule. "They'll be in the seventh-grade hallway." I look up; I look down at the binder wedged between my bicep and chest. I fumble through several pages. "Over there," she says. She points to the library's double doors. "To the right." I see a herd of students filing in from the outside glass doors. I'm impressed by the variations in their size. "That's seventh grade," Mrs. Martinez says. She hands me a piece of paper. "Here's your list of students."

I stare at the paper and up again at Mrs. Martinez. "I'm not sure—"

"Have them come to the library when you find them."

Well, top o the morning to you!

She smiles, turns around, and walks away.

And the rest of the day to yourself!

Her big ass *plumpity plump plumps* down the hallway. She's done with me.

I'm frightened by the number of students on the other side of the double doors. I strap on my backpack and look at the names on my list. I rear my horns and enter the smelly mass of prepubescent hormones.

"Anzaldúa," I shout thorough the crowd. "Brian Anzaldúa." I've been asked to read the bulls of Pamplona a bedtime story. I twirl round and round. A few minutes later, drenched in my own sweat, I find no one. No one finds me. I'm ambling now. I'll never find my advisory students. *Damn, fool!* Past the library, down the long hallway toward the teacher's parking lot: I should run for it. My body leans to the left. I can follow—if only I can follow. I see a small boy in a red long-sleeved shirt, his face the

color of caramel candy. His hand touches my lower back. I look down. He looks scared. He takes back his hand and lowers his head.

“Are you Mr. Girman?” His face rises to look at me, and I notice his large, plum-colored lips and what appears to be a half-smile. “I’m Brian.” I don’t say anything. “You know,” he says. “Anzaldúa?” He extends his right hand and becomes—against the advice I would later read on page twenty-six of the handbook—my first friend at the school.

Brian and I collect another twelve students before returning to the library. Mrs. Martinez is not pleased. Her breath pinches her pantsuit from the inside; the butterfly has flown. “You have thirty-five students,” she says. I take the roster from Brian. “Never mind. Never mind. Sit them down here.” She points at the same rectangular tables I’d left minutes earlier. I sit down along with the students. “Not you,” she says, adjusting her collar. “Clearly not *you*, Mr. Girman!”

“Right, not me.” I make eye contact with a girl wearing flashy hoop earrings. She laughs, lowers her eyes. Brian’s still gathering students at the door.

“Roxanne,” says Mrs. Martinez. “Quiet down.”

Roxanne rolls her eyes—quietly, thank God. *Nothing to see, children. Move along!* Brian returns behind several students. One girl is swathed in black clothing. Her bangs cover her eyes. “Have a seat,” Mrs. Martinez says. I spot a sea of mismatched faces. A girl with fair skin like a Geisha pulls headphones from her jacket pocket. A spiky-haired boy eats a tamale. Grease covers a thin sheet of wax paper next to him. He makes a noise when he chews.

“Where’s Brian?” I ask. Two boys laugh at the far end of the table. I look in their direction. I turn to a girl with blonde streaks in her hair. “Do you know?” One of the talking boys puts his mouth to good use.

“He’s getting everybody,” says the boy.

“Right.” He lowers his head on the table.

“Right, right. Getting everybody.”

Mrs. Martinez frowns and fingers her walkie-talkie. “Uh-huh, uh-huh, okay, ten-four.” We look in her direction. “Okay, kids. Let’s go.”

Homeward bound! The more aggressive kids arrive first at the door. I don’t see Mrs. Martinez. Several children wear identical colored belts in an array of metallic patterns, as if someone stretched a Rubik’s cube across their waists. Something squeaks behind me.

“Here you go,” says Mrs. Martinez. I turn around; she’s coming at me with a noticeable limp. “Your cart.”

I stare at the mass of corrugated metal. *Ill-shaped, knock-kneed, swaybacked, and awkward.* The cart is held together by large gray electrical tape. The wheels are tall enough to squash a cat. They squeak. The handle looks broken. I push the cart forward. A piece of sharp metal grazes my hand. Roxanne opens the door. Halfway down the hallway I ask her where we’re going.

“309,” she says.

“The sixth-grade wing,” says Brian.

“Cool, sir.”

“It’s too far.”

“I no want—”

“Sweet!”

We ambulate down the hall like pirates walking the plank. Teachers peer outside their doors. Some shut themselves inside. *Arrrrrrggh!* Brian accidentally pushes the cart into a wall.

“It’s hard to move,” he says.

“I know.”

“The wheels.”

“Sure.”

“They’re plastic.”

“Uh-huh.”

Roxanne pushes the cart away from him. “*I’ll* do it,” she says. She nearly mows Brian over.

In class I introduce myself. Nothing fancy or sepia-toned: *my name is Girman*, Mister Girman. Gir, as in *Grrr*. . . ; man as in *man*. Mr. Girman. I think we’re in a science room. Five barstools sit around a shiny black table attached to the floor on all sides like a giant cube. In the middle of each table is a sink. It smells like honeysuckle in Room 309. I wheel my cart next to the teacher’s desk, another rectangular black table with a computer on top and a half-eaten taco beside the chair. I write my name on the dry erase board in front of the room: MR. GIRMAN—ADVISORY. I write legibly. Orange marker smears on the side of my right hand. Roxanne’s silver bangles bounce off the table. A woman wearing an argyle vest and pink button-down shirt walks in, smiles, and

looks around. The kids stare. She offers me a flat, lip-leading smile and takes a seat at the desk. “Don’t mind me,” she says. “I’ll just be eating.” I look at Roxanne. She continues to stare. Shaved meat falls out of the taco. The teacher looks embarrassed. She chews loudly. Someone in the back says *barbacoa*. I look around—all the seats are taken. Four kids sit in a neat row, on the floor, against a side row of cabinets. “I can see we’ll need more seats,” I say aloud. Things are quiet, eerily so.

I’m interrupted by a knock at the door. I look at the door, then the teacher’s desk, not sure who should answer it. A boy stretches his neck from a far lab table. Pink shirt eats her taco. A man enters with a stack of blue books. “These are our revised student-teacher handbooks,” he tells me. “Distribute them before you leave.” He places the books on my cart. The metal sags, crunches like a mule’s inverted back. The cart wobbles. The class alternates its stare between aromatic *barbacoa* tacos and the trembling cart. I’m not sure what to do.

“Why they give us these?” asks someone in the back.

“I’m not—”

“Every year.”

“Yeah!”

“Your cart looks—”

The teacher walks toward the trashcan near the door. She stares at several students. Comments cease. Apparently sixth grade teachers are strict; we, on the other hand, are a bunch of straggling seventh-graders without a home. Two students from the floor stand up. I ask them to pass out booklets. The teacher looks up from her taco, hesitates, and looks at me with an angelic expression borrowed from some Medieval

painting. Her nails are bright pink. She intercepts the kids. “Tomorrow,” she says. She repeats herself quickly. The kids return to the floor. A cute boy in a Cowboys football jersey watches his gum fall from his mouth to the trash can. I’m entertained. The other teacher walks around the room, stopping at each desk to straighten a stack of blue textbooks. She watches the kids. The Cowboys fan pushes a book on his way back to his seat. The teacher notices. “Fix it,” she says, her cheerful pink shirt bunching up around the collar. “You don’t touch.” The boy walks back, a bounce in his toes, and pleasantly returns to where he’d come from, straightening the books like a makeshift drill instructor inspecting bunks. *Things are looking up.* “Perfect,” he says. He eyes me suspiciously.

Moments later the bell rings. Students file around me as if I’m a turnstile. A stocky boy with a light moustache asks if I’m going to stand there all day. I feel naked. On top of my cart is my list of classrooms for the rest of the day.

“Who are you?” asks a pigtailed girl, hands behind her back, looking up at me as if I’d descended from an aircraft.

“Oh, sorry, yes.” I straighten the booklets on top of my cart. “I’m just leaving, you know, for the other.”

“Are you a substitute?”

“Well, no. I, er, I’m here for the, er . . . Room 107.”

“It’s on the other side of the building. She stares, deadpan, waiting for God-knows-what.

The teacher looks at my schedule. She nods at the girl in Pigtails. I thank the teacher—for what, I don’t know—and quickly leave the room. I dart out the door,

unsightly cart in front of me, sixth graders laughing behind me. Halfway down the hall I notice the same girl running after me.

“Do you know where it is?” she asks. I don’t. Me, the pigtailed girl, and my broken-down cart speed down the hallway as if catching a train. Several handbooks slide to the floor. Pigtailed and I exchange hurried glances. She helps maneuver the cart. We finally arrive. Like I said, *things are looking up*.

The thing about stories, frankly, is you never know which version to trust. Fourth period does not blink. The collective, yes: *fourth period*. No one moves. No one talks. I squint my eyes at a girl in front of me. She wears a scarf around her wrist.

“I’m sorry I’m so late.” I wheel the cart beside me. A girl asks if she can shut the door: thin face, arched eyebrows, makeup smeared on like a Frida Kahlo painting. *A-ha!* Roxanne is back.

“You’re late,” she says. She shuts the door and casually wanders back to her desk. The kids look happy.

“Where is everyone?”

“We’re small this period.”

I count fifteen students. I don’t see a teacher. Roxanne looks around.

“Roxanne?” I ask. A teacher appears, smiles, and walks to her desk.

“Roxy,” she says. “I prefer Roxy.” Ego deflated, I repeat the question.

“I had this room last year,” someone says.

“Oh yeah, you’re right,” answers a boy at the desk in front of me. *Why is he sitting so close?*

“For history, no?”

They're all so close.

“Ms. Zamora, remember?”

“Yeah, she's gone.”

A giant exclamation point on the back wall explores five reasons to write. I wave my arms to get the children's attention.

“You've probably heard—”

“Is that your cart, sir?”

“Well, yes.” I'm flattered they notice. “You see, I move—”

“We know.”

“How?”

“Roxy told us.”

Pleased by the attention, Roxy straightens up. “Does that mean you'll be late every day?” she asks. The teacher looks up from her desk.

“I've got you twice,” I say.

A small arm in red fabric rises to my left. “Me, too.”

“Brian?”

“Yep.” He smiles. “Advisory *and* fourth period.” His face is more mahogany-colored in the light of our new room.

“I hope to get here on time.” I remove the folded schedule from my pocket.

“Anyone know where room 407 is?” Several hands wave in the air. I feel like I'm choosing captains for the kickball team. A stout boy on my right has big, strong legs.

“Where at?”

“It’s— ”

“Your name, sir?”

“Adrian.”

“Adrian what?” I ask.

“Huh?”

“Your last name.”

“Garcia.” He waits for me to highlight his name on my roster. “It’s one of the computer rooms across from the cafeteria.”

Roxanne stands up. *Roxy, I mean. Roxy, fool.* She points to a white sheet of paper taped to the wall next to the door. “This paper has all the room numbers.” She rips it from the wall.

“Hey, yeah,” Brian says. “Give us your schedule.” I’m quiet.

“Sir.”

“Come on, sir.”

“Let’s do it.”

I relent. A girl with a headband opens up a striped pencil case. I give her my schedule. She pulls out several colored highlighters. I remember my interview a few weeks ago with the mustached head principal, Mr. Cerda. “My school fosters student-led initiatives,” he’d said. Roxy takes the highlighters from headband girl. Brian saunters over. Me to Mr. Cerda: *discipline will not be a problem.* I watch Brian and Roxy uncapping colored highlighters.

“Use a different color for each portion of the trip,” I tell them. They smear psychedelic jazzy-hued ink over paper. Roxy grabs a green highlighter out of Brian’s hands.

A few seconds later they hand me a piece of paper labeled EVACUATION PLAN. The paper is covered by *green red purple fuchsia orange* highlighter. Each classroom is colored lime green. I hope there’s no fire today.

“So tell us,” asked the principal at my interview. “What’s your story?”

“Story?”

“Tell us who you are.” I’m as blank now as I was in the interview. I’m saved by the English teacher walking in front of me and staring at Roxy as she taps the spot on the wall where the evacuation plan had been taped. I decide to tell a story to my next class. I look down at the evacuation plan—if I can find my next class, that is.

Girls! Girls! Girls! I’m surrounded by *walking talking texting* girls. Eight children sit cross-legged on the floor. “We don’t say ‘Indian-style’ in here,” I tell them. “For now, just say ‘indigenous.’” The girls settle down. “We’ll have plenty of time to retell history.” I write His + Story on the board. “Texas History is all about stories.” Eager eyes stare at the board. “I’m sure you all have a story, right?” A girl in a brown headband raises her hand. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Mary,” she says. “I’m Mary.”

“Yes, Mary?”

“What kind of story?”

I make something up, try to sound fancy: “Narratives shape and interpret our lives.” She stares blankly in front of her.

“You know, our lives?”

“What’s a narrative?”

“A story.”

“Story?”

“Yep. You can have a good day or a bad one depending on your story.”

“What’s your story, sir?”

“Yeah, your story?”

My story, eh? I stare at the children—the moment I’ve been waiting for. *What’s it to you?* A girl with bony elbows drops her arm on the desk.

I’m a lawyer, yeah. Damn good at it, too. Okay, no. Never practiced. I like to run. Rabbit Run. You’ll read it in college. I don’t like stories that fulfill themselves. What’s it about? A husband with better things to do. Me? Single. I’m no idealist. I’ll tell my own story, Dammit. I’m a graduate of The George Washington University. No lie. You have to say the first word ‘the.’ Don’t forget to capitalize it. Yes, like a title. Yes, named after our first president. Maybe it’s inevitable that I became a history teacher.

What brings me here? God knows. Wait! I know. Okay, girls raise your hands. Wow, that’s a lot. Now, boys. How many boys in here? onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnine. Girl power? Sounds good to me. Mujeres! Yes, I speak-a-da-español. Studied in Peru. Semester abroad. If I had kids, I’d make them go. Make you do it, right?

Kids? No. That's personal. I never took to the law. Like an Eskimo holding a can of mosquito repellent. I'd rather chew glass than file a deposition. No, just an expression. I don't chew glass. A deposition is when, you know, you write the facts as you know them. What you saw. What you heard. Who done it. I once dislodged a beer cap in a sorority girl's throat. Yes, for reals.

I prosecuted witnesses like a seventh-century pirate. No one was safe. I sent old women back to Guatemala. No one is safe. Where? Guate . . . south of Mexico. Under Mexico. "Who's going to watch my grandbabies?" complained the lady. In Spanish. Like, los bebes. I didn't care about her wheelchair. I told her it's not my problem: you should have thought of that before you went wheeling through the desert. Okay, fine. Never practiced. But if you ever want to arrange a fake marriage.

All I'm saying is I like to bartend. Never drink. Pay my way through school. You see how silly people are when they drink too much. Do dumb things. Yes? Uh-huh . . .uh-huh . . .uh-huh . . .uh-huh!! Well, your uncle shouldn't drink so much. Yes. I see. Well I think—. Oh, now I see, yes. I'm just saying—

OMG. Do . . . you . . . ever . . . SHUT . . . UP!

Kids? Of course. When I'm ready. Twenty-eight. Okay, I lied. Don't repeat this. One day you're twelve; the next, sixteen. Tomorrow I might be thirty. Or thirty-three. Or twenty-one. Bartending, I told you. Good money. Good friends. Your Uncle? That's too bad.

The bell! The tap and stroll of the tolling bell. Time heals all wounds. Bye Kids. I'll ask for textbooks tomorrow. Oh, my! Who are all these tiny little children strolling in? Where's the teacher? No wonder I talked so much. Little fingers like crayons. No,

afraid I can't stay. Got a class somewhere. I need my evacuation plan. No, I really can't stay. I'm sure she'll . . . ah, what's another few minutes? I'll wait until your teacher gets here. What's that? I've got lunch next period? Great—I've got all day.

CHAPTER 3

I peel an orange in spiral divots with the side of my thumb and spark my lighter under the table. I draw stick figures on a napkin. I empty business cards from my wallet. I finger my eyebrows. I write down—in red, green, and yellow highlighter—how much money I shelled out for this emergency teacher certification course. I sigh into limp fists, as close as I've come to a prayer in months, dreading another evening with my classmates: five Teach for America *wannabes*, Juanita, and me. I flick the lighter through my pants.

Today is Tuesday night, the second day of class. I started teaching last week. I am surrounded by a coterie of young, attractive east coast college graduates—all except Juanita—grading high stacks of student papers. Juanita is older, one of two Mexican-Americans in the class. It's odd to be ten minutes from the Rio Grande and surrounded by mostly white faces. Instead of finding comfort, I'm spooked. A blonde-haired girl presses down on her pen and draws a large checkmark at the top of a hand-written paper. She circles the title with a quick motion of her wrist: *Idealism in Don Quixote*. I notice the book to her right. On the cover, the old Spanish knight clutches a long sword; he's perched atop a skinny horse. Both man and horse melt into each other, disappearing below a black- and rust-colored sky. The girl picks up the book and feverishly searches inside. She diverts her eyes to the paper she's grading, then back at her copy of *Don Quixote*, then nods her head and draws more checkmarks, smaller this time. That

reminds me: I still haven't turned in my attendance on time. I pull out the two attendance sheets, both blank, that Ms. Sandoval, the pink-shirted woman in my advisory room, gives to me each day. I coax up some phlegm, dramatically, from the back of my throat and look around the room to see if anyone notices. I feel inside my pocket for a pen. I cough. I don't feel like filling in names. I cough harder and adjust my seat for a melodramatic departure. A guy across the table rolls his eyes at me and whispers something to the blonde girl grading papers. They're on to me. I twist sideways and crack my back. I swallow mucus. I remain seated and begin elaborate neck-rolls.

Gina Antorveza

Brian Anzaldúa,

Angel Bocanegra,

Jonathan Buceli,

Jean del Negro,

Adrian Garcia . . .

I write carefully. Is Bocanegra smudged? Who's Buceli? Where's Roxy? Do Mexican women have more babies?

Victoria Jimenez

Juan Jimenez

Maria Jimenez

I scan our small room. My classmates are articulate and well-informed, sipping soy lattes and looping red pens in every direction. I don't even know if my seventh-graders know how to read.

Samantha Loera

Jose Lucero

Reymundo Martines

Lucent Martinez

Lucent? *Huh?* River. Swallow. Lightening. Can I spell Martinez with an “s”? Is that allowed? Or “z”? You say *tomāto*, I say *tomäto*. Good God, did I learn anything in Peru? I stare at the blond girl typing away on her slender Macintosh iBook computer. Yes, Jennifer! Jennifer is her name. She and Kevin share a bag of organic potato chips that crackles like foil. I forgot to bring my World Wrestling Entertainment notebook, the one I found on Mary’s desk after fifth period. I consider asking someone if I can borrow paper. I slide myself another napkin instead. Yesterday, downstairs, I heard several of my classmates discussing new educational theories. They exchanged lesson plans and dished the latest gossip from their respective schools. I smoked a cigarette.

Today the teacher is late. I’m almost finished with my morning attendance; only three more periods to go. I purposely skip Gabriela Rincón, a chipmunk-cheeked girl absent this morning. Only a few more names . . .

Xochitl Sanchez

Ruben Treviño

I loop my blue pen in a theatrical “o,” the last letter of Ruben’s name, like the dynamos grading papers around me. I retrieve my partially-peeled orange from the top of my notebook. I finish peeling it and wrap a long piece of rind around my wrist. My creativity impresses me. I hold my fruit-wrapped wrist a small distance from my face and notice one of the volunteers reading a Teach for America pamphlet. I look at the

smiling young woman on the cover of the pamphlet. She looks like Jennifer. The actual, three-dimensional girl in front of me speaks to Kevin, himself donning a yarmulke, in a thick Boston accent. I notice Jennifer's long, flowing brown hair and freckled face. I inspect her closely. She looks like a Samantha—something about her upturned nose. Maybe Karen. A strand of hair hangs in her wide, ceramic mug. She looks like my older sister. I remind myself to talk to her later.

I glance over Jennifer's shoulders into the sad eyes of a young black youth staring back at me from the next page of the pamphlet. Under him are the following words:

*Of the 13 million children growing up in poverty,
About half will graduate from high school.
Those who do graduate will perform
On average at an eighth-grade level*

You can change this

I laugh, unexpectedly, much louder than I had intended. Had I forgotten my school district is one of the poorest in the United States? The boy across the table gives me that look again. This time he doesn't roll his eyes: they bug out instead. Perhaps he's right: maybe I'm not teacher material. I place my hand in my pocket and finger one of the business cards I'd emptied from my wallet. Someone offered me an attorney position last week. I pull out the card: *Denis St. James and Associates*. I glance at the bug-eyed boy. Next to him, Kevin leans back in his chair. The blonde girl whispers something to Kevin and points her long fingers toward a passage in *Don Quixote*. Together they laugh.

I have nothing against Don Quixote. That's like chastising quiet Jonathan for fouling up the Texas pledge every morning. No, Jonathan's a real charmer, as was Don

Quixote back in his day. But we're not in Catalonia, and Quixote's idealism is a long way off from my present predicament. No more Golden Age of justice, respect, and reverence. I've nothing against idealism, nor would I begrudge Quixote his fanciful decent into madness. Quixotic—the word's an enigma: on the one hand, it means visionary, though often impractical. The other definition is more like me: impulsive, unpredictable. How else could I explain how I ended up here?

My impromptu fifth period meet-and greet wasn't entirely accurate. I embellish. I leave things out.

***** See that? Who knows what you might have missed. I, too, like the fawning lemurs of the ghastly stares grading papers around me, studied politics at an expensive east coast university. I told the gals of fifth period the truth. Go Colonials! I *am* the blonde girl and the bug-eyed boy. I interned at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, where I ran errands, made coffee, and mixed drinks for the high powered experts analyzing the international weapons contracts that kill thousands of innocent civilians each year. I moonlighted for a variety of lobbyists who thought nothing of bribing U.S. officials as if they were self-conscious teenagers. All told, eight jobs: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Matthew Lesko's Info-power Newsletter, Welt Publishing, Au Bon Pain French bakery, George Washington University library reference desk, T.G.I. Friday's, *Escándolo* Latino bar, and the Venezuelan embassy. My junior year I scatted out for a semester abroad in Lima, Peru. See that, I told the girls the truth!

Four weeks ago, I poured a beer for someone in Austin who suggested I'd be good working with children. I'm still not sure what he meant. True, I once helped an intoxicated customer into a taxi, and the sorority girl really *did* lodge a Bud Light cap in her throat, but I'm not sure what this has to do with children. Either way, his comment made me feel good. I told him I was an attorney. He glanced at a stack of overturned pint glasses next to the sink. "I work for a school district down in the Valley," he said.

"The Valley?"

"Extreme South Texas."

I sipped my tequila and club soda. I looked around the bar. "More south than this?"

He took a long sip of beer. "We could use a guy like you." He looked at my suspenders filled with the mandatory fifteen TGI Friday's colorful buttons. "Can you coach?" he asked. Flattered, I said yes. "We're always looking for coaches." He stared at my chest for a few seconds before returning to his beer.

I ripped the cap off a bottle of Bud Light and slid the bottle across the metal service bar. Beer foamed over the top. Gloria thanked me with a wicked smile. I turned around and met the customer's brown eyes. I was miserable. The man stared, smiled, and told me he had to return to a conference in the hotel's meeting rooms upstairs. He handed me a business card from the Edison Independent School District. I left the next week, not sure what I'd gotten myself into.

So here I am, three weeks later—impulsive, unpredictable. Jennifer is still grading essays. I return my attention to where I'd left off in the Teach for America pamphlet:

It is this—the clear potential of students—that makes the disparities in educational outcomes so unconscionable and fuels our sense of urgency and responsibility to do everything we can to ensure educational opportunity for all.

I feel like I've entered an Al Gore documentary. I pick up a piece of orange rind from the floor. I notice my thumbnail's yellowish tint. I glance at the pamphlet; desperate for an emotional response, I pinch my forearm under the table. I think of dead kittens floating in a bathtub. Nothing. Maybe if I keep reading. . .

We accomplish [our mission] by building a diverse, highly selective national corps of outstanding recent college graduates—of all academic majors and career interests—who commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools in our nation's lowest-income communities and become lifelong leaders for expanding educational opportunity.

The Marine Corps battle hymn comes to mind:

*From the halls of Montezuma
To the shores of Tripoli'. . .*

I breathe slowly and maintain my composure.

*You will find us always on the job –
The United States Marines.*

I return my gaze to the (presumably) slow black child in the brochure. Again, I feel nothing. Why can't I feel emotion for the thirteen million children growing up in poverty? I am overcome, instead, with a wave of skepticism. I see myself as a little boy—skinny, covered in blonde, wispy hair—hiding under the covers, embarrassed to go to school because my parents wouldn't buy me a *Superfriends* lunchbox. “Do you think it's that easy?” I ask the pamphlet in front of me, trying to ease the pain of a rusted *Starsky and Hutch* metal lunchbox. “Do you really think it's that easy?” Jennifer looks up and smiles. Her hair still dangles in her coffee cup; I hope she falls in.

Okay, fine—I admit it: I am one of them. On the pamphlet, in person, a “highly selective” recent college graduate of a “diverse academic major” committed to teach in one of the nation’s lowest-income communities. *Fine, fine.* I, too, relocated to a smaller community. *I know, I know.* We are the leftist intelligentsia, the harbingers of change, the women and men upon whom America’s leadership depends. I scowl at a boy on the far end of the table. Why does his enthusiasm nauseate me?

I’ve had a bad week. Unlike Don Quixote, my idealistic phase lasts as long as it takes me to realize—three days—that someone in my perfect fourth period has thrown gum in my hair. “Truly I was born to be an example of misfortune,” laments Don Quixote to his loyal servant Sancho, “and a target at which the arrows of adversary are aimed.” Faced with a world of fraud and deceit, malice and greed, the fictional Spanish knight succumbs to fantasy as a way of preserving his idealized image of *how the world should be*. The teacher looks up from her computer. I understand Don Quixote’s despair. I explain to Rafael in the front row, as Don Quixote explained to several goat herders, that before the fall of man, Mother Nature had provided all that man needed. “That means,” I say to Rafael, griping his little hands until he drops the eraser, “that stealing was unnecessary.” The teacher looks up from her desk.

“Who’s Don Quixote?” he asks. I’m reminded of the only so-called teaching book I’ve read: *It’s Your Time You’re Wasting*.

“This guy,” I say, holding up a copy of *Don Quixote* I’d borrowed from Jennifer. “An old guy.” I return the eraser to the board. “He was romantic, believed the world needed his immediate presence.”

“Why?” Rafael asks.

“He just thought that some people in this world need to be protected,” I say. “To be looked after.” I return to my podium. “Don Quixote would never steal.”

“He sounds dumb,” Rafael says. “And I didn’t steal the eraser. Roxy *gave* it to me.”

“Did not,” Roxy shouts.

“Did too.”

“Liar,”

“*You’re* a liar.”

“SIT DOWN,” I scream, a clear violation of teacher certification rules. “I said sit down!” Rafael and Roxy sulk back to their seats. “Does everyone have their self-story?”

“Our *what*?”

“The thing you wrote, you know. Who you are? What you do? What you like? What you do?”

“You said that already.”

“I don’t have mine.”

“Me neither.”

“I left mine in my locker.”

“We don’t have lockers yet.”

“I mean my PE locker.”

“Enough,” I yell.

“I’m just saying.”

“ENOUGH!”

“Okay,” Rafael says, lowering his head. “You don’t have to yell.”

“The order of knight-errantry,” I read from my *Don Quixote* book, “was instituted to defend maidens, to protect widows, and to rescue orphans and distressed persons.” The stocky boy, Adrian, rolls his eyes. Maybe I’ve got it backwards: I’m here to protect myself. I *am* the distressed person.

“Okay, then,” I say, closing the book. “Now back to Texas History. Do I have any volunteers to read their stories? Brian?”

“Huh?” Brian says. He looks toward the door. “My what?”

“Don’t be such a dumbass,” says boy says from the back of the room.

I channel the spirit of Don Quixote and answer in a chivalrous manner. “Sir, what’s your name?” I step sideways from the podium, look at a boy in the back of the room. “I’d like you to refrain from using profanity please.”

“Oh,” he says. “Sorry about that.” His skin is luxurious white like bath towels. “I’m Javier.”

“No problem, Javier.” I turn toward Brian.

“Can I go to the bathroom?” he asks.

Are you kidding me? “Go ahead.”

Brian walks toward the cart. He grabs the bathroom pass, but catches it on one of the metal edges. The cart drags. One of the bottom wheels scratches along the floor. An edge of the top shelf collapses. “Way to go,” yells Javier from the back of the room.

“You big dumbass.” The teacher rises from her desk and leaves. *No stories, it seems.*

That evening—Friday, at last!—I explain my predicament to our instructor, Mrs. Randolph. “They won’t shut up,” I say. She’s a soft-spoken, middle-aged woman, who tonight wears a long denim skirt. I picture her roaming Santa Fe art exhibits, scribbling in a tattered notebook, buying nothing. “Each period is different.” I exhale loudly. “I’m nearly schizophrenic.”

“Each period has its own personality.”

“Right, but—”

“You just have to, you know, roll with the punches as they say.”

She doesn’t understand. “No, I get it. I do. What I mean is—”

“Okay, class.”

“Not listening. They’re not listening.”

“Today we’re going to . . .”

Not listening to me.

“ . . .examine the reasons why we became a teacher.”

“But . . .”

“Three reasons.” She looks above our heads. Jennifer smiles awkwardly. “The top three reasons we selected a career in education.” Mrs. Randolph returns her stare toward me. I look away. Agile fingertips tap lightly across the table. Juanita writes in her marbled composition book.

“Is this yours?” asks Mrs. Randolph. She holds up my WWE notebook. “You left it yesterday.” She hands me the spiral notebook, her stare lingering on several stickers of half-naked men and buxom female wrestlers posed in battle. Someone has

written “Eat me” on the back and drawn huge hooters over a wrestler’s metallic bikini. I pretend not to notice. I don’t tell her I’m the artist.

“Five more minutes,” Mrs. Randolph announces. I turn another page and massage my temple. I desperately try to answer the question. I turn more pages. The room is quiet. I make a quick list:

Why I Became a Teacher:

- 1. To make a consistent income*
- 2. To go to bed at a decent hour*
- 3. Summer vacation*

Mrs. Randolph notices my open notebook and asks me to share my response with the class. I do as she asks. Several students stare into open computer screens. Beverly, another blonde, breaks the silence.

“I think I have more of what you’re looking for,” she says. Mrs. Randolph, a former theater teacher, maintains a neutral expression.

“Okay,” she says. “Why don’t you share for us, Beverly.”

“Bev,” corrects Bev, the third time this week she’s corrected Mrs. Randolph. “I like to be called Bev.”

“Alright, Bev, then have at it. Why did you become a teacher?”

“First,” Bev begins, “I became an educator to improve the sorry state of our educational system.” Several people nod; someone crunches potato chips. “Second, I want to share my unique knowledge of the world.” Mrs. Randolph smiles. “And third,” Bev says, nearly rising out of her chair, “I love children so much and want to be an advocate in their lives.” She stresses the word “advocate” as if opening a jar of pickles tightened by the stiff hands of those who were *not* advocates. She looks at me as she

says the word. I don't blame her. "I think of myself as Don Quixote," she says. "Pure idealism."

Bev's vehemence is tame. Bug-eyes plans to "use music as a way of enriching the lives of forgotten souls." Samarah, a tiny girl in a beautifully-beaded vest across from him, declares her willingness to sacrifice everything for the educational advancement of her students. Tammy agrees in a nasally grunt. Even Juanita, who appears to be dozing off, rouses herself and reveals that her status as a mere substitute hinders her ability to "care for my students in a fully-integrated environment."

"And by that?" asks Mrs. Randolph. She stands up and walks toward Juanita.

"I want to oversee the academic, social, and spiritual needs of my students."

I make eye contact with Juanita. "How could you?" I mouth.

Next, Mrs. Randolph asks us to identify three things we hope to gain from teaching. Eager to redeem myself, I volunteer to read my answers aloud.

"What I hope to gain from teaching," I begin, "is compassion, organization, and self-confidence." Again, silence. I try to laugh, but I end up spitting on my notebook. Bev volunteers to read her answer.

"Absolutely nothing," Bev announces. "It's all about the kids." I look around the room. Surely someone will see through her charade. Several students scribble furiously on tiny pads of paper.

"Whatever God has in store for me," Bug-eye says.

All eyes turn to Juanita. "What I hope to gain," she says, much to the dismay of the class, "is my teaching certificate." The room falls silent. Bev drops her pencil! I smile at Juanita, pleased to have my ally back. Then she continues: "I have to be

official before the big changes can happen.” I hear a nervous sigh of relief from across the room. Everyone, including Mrs. Randolph, is pleased with Juanita’s answer. Then Juanita tilts her head to the side and looks at me. She leans over and whispers softly to me in Spanish: *juega el juego, m’ijo*. Just play the game, son. I’m not sure what she means, but I make a note to retrieve the *Denis St. James and Associates* business card from my dresser drawer.

I’m surprised one afternoon by a man in the teacher’s lounge in a crisp white shirt, movie-star eyes, and a striped tie too low over his trousers. “I’ve made a discovery,” he says. I scoop applesauce out of a plastic Tupperware container. “We’re out of books.” His hand rests on my shoulder. “We have books, of course.” I nod, make a guttural sound with my throat. I wipe apple sauce off my fingertips. “Here’s the thing: I gave them out already. The tennis coach wanted to give homework.”

“I’m not sure—”

“Homework?” He looks at a woman in a green blouse sitting beside me. “In history? Yeah, right.”

“Well that figures,” says the woman. She turns around toward me. “Oh, you’re the new history teacher, right?” *Yes*, I tell her. *That’s me*. “We’re on the same team, you know? They moved Lila to the new team. I don’t know why they don’t move her out to the portable. Now *you* have to struggle with that thing all day.” She looks at my cart nestled next to the wall of teachers’ square mailboxes. She turns around at the man standing above me. “Mr. Palacios, are you telling me this boy can’t get books?”

“Not even a room,” he says, patting my shoulders and quickly letting go. I wipe my face, attempt to speak. Nothing comes out. I prefer the stage, I guess. I’ve never been good in intimate settings. But I’m buoyed by the friendly exchange. I smile, cautiously, warmly; I’m sure we’ll find something to do—the kids and me. I read a story once about a teacher being raped in the teacher’s lounge. A male teacher.

“How goes it, young man?” asks Mr. Palacios.

“Fine, I guess.”

“No problems?” His eyes wander to a young woman heating soup in the microwave. “You’ll take good care of him, right Clarissa?” The woman in the green blouse across from me cackles loudly.

“Right, sir. You’re asking *me*?” She rises and takes short steps toward the trashcan. She wears a nice green shirt and houndstooth pants. A large turquoise flower is pinned near her shoulder. Sequined flat shoes, no socks. She throws out the plastic top of her Lean Cuisine pizza. “I love pineapple,” she says. “Want a slice?” I smile. Mr. Palacios declines.

“I like the chunks,” I say.

“Typical.” Her face reddens. “Men.” She puts one hand to her cheek. I can’t tell if her hair is dyed blond or slowly graying. Her face is freckled. A blue ring, perhaps topaz, adorns one of her fingers. It’s square and looks like something from a home shopping channel.

“I’ll see what I can do about the books,” says Mr. Palacios.

“That’s okay. I’m sure there’s other stuff to do.”

“Don’t forget about attendance.”

“Oh, we’ll take care of him,” says Clarissa. *I should ask her last name.* “He’s one of *us*, now.” She looks at me and laughs. Smudged eyeliner makes her eyes look smoky.

“Team 77, right?”

“Don’t you worry about a thing, sir. We’ll show him how it’s done.”

“Show *me* first,” says Mr. Palacios. He turns away, mutters something about textbooks.

“Bye, dear. Ta ta!”

I look up from my sandwich. The pineapple looks good.

“Have some, dear.” The woman’s voice shifts to a matronly tone—part mother part aunt. “I’m Clarissa,” she says. I teach reading way in the back here.” She spears a slice of pineapple with her plastic fork. “Good to have a man back here. I smile. “You know, those boys!” We laugh on cue. “The psychology of the adolescent is an odd thing,” she says. “Me: I punch in, punch out, teach a little in the middle, eat my *piña* and go home.” She giggles again. A well-tanned, fit woman beside her slaps her on the arm.

“Mrs. Masterson, please.” The woman looks at me. “Don’t let her fool you.” She wears a sparkly black shirt I can’t quite read. “Clarissa’s a pearl. Lines up little novels like a pro.”

“Oh, stop.”

“No, it’s true, Mrs. Masterson.” The woman’s chin tightens. “Every time I’m in there, the kids are reading away.”

“Yeah, they probably have a dirty magazine stuffed in there.”

“*Pshh, ya*”

“Some teen thing.” Clarissa looks up, her gaze shuffling between us. “The incredibly riveting adventures of the teenage slut Brittany Spears.”

“She’s not a teenager anymore, Clarissa.”

Mrs. Masterson twists around, pushes her chair from the table. “Oh, I know. I have two boys, don’t forget. They’re all bimbos.” She titters on her way to the garbage can and dumps out pineapple juice. “I’ve seen ‘em all,” she tells us. The other woman giggles. “Oh Monica,” Clarissa says, darting to the refrigerator. “Why can’t Jack meet a nice girl like you?”

Monica stands up, brushes food off her shirt. “Oh, the insanity.” She flickers her head swiftly as if drying her hair after a shower.

“Go on, girl.”

“The weight of the world on my delicate shoulders.” Clarissa watches, one hand on the refrigerator. “A prince, I say. Send me a prince.”

Clarissa tidies up her wardrobe. “Well, you’re looking in the wrong place.” She looks over at me. “Hurry up, we have team planning. Don’t forget to check your box.” I look at the row of teachers’ mailboxes against the wall. “You do have one, right?” Paper of every imaginable color, especially pink, decorates the matrix of boxes. “See here?” Clarissa points somewhere in the middle. “Our team is on the third shelf.” Her ring knocks against the shelf. “The history department is the . . . one, two, three, *fourth* column. See, there you are?” *Impressive!* My name is scribbled on a piece of paper and taped to the front of the box. I’ve finally arrived.

“At least your mailbox won’t move,” Monica says. “By the way,” she continues, holding out her hand, “I’m Ms. Ramos.”

“The other woman,” Clarissa says.

“On Team 77.”

“Right,” Clarissa says. She looks at me. “Come on, we’re late.” For what, I don’t know. I grab the mass of papers and a heavy book waiting in my box. I follow the two women down the hall.

“Allow me to welcome you to the dungeon.” Our trip ends in another science room. No windows, two doors. A small-boned woman leans over and eyeballs a piece of paper as if translating an ancient manuscript. An enormous periodic table decorates the back wall. “They stick the riff-raff at the end of the hall,” says Ms. Ramos. Standing in front of Ms. Ramos, I notice that her black shirt is covered in a silvery-sequined order of operations. Sprawled across the front of the shirt: $\times \div + - .$ The addition sign spreads across her right breast.

Embarrassed, I glance at the book I’d retrieved from my box. A pastiche of wildly optimistic faces adorn the cover: a blue-shirted little boy devouring a text, a high school girl smiling like a chipmunk in the acorn forest, a trio of thin men in white shirts *pointing pointing pointing*. The effective teacher, apparently, reads with his fingers.

On a Post-It: *I Thought This Might Help* ☺

Someone has it in for me. I think of the woman in my fourth period class. Or rather, I’m the man who uses her classroom during her fourth period conference period.

THE FIRST DAYS OF SCHOOL, by Howard K. Wing and Honey T. Wong. I don’t see any Asians on the cover. The book is long and wide, as big as serving platter.

Another Post-It: *Please Return When Finished* ☺ To whom, The Wings or the Wongs?

Ms. Ramos notices the book. "Our teacher made us read that."

"Teacher?"

"You know, in training." I flip through the book. "At the university." I notice a sign on the inside of the door: 234. I'm cold. "We had to take this stupid course on effective discipline."

"Oxymoron," I say.

"Something like that."

"They just, you know, so loud."

Ms. Ramos crinkles her face. "I know." A woman on my left looks up from a paper on the table in front of her.

"Finished, Miss?" asks Ms. Ramos.

"Yes, I guess," says the woman. "Can you notice," she says, pointing at the page, "the erasure here?"

Ms. Ramos leans closer to the page. "The fourth one, no?"

"Yes, I had it down, but—"

"No, don't notice."

"No?"

"Not a thing," says Ms. Ramos. The woman giggles. Her hair is short, combed straight, and curls under in the back toward her neck. A tiny cross hangs from a thin silver necklace around her neck. "You're going to rewrite that, right?"

The woman looks up at me across the table. "I'm Mrs. Bermuda," she says.

"Pleased to meet you." She giggles like a schoolgirl.

Mrs. Bermuda lightly brushes the paper with her index finger. “Darn, I knew it.” I look more closely at the paper. She notices my book. “Oh, yes—the Wong book.” She slides the book toward her. “May I?” I look at her attendance chart.

“That’s second period attendance,” says Ms. Ramos.

Mrs. Bermuda looks up. “I hate writing these.” I see a chart covered in upside-down names. “You have to write down all the names of your second period class. She turns the paper around. “See?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I made a mistake, so I have to rewrite it.” She exhales softly and places her hand beneath her jaw.

“Only second period?” I ask.

“Yes sir. Just second period.”

“Right, second.”

“No mistakes,” says Ms. Ramos.

“You can’t mess up?”

“Well, sure, but you have to rewrite it.”

“See here,” says Mrs. Bermuda, running her finger along the top of the form: *ALL MISTAKES MUST BE REWRITTEN PER DISTRICT OFFICE.*

“Rewritten?”

“Your attendance list.”

“Right, but I didn’t—”

“Black ballpoint pen.”

“Black?”

“Yes sir, black only.”

“You have been taking attendance,” asks Ms. Ramos. “Right?”

I consider telling them the truth, my truth. *Adrian is rarely here. Only three students on the floor yesterday. Roxy is always late. I can't find room 307.*

My answer: “Right.”

The truth: I only have a hard copy of my roster for second, fourth, and fifth period.

My answer: “I think I misplaced my attendance list yesterday.”

“Oh God, I’m surprised they haven’t harassed you yet.”

“Amen,” hollers Mrs. Bermuda. She looks up from a blank chart.

“You can print it here.”

“Here?” I look behind me at the door. Virginia, the science teacher, walks toward the computer next to her desk.

“All you have to do is type in your code.” *Virginia speaks!* I’m not sure what to say.

Pleased to meet you, science lady!

Well that’s mighty nice of you!

All hail the periodic table!

“It’s already on the site,” she says. She wears a brown pinstriped shirt and straight, straight pants. I’m afraid she can’t bend. She stares at me, waiting. “Just type in your code.”

Speechless, I sit.

“Your attendance code.”

I smile or smirk, not sure which, and take a deep breath. “Uh-huh, the code.”

“The six digit one.”

“Four if you cut off the zeros,” says Mrs. Bermuda.

I shrug my shoulders. *Better slip with foot than tongue*, says Benjamin Franklin.

“Let me,” she says. I slowly rise. “Come on.” She folds her arms and waits for me to move. I notice her pony-tail. Her skin is pasty white. She slides another chair next to the computer. “Sit.” I ask her which code to type.

She looks toward the table at the other teachers. “The one you use for attendance each period.” I’m nervous. *Each period?* The cursor blinks incessantly. *Stop, Dammit.* I don’t know what to do.

“The thing is,” I say, “the other teachers, you know . . . I’m not sure I can, um, use their computers.” Team 77 stares. “The one, that one in the morning—first period.” I look around. “I’m in the way.”

Clarissa returns from the bathroom. Virginia stands with toes pointed in opposite directions. “What?” says Clarissa. She looks at her blouse.

“Mr. Man here hasn’t taken attendance,” says Ms. Ramos.

“No, it’s not that. I, er, don’t know the . . . code.” *Ah, relief!* “You know, the attendance code?”

“Not to worry,” says green blouse Masterson. “Remember my two boys.” She walks to the computer and reaches over my shoulder. I move out of the way. She types something and a list of students appear.

Virginia drops some pencils in a drawer and turns toward Clarissa. “How’d you—”

“Don’t you know I’m Brenda’s best friend?”

“The office Brenda?”

“Who else?” Her fingernails are short and colorless. Something starts to print.

“Oh, the Wing book,” Clarissa says, leaning over the table and turning a few pages. *The famous Wings!* Virginia grabs paper from the printer before it lands on the floor. She’s holds the stapler like a contestant on *Jeopardy!*.

“Wongs!” says Mrs. Bermuda. She looks at me. “You can use my attendance sheet.”

Virginia hands me a stack of papers. “Last name first,” she instructs. She gives me a pen from her pocket. *A black pen.* I frown.

“Last name?” I repeat. Ms. Ramos shakes her head at Virginia. Clarissa and Mrs. Bermuda giggle. “So I’ve been doing it all wrong?” The women turn toward me:

“Hold steady.”

“Make ‘em sweat.”

“Sweat?”

“Not literally.”

“You’re the boss.”

“God.”

“Right!”

“Feelings are irrelevant.”

“Mine?”

“Yes, yours.”

“Button your shirt.”

“A collar’s a must.”

“Aren’t you a lawyer?”

“Speak slowly.”

“Don’t repeat yourself.”

“You need pencils.”

“Borrow mine.”

“Speak slowly.”

“Don’t repeat yourself.”

“What if they can’t—”

“You know, don’t say the same thing twice.”

“Lots of tests.”

“Watch out for Martinez.”

“Lots of frowns.”

“Yep, like that.”

“No one likes a cry baby.”

“Never complain.”

“They’re not so bad.”

“Repetition sucks.”

“*Ya, chica.*”

“Take it from us.”

CHAPTER 4

Classroom protocol is an odd thing. Page twenty-eight of the Wing-Wong book tells me to stand in front of the door greeting each student with a handshake and a smile. The man in the picture—finally, a real Asian—offers his hand and a smile so big he must have affixed his cheeks to his ear lobes with a hot glue gun. I can't look like that man on the page. I wear contact lenses, not glasses, and his hair looks like something from the layered Farah Fawcett collection. No, really—I can't be him because I'm not that happy. I've never been that happy. I hope to never be that happy. Besides, my students get to the classroom before I do.

Today I've lined pieces of cardboard paint samples, which I took from Home Depot last night, along the lab tables in first period. I give Brian another pile of matching paint samples to pass out to the students. Mr. Wing advises the new teacher to have a seating chart before the first day of class. Sounds fascist to me. Far too late for that, anyway. I tell the students to sit in the seat with a matching color.

“Matching what?”

“The one you're holding.”

“The square?”

“Yes, Angel, the square.”

“She's got my yellow, sir.”

“Where's the black?”

“Look at the colors.”

“I am.”

“Me, too. She has my yellow.”

“It’s not yellow.”

I approach two girls. They each hold a yellow card. I inspect more closely: *Canary Yellow*, like a school bus. Victoria, legs covered in long black soccer shoes, brings me her cardboard. “Mine says Banana Bottom,” she says. Her card looks the same color to me.

“There’s no black,” Brian says.

I take his card and look around. “Okay, everybody sit.” The movement stops; everyone looks confused. Reymundo, the cute boy in the Cowboys jersey from my first day, sits in the back smiling. “Look at Reymundo.” No one knows where to look. Heads turn around. “You see, the two—”

“But I don’t have blue.”

“ . . . matching colors, um, Reymundo has—”

“I can’t find—”

“Sit.”

“But—”

“Everyone just sit.”

“I am.”

Several students slump back to their seats. Roxy wanders aimlessly. “Yes, Reymundo, I see that you’re sitting.” The science teacher looks up from her computer. “Sit anywhere.” I hold Reymundo’s two cards high in the air. “See that. Blue and . . .”

“Blue and what, sir?”

I look more closely at the cards. One says *Sky Blue*. I see a beautiful June day in Miami. The other says *Marine Blue*. I hold the cards higher. I see no difference. Brian and Samantha approach me, each holding identical black cards. “See the words,” I say. “Look at the tiny letters.” I inspect the cards. Both say *Knight Black*. Now I know: I’d forgotten to separate the cards into matching piles. A few seated students hold two matching cards in the air. “It’s easy,” one of them says. Brian looks annoyed. Roxy smiles and laughs with Victoria. I ask everyone to put their cards on the table. Brian separates the cards into two groups. Victoria helps. The science teacher stands.

“Why don’t we just sit where we are?” someone asks. *Well, now how boring would that be?* I can barely stomach the idea. I turn away from the students. Brian places a card on top of each chair. Reymundo gives everyone a card. Samantha asks for orange card. Reymundo gives her pink. Students trade colors like kisses.

“Keep the ones on the table,” I say. Students pass more cards. Someone hands Samantha a shiny orange. “Alright.” I look around. “Now everyone is seated.” I hear murmurs. The science teacher stands next to Brian. She raises her hand.

“I think, sir, they need to move to their seats, now.”

“Right.” I have no idea what she’s talking about.

“Now, move,” she says. The students stand quickly and wander about the room.

Samantha squeals “*Sunset Orange*” and hugs a girl sitting next to her. Brian searches for green. “I hate green,” Victoria says. A small boy says *Coral Reef* is a pretty color. Roxy tells me *Copper Glow* is like her mother’s makeup. Adrian sits in the back doing nothing. I’m surprised he’s here today.

“Has anyone seen *Island Green*?” someone asks. Reymundo shakes his head at me. “*Island Green*?” The color would look good on my bedroom walls. Samantha directs him to a card in the corner. He looks upset when he sits.

I regain my composure. “Has everyone found their matching color?”

“Maria cheated.”

“No I didn’t.”

“I saw you and Kenia change colors.”

“That’s okay, Angel.”

“No, they changed—”

“What color do you have, Angel?”

“Red. He looks closely at the letters. “*Strawberry Freeze.*”

Lemon Zest.

Calm Matter.

“Mine’s boring—*Basket Beige.*”

“What’s beige?”

“Khaki.”

“What’s khaki, sir?”

“Your pants.”

“What’s zany?”

“Crazy, fool”

“*Crazy Pink?*”

“Exactly.”

“*Canary Yellow?*”

“A bird!”

“Good, Reymundo.”

“My *abuela* has one in her yard.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m just saying, sir.”

It’s the most excitement I’ve seen from my advisory class all year. *They’re not interchangeable!* No more swirling mass of indistinguishable parts. They don’t look like windmills anymore. Well, that’s fine, but Reymundo picks up the cards and disappears. The teacher returns to her desk. I raise my voice in an attempt to sound confident. Still no textbooks. Nothing’s written on the board. My evaluation is tomorrow. I watch Adrian write on the table. My activity, the e-mail from my EPIC mentor reiterates, must be open-ended, student-centered, and pedagogy-based. I’m not sure what this means. I’m to specify my real-world applications, or “nomenclature,” and specific strategies for English-language learners. *Huh?* Adrian scratches something out. The science teacher rises again from her desk. She wears big rings. Adrian hides his pencil under his leg. I’m thankful Mrs. Jenkins, my personal EPIC mentor, will be dropping by around 11:00 a.m., just before fourth period. I’ve promised the class king-sized Snickers if they do a good job. They want something called Cheetos and cheese. Wing-Wong might be right: each class possesses its own essence. Mrs. Jenkins tells me classroom culture is a changing thing. I’d never thought of teaching as an anthropological endeavor. I think of the copulating stone figures I’d brought back from the Guatemalan highlands years ago. They’re meant for tourists, I think.

I remind my students the following morning in advisory that those in my fourth period class will be having a visitor today. “Like a guest speaker?” Roxy asks.

“Not exactly a guest—”

“Sir?” Brian interrupts. He walks around the room collecting pencils. “Aren’t we supposed to have those already?” He stares at the student compacts still sitting on the second shelf of my cart. He drops a handful of pencils in the empty Kleenex box atop the collapsed first shelf. “They were due last week.” The bell rings. “The pink one goes to you,” he says. He holds up one of the forms. “The yellow one you give back to us.” He drops the form on top of the Kleenex box. The mass of colorful copies take up the second shelf of my cart. I stare, covetously, at a row of empty shelves on Ms. Sandoval’s shiny metal bookcase. I need a space of my own. Brian walks to the back of the room. He returns with an empty box. “It’s for stacks of paper,” he says. Roxy squeezes between us. I turn the cart around to face the door. “It’s empty, sir.” He lifts the box so it’s on my eye level. “You can put them in here.”

“Put what?”

“The compacts.”

“The what?”

“The *forms*.” He points to the mound of papers nearly sliding on the floor.

“You’re not going to make it to next period on time.” Maybe he’s right. *The forms. The forms.* “Put the forms in here.” He lowers the box to the bottom level.

“But I thought—”

“The filled-out ones,” he says, separating the compact, “you can put in here.” The classroom fills with sixth-grader students. Pigtails approaches, looks at Brian.

“Hello,” she says.

“Oh, hi, uh . . .”

“Elizabeth.” She continues staring at Brian.

“Yes . . . Elizabeth.” She looks at me, then at Brian carefully placing the forms into the box. “You’re going to be late, sir.” I am going to be late for second period again.

“You see, sir?” Brian lifts the box from the floor to the desk next to him. Pigtales opens her mouth, braces fall out, an oval of discontent overtakes her face when Brian ignores her. “Just pass these out today.” He moves the stapler, box of pencils, worksheets, and empty colored folders to the second shelf. “I’m putting the box on top.” I don’t want the ugly red and white box on top of my cart. “So you don’t forget,” he says.

“Right.”

“Late, sir,” reminds Pigtales.

“Thank you, Elizabeth.”

“So you don’t forget.”

“Thank you, Brian.”

A boy in a maroon t-shirt watches us. We make eye contact and he flips through a book on his desk. He’s caramel-skinned, stocky, and needs a haircut. The teacher asks him something. “No ma’am,” he says. He pauses. His hands shuffle, stop. “I don’t have it.” He answers in a low, growling voice—more adult than child—but his voice sparks with intensity. He blinks repeatedly. His long eyelashes cover his eyes.

“You have to go,” Pigtales reminds me. “You’re going to be late.”

I look at Brian. “Do you need a pass?”

He laughs. “My teacher doesn’t do tardies.” *Tardies? Oh God, what next?* I wheel the cart toward the door, which Pigtales cheerily opens. The stocky boy watches Brian and me leave.

“Don’t get lost,” Pigtales says. Brian and I fly down the hallway toward the next turn. “This way,” he says. My mind’s still on that sixth-grade boy. “Over here, sir.” I stop, stare straight-ahead. “You’re down there.” *I’m where?* “You’re in eighth-grade, remember?” *Yes, of course.* Brian shakes his head, runs toward the seventh-grade hallway. He turns around and yells: “Don’t forget to pass them ooooooooouuuuuuut. . .” I gather speed and roll ahead. I can’t get that boy’s eyelashes out of my mind.

I forget about the forms until fourth period. Roxy grabs an armful from the box and begins distributing them to students. *By the grace of God.* “We’re getting these, right?” She’s wearing gigantic bangle earrings again. *La Virgen de Guadalupe.*

Brian walks in. “I told you not to say anything,” he shouts at Roxy. *Huitzilopochtli*, the Aztec god of war, strikes again. Roxy rolls her eyes and walks over to the third row. She dumps what-must-be fifty forms on Martha’s desk. Brian picks several off the floor. He pulls something out of his folder and hands it to me, blank side down. “Sorry it’s so late.” On the other side Brian Anzaldúa’s lifeline stands out in gaudy orange marker. He’s a month late. His timeline starts in 1993. I turn the paper over and slide it into a blue folder. Martha dumps the extra forms in the box. Brian stares at me, waiting for I-don’t-know-what, and pouts back to his seat. I look around; Mrs. Jenkins has yet to arrive.

“Okay,” I begin. “Just a reminder.” I look again—no teacher or Mrs. Jenkins. “Make sure you’re in your new seats.” A girl in an oversized orange t-shirt raises her hand. I still don’t know all the names. “Yes, miss?”

“Are we going to get our timelines back?”

“Yeah,” Brian agrees.

“Uh-huh, the timelines, right.”

“The *lifelines*, sir.”

“Right. Life.”

I look at my cart. The bottom shelf is covered in papers—some fastened, most not—indistinguishable by period, assignment, student, just a whirlwind of papers I’m too tired to look at. The class looks confused. “Shouldn’t we, like, get them back?” someone asks. Everything’s a mess now and I’m not sure how to fix it. I’ve no time for grades or tardies or multicolored forms. *Where’s Mrs. Jenkins, dammit?*

I picked fourth period because they’re my favorite class. Boys outnumber girls by four to one. Boys don’t talk as much, at least not in fourth period. Mrs. Jenkins should see what a good job I’m doing. I finish writing the day’s agenda on the board. Only Martha copies the agenda into her notebook. “He told us yesterday,” she says. Brian dutifully follows. Javier says he doesn’t understand.

“Understand what?”

“What it means.”

I read the agenda from the left hand corner of the board—TAKS Objective 7.02B: *Identify important individuals, events, and issues related to European exploration and colonization of Texas.* I’m satisfied. Javier mouths something to Rafael across the

room. I turn my head and see Mrs. Jenkins, her candy-apple red shoulder bag looking supple on her arm, slide into one of the unoccupied desks. She's had the bag every time I've seen her, part purse, part faux briefcase, with long enough straps to slide manila envelopes inside. Besides the bag, she's carrying a clipboard. "What's TAKS?" Javier asks. The class moans. Martha turns around and rolls her eyes. Mrs. Jenkins writes. She nods her head as we make eye contact, then leans over to grab something from her purse. A little old lady from Milwaukee with flat gray hair has no reason to carry such a stylish bag.

"Raise your hand if you've ever eaten cow's head."

Martha tightens her face like vertical blinds. "The brains of a cow?"

"Like that lady in first period, right?" asks Roxy.

"Uh-huh."

"The teacher, you know, the teacher."

"Ms. Sandoval," someone says.

"Exactly."

"She eats cow brain?" Martha asks.

"Not the brains, stupid." Mrs. Jenkins looks up. "The head," someone answers.

"Cow's head is *barbacoa*," I say.

"No."

"Yuh-huh."

"For reals?"

"Yep."

“Well, yeah, I’ve had that,” Martha says. Everyone’s speaking loudly, smiling, having a good time. Even Mrs. Jenkins smiles.

I change my look to something serious. “Cabeza de Vaca.”

“I get it,” says Rafael. “The head of a cow.”

“The first European,” I begin, “to set foot on Texas soil.” I notice my toe tapping the podium in front of me. I’m nervous.

“So, he was the first white guy?”

“The first Spaniard.”

“So, no, he wasn’t white?”

“He was Spanish.” Rafael stares at Mrs. Jenkins.

“So the colony is like ants,” says Javier. “You know, ants?”

“Not ants,” Martha says. “I don’t get what colonization means.”

“Ants!” says Javier. He turns around in his chair. “Haven’t you ever seen an ant mound? He raises his hands like claws. “You know, how they take over the yard. Like a colony.”

“*Hormigas*,” says Rafael.

Martha pulls her shirt sleeves over her wrists. “I know what ants are, stupidhead.”

Rafael raises his big head and looks at me. I glance at Mrs. Jenkins. “She called me stupid,” he says.

Brian sits straight at his desk like he’s cracking his back. “More like mango-head,” he says.

Rafael looks at me. “Better than a pineapple.” His pink lips jut out like he’s pierced his lip with a giant rod from the Amazon.

“Ha! A pineapple,” says Javier. “I can see you trying to put on your football helmet.” Javier squats down his head. Everyone laughs. Jennifer throws him her pink ski cap. Javier puts it on his head and pulls it over his eyes. Mrs. Jenkins clears her throat—loudly.

Martha strains her hand in the back. “Hello, I’m dying back here. *Hell-ooooo.*”

I take an black Expo marker from the ledge in front of the dry erase board. I turn toward the board. “Who can name me some Spanish explorers from last week?”

Javier raises his hand. “Cabeza de Vaca.” The class laughs. “Right, cow’s head?” he asks.

“Duh.”

“I know,” says Martha, “but—”

“And the black guy.”

“Good,” I say. “Who’s the African guy?”

“Estevanico!” shouts Javier.

Exasperated, Martha lowers her hand.

“You’d know,” says Rafael.

“Alright, alright, back on track. Did you have a question, Martha?”

“Are you saying that the explorers were like ants?”

Jennifer laughs in a giant belch. Others join her laughter. Rafael smiles like he’s auditioning for a role in the high school musical. He’s hard not to like. I try to restrain my smile.

I can see from the podium that Mrs. Jenkins is marking on the classic EPIC Pedagogy chart. I look at mine in front of me. I'm dizzy again, swirling like when Brian found me in the halls my first day of school. *Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. 4.18. Correlated Objectives. 8.25K. Data-Driven. Time-Tested. ELPS.* I don't know what I'm looking at. Mrs. Jenkins stops writing.

Martha persists. "Are you talking about the Aztecs?" She's intuitive. Rafael finally copies the objective. We're back on track.

"Take a look at this, Martha."

"Is that our opening activity?" Hector asks. "Class is, like, halfway over." Hector always knows the time. Jennifer teases her hair.

"What's up back there?"

Jennifer squints and opens her mouth. No words come out.

"Yes?"

"What's wrong with her?" she asks.

"Who?"

"The lady with the dots all over her?"

"The pox."

"The what?"

"The pox, like chicken pox."

"Yeah, that lady. What's her deal?"

"Anyone got any ideas?" Mrs. Jenkins looks around the room.

"She's sick, duh," says Hector.

Javier says it looks like a 'dude'.

“Why, dude?”

“That sheet thing is around his waist. If it was a girl, it’d be way up here.” He pulls his shirt toward his neck.

“Does it look like my boobs are around my neck?” Martha says.

The class laughs. Javier mumbles something to himself. He slouches down in his seat. I’m surprised to see Mrs. Jenkins giggling.

“Sometimes foreigners bring diseases, right?” No one answers. “This is a picture from something called the Aztec Codex.”

“What’s coming out of the doctor lady’s mouth?”

I look more closely at the picture on the overhead projector. I walk to the screen in front of the room and stare. “Everybody see?” I’m standing in the way. Hector walks to the board. He hands me a long pointing stick near the teacher’s desk. I stare at the stick.

“Well?” says Hector, still standing. “*Point* with it.”

I can’t stop staring at the stick. “The doctor lady, huh?”

“Yeah, the shaman,” says Martha. “She’s talking, right?”

“Good.”

“She’s sucking out the bad germs,” says Javier, sucking in the air through an imaginary straw.

Hector walks back to seat. Mrs. Jenkins fumbles through her giant red bag. “I think the shaman,” Martha continues, “is sort of telling the Indian lady to calm down. Like relax, it’s just sick.”

Brian shouts “relax!” like a crazy person. “Relax?” he repeats. I tell him to talk more quietly.

“Sorry, sir.” He pauses. “The lady looks dead to me.”

“Dead?”

“Look at her.”

“Her eyes are all closed,” says Martha

“But down there,” Rafael says, “they’re open.” I bend over to see what Rafael’s talking about. “Looks like a different person to me,” he says. He might be right. “You see all the different squares, like a comic. Each one is a different person.”

I pick up a glue stick on the teacher’s desk. We haven’t gotten to the quotation sheet I’d planned on passing out. What about Bartolome de Las Casas? *The children have to know about Bartolome de Las Casas*. I don’t know what to do. I look at Rafael. “What does it mean,” I say, tossing the glue stick in his direction, “to be hurt?”

“What does it *mean*?”

“For what is my appetite?” I say. I don’t know what I mean anymore. I hope Mrs. Jenkins has fallen asleep. I strain my neck toward Rafael. He smiles like a woman: glossy-lipped, infectious, perfectly-timed before I burst—with what, I don’t know.

“I’ve never been hurt.”

“Never, Rafael?”

“Never.”

“Not even emotionally?” I say. “Sad feelings?”

“We’ll yeah, when my Mom and Dad would always fight.”

“How’d it feel?”

“Bad, I guess.”

“How bad?”

“Really bad.”

“No, I mean, how, as in what did it feel like? What hurt?”

“My tummy.” He’s thinking now. “I cried a lot.”

Javier breaks down laughing.

“Cried?”

“I was eight.” Rafael lowers his shoulders. “And I cried a lot. I was only eight, I guess.”

Jennifer raises her hand. “I broke my leg last year.”

“And?”

“And it sucked.”

“Did people laugh at you? Like your parents?”

She looks puzzled. “Well, no.”

I stare at Brian in front of me. “So imagine if you and your family are dying of small pox and no one cares.” The class is silent. “Look at these people. Who’s going to care for them? Rafael?”

“I don’t know. Their family.”

“Nope. Dead.”

“Friends?”

“Nope. Dying.”

“Shamans,” says Martha.

“Does it look like they’re helping?” Martha says no. She huffs like she’s exasperated.

“So they all died?” Javier asks.

“Millions. Hector shoulders slouch. He’s stopped staring at his watch. He looks depressed. “No one to care for them.”

“Who cares for you?” Rafael asks. I turn my head, embarrassed by the question. “You’re not married, right?”

I pick up the worksheet off the desk and walk toward Rafael. “The Tears of the Indians,” I say, tossing the worksheets on his desk. I rub his head, quickly, with both hands. The boy stays still—the sullen female. He’s a star on the football field, I hear, but his spirit is feminine. I learned Spanish from friendly men like him in Quetzaltenango. Rafael shares their strong jaws, their tendency for forgiveness. Rafael is curious. These kids don’t know I speak Spanish. I remember my first month in Guatemala—I’m out of money, freezing in the antiplano. A peasant lets me sleep in a room full of corn. I don’t remember how I felt. Touching Rafael’s shoulders reminds me of warmth. Rafael lowers his head. I can see Javier staring at me from across the room. Have I gone mad? Has the colonizer in me returned? Who am I to teach Mexican children about the Aztecs? I’m no Mayan. *Who the hell am I? Who the hell is Mrs. Jenkins?*

“I’m late,” I say.

“Late where?” Martha asks.

“Late to get here. To the Valley.”

“You were a Spanish explorer?” Justus asks.

“God, do I look that old?”

“No, I mean, you came like Cabeza de Vaca and left?”

“I’m always running around, not sure what to do.”

Martha raises her hand. “My dad says we’re descended from the Aztecs.”

“Really.”

“Yep, and how the white people raped and killed them.” The class laughs.

“What do you know about the Aztecs, Martha?”

“Just the temples and all the artifacts, and stuff.”

I’m excited now. I’m an anthropologist. Mrs. Jenkins and I are anthropologists.

She watches us from her desk. “The Aztecs descended from the people called the Chichimecs in Northern Mexico, a wandering tribe of people known for being barbarians.”

“Barbarians?”

“More like hunter-gatherers. They hunted animals and ate berries and nuts that fell off trees.”

“Chichimecs?” says Javier. “That’s funny.”

“Chichimecs,” repeats Rafael. He makes two fists over his breasts and sits tall in his seat. Hector laughs loudly.

I walk down the center aisle. “The Chichimecs wandered around for a few hundred years.” I glance at Mrs. Jenkins. “They settled on swampy land in the middle of Mexico and made an alliance with two other groups. Eventually they called themselves Tenochca or Mexica.”

“Hey,” says Rafael. “That sounds like Mexico.”

“It does. That’s where Mexico got its name.”

“Yeah?”

“Much later.”

“What about all those temples,” Martha asks. “Isn’t that Aztec?” A few students nod.

“What I mean is that this group of wandering people—savage, really—just killed animals and each other and wandered and wandered, then found a home.”

“Where’d they find it?”

“In the water, this lake called Lake Tlatelolco.”

“How’d they live on the water?” asks Javier.

“They irrigated it, drained it, stuck a bunch of branches and silt on top. Made a kind of floating city.”

“What about the temples? A temple can’t float.”

“That, too. They built temples and stuck their war god on top.” A few students laugh. “Huitzilopochtli.”

“Huit-a what?” Javier asks. Nathan stands, bends at the knees, returns to his seat.

“Their war God.” Rafael repeats the name. “They pulled out hearts and pushed people down the pyramids.” I’m dizzy again. Rafael sticks out his tongue and makes gagging noises.

“Yeah!” shouts Javier.

“They finally stood still,” I say. “The Chichimecs had a place to call their own.”

“So what’d they do all this traveling for?” asks Jennifer. She folds a piece of paper to the size of a baby’s fist.

“Yeah?” shouts Hector.

I pause, look at the Aztec codex on the board. “I guess they wanted a better place to live.”

“What was wrong with where they lived?”

I want a better place to live

“I don’t know. I think it was kind of like here.”

“What’s wrong with here?”

“Nothing. I mean, nothing. Just, you know, there’s not much to eat here. It’s not like they could go to HEB and buy half a chicken.”

“But couldn’t they kill a chicken?” Brian asks. “My dad does that on the ranch.”

“Yes, I guess. I suppose. But there weren’t any chickens, remember?” Brian’s face becomes still, his eyes look straight ahead. The kid’s probably thinking about yesterday’s Columbian Exchange lesson.

“No cows?” Brian asks.

“Nope.”

“Pigs?”

“*Nada*. Heck, there wasn’t even grapefruit.”

“No oranges?”

“None.”

“But . . .”

“What do oranges need to grow?”

A few students answer: “Water!”

“Do we get lots of rain?”

“No.”

“Exactly,” I say. “The white people came later and dug all these canals. Javier sits up straight. “The Chichimecs didn’t have any water to grow anything.”

“So that’s why they wandered around?” says Javier.

“Exactly.”

“To find what they were looking for?”

“Yep?”

“So what were they looking for?”

“Besides a better name?” Rafael interrupts.

Brian rolls his eyes. “Food, I bet.”

“Nourishment,” I say, surprised by my own enthusiasm. Mrs. Jenkins stops writing. I look at the *Tears of the Indians* worksheets on Rafael’s desk. I pick one up and start reading: *To these quiet lambs, endowed with such blessed qualities, came the Spaniards like most cruel Tygres, Wolves, and Lions.* I finger the bottom of my sweater. Rafael looks up at me. Had I been a Chichimec all along? Dragging myself through deserts, pounding my head against walls? My cart’s a mess. The room’s a mess: papers hang lifelessly from the bulletin boards and scraps of magazines litter the floor. “Pass these out, Rafael.” I see Martha’s hand raised in the air.

Am I here to help, or merely to escape? From what am I running? Or am I running toward something? How does a man find himself in a roomful of children? *To travel is to counter the terrorizing force of white supremacy.* Which am I? The curious traveler or terrorizing force? Anthropologist or wandering tourist?

Rafael stares at me while passing out the worksheets. I feel like a museum curator. The boy is handsome. Slave? Refugee? Asylum-seeker? Have I exoticized the Other. Or worse, romanticized the other? Aren't they, simply, children? Martha's hand remains in the air. How does the involuntary traveler know himself? I stare the imperialist gaze. What is the so-called white man's burden? Martha anchors her raised left arm with her right hand pressed against her elbow. What do you do with so many innocent eyes watching your every move? I finally call on Martha.

"Nothing," she says, watching Rafael pass out papers. "I wanted to tell you we're running out of time." Hector nods in agreement. Mrs. Jenkins writes furiously in her notebook.

"I know," I say. "I've known for some time."

A loud knock reverberates from the door. *Oh God, what now?* I see a big-armed boy holding a stack of books. "Can somebody—". Roxy opens the door before I have a chance to finish.

"These are from Mr. Palacios," says the boy. He bends low, from the waist, books piled one on top of the other to his shoulders. He looks like he's about to shoot an underhanded free-throw. "Sir?" He looks distressed. "Where should I put them, sir?" I look around the room.

"There's room there," Brian says. He points to a nice shelf behind the teacher's desk. I look at the shelf. The teacher is gone.

The boy with the books is tired. He rests his arms against a table. "How about here?" he asks. I'm tired. *Here? There? Everywhere?* "You can stack them on this

table.” I see the long table he’s referring to. Before I can tell him yes, three other boys appear at the door holding similar stacks of books.

“On the cart,” I say. The burly book boys stare at the cart.

“The cart, sir?” He thinks I’ve misspoken.

“Yes, the cart.” I’ve given up.

Brian wheels the cart forward, toward the boys.

“Are you sure it can take it?” asks Rafael. He looks at the battered cart as if it were a tousled old street dog napping after an alley brawl. I, on the other hand, am proud of my cart. Don Quixote’s horse Rozinante is, it’s true, long-haired, sway-backed, and slow, but to me—the master—he’s the handsomest and wisest steed that had ever lived. Maybe Jennifer in EPIC training class is on to something. My cart’s all I’ve got.

“Betsy’s dead.”

“Excuse me?”

“The cart’s dead.”

“Betsy?”

“Something my dad says for old people,” Rafael explains. “You know, like Betsy’s tired, we’re gettin’ pizza tonight.”

“Maybe your mom—”

“Grandma. Beatrice, I think. You know, in Spanish.”

I’m hurt. Together Betsy and I ride bravely out into the world, lance in hand, notebook paper flying aimlessly through the air, prepared to fight injustice, heal the sick, and teach children the four regions of Texas. I look at Mrs. Jenkins. “I thought of her more as Rozinante.”

“The Quixote horse?”

“Yes, the horse from Don Quixote.” Roxy keeps popping gum. “Knock-kneed—”

“Yeah, yeah, we know: knock-kneed, bad-shaped, old, clumsy, *blah blah blah*.”

“All we’re saying is it’ll break.” The book boys put the books on the table instead.

“Thank you, boys.” I look at the class. “All *I’m* saying,” I tell the class, “is that Betsy serves me as well as she can. She’s like that horse wobbling through the treacherous hallway.” I buckle my knees and grab a stack of books. “She’s as brave as Rozinante struggling up the Castilian hillsides.” Brian giggles. Rafael looks unconvinced. “I pull on the reins and charge down the hallway. Woe to thee who dare cross our path.” I’m an actor now, my head perched forward at the parts of speech on the back bulletin board. I’ve forgotten all about Mrs. Jenkins. *I’m free, dammit!*

“Fine,” says Rafael. “Load it up.” He walks toward the table and softly places three books on the top shelf. Brain follows. Students rise in a frenzy. Roxy adds two. Jennifer only one. Alexis refuses to stand. Finally, Javier takes responsibility for adding the final few books. Rafael looks at me like he wants the cart to buckle. Betsy stays strong. I notice Javier’s weight pressing on the cart. Rafael smirks. I’ve never seen Roxy look this excited. Javier places the final book on the cart. Nothing moves. I’ve won. *Damn it, I’ve won.*

And then she collapses. Betsy heaves and sighs, struggles mightily to keep her weak joints in place, and buckles in a ghastly heap of corrugated metal legs and tiny screws. I bow my head in reverence. Secretly, I’m pleased. I hear Rafael mumble

something on his way back to his seat. I think he's talking to me this time. *That's Mister Dumbass to you, kid.* The class begins stacking books on the table. Mrs. Jenkins closes her notebook and leaves. Only Roxy seems to notice. On her way out, Roxy tells me she saw lots of happy faces in Mrs. Jenkins' notebook.

CHAPTER 5

Whah! Whah! I'm being watched. I can feel it. *Don't be a crybaby. No one likes a complainer.* Ever since Mrs. Jenkins exited in fits and huffs (as I imagine it), I've been surrounded by a life-size cutout of Mrs. Martinez herself, peeping past corners, leering from the hallway, and on one occasion sitting through thirty minutes of Alfredo Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Much of the movie was filmed on location at San Francisco's Mission Dolores and Mission San Juan Bautista, which, incidentally, shares the name with the Mother of Texas Missions, *our* San Juan Bautista right here on the Rio Grande River. Mrs. Martinez left unimpressed. Sure, we went a little long, saw too much, didn't have to see Madeleine's fall from the Mission's tower three times, but did Mrs. Martinez really have to bang her thigh against the door on her way out? She'll never know if James Stewart conquered his fear of heights. Or his romantic longings.

"He looks creepy," Jacob says after Mrs. Martinez leaves.

"It's a disoriented psychological state," I say. He doesn't answer. "It's when you search for something you lost in someone else."

He says fine but combs his hair forward obsessively, with his tiny fingers.

"What's acrophobia?" he finally asks.

"Fear of heights."

"Tall buildings, sir?"

Loss of equilibrium, kid.

“Is that why she fell?”

“Disorientation.”

“That’s the trouble with blondes.” He says it with a thin smile like a drawer handle and presses out his tongue at the air.

“That’s the trouble.” I look away from Jacob. “Check out the paragraph in your book about the mission in Eagle Pass.”

“I’ve been there,” Ashley says.

“Me, too.”

Brian looks sleepy, his eyes puffy, vacant-looking, one hand on his chin propping up his head. I ask him to read. He starts laughing and can’t stop. Jacob giggles.

“Read,” I repeat. Brian looks over at Roxy. Luis puts his head down. There’s nothing I can do.

“I will! I will!” says Jacob.

“Sit.”

“But, sir—”

“Brian’s going to read.” I walk toward Brian. The usually helpful boy in a long-sleeved red sweater I met the first day of school appears spiteful. He looks at me with squinted eyes. His head is stiff, full of gel. “Read.” I pat his head again. He lowers his shoulders and looks ahead. I wrap a firm hand around the back of his neck. “I don’t know what your problem is, little boy, but I suggest you read.” I’m close enough to see his nostrils straining. His brown eyes are detached. I can’t discern any pupils. My right hand pushes his left shoulder down. He does not resist. Roxy develops a strained,

defensive posture as if seated on a church pew. Brian turns his head toward me. I repeat my instructions.

His first word, *The*, is slow and laborious, followed by a pause, restraint, a bubbling in his lips, girding of a motor, snake hiss . . . *miss* . . . I don't . . . I can't . . . *sh*, *sh* . . . *miss*, right, *miss-shin*? The mission was an *impo* . . . *imper* . . . *impar*. Someone says important. *Important*. An important part. *The mission was an important part of the se* . . . *set* . . . *sittle* . . . waits for help. *Of the settlement*. *The mission was an important part of the Spanish settlement of*—I can't take it. Tejas, I say. *The mission was an important part of the Spanish settlement of Tejas*. He begins the next sentence. I interrupt. "Agoraphobia," I say. "What does agoraphobia have to do with missions?" The room is eerily silent as it was during our initial meeting. "Think of the Apaches."

"Maybe the Indians got dizzy inside of missions," someone says. I'm satisfied. "Do you think so, Brian?" He shrugs his shoulders. "So maybe the Indians didn't like missions," I say. He looks forward. "Does anyone think that's possible?" The class remains quiet. I've broken a code I don't understand. I've lost my friend. I feel like one of Hitchcock's dual personalities. Am I Madeleine or Judy? I slam shut Brian's book. *Which mistress am I?* But then the boy looks at me with the vacant eyes I'd never seen before, and brushes sweat from his face, wipes his nose with the back of his hand, and I want to *hug hug hug* him into me for being so nice and his hand so soft on my lower back and my right hand, now, on his left shoulder again and hovering softly and no one can feel how he pinches his shoulders up and around so it feels good, it must, for the both of us and Roxy must not see it because she's looking at me with too much eye makeup, like an angry raccoon.

“To scare the hell out of people,” Hitchcock said of his ultimate aim in *Vertigo*. Maybe I’ve never conquered my fear of heights.

I’m sent to some training course the following Monday at the Region One Education Center. On her evaluation, Mrs. Jenkins wrote that I talked too much. She circled *Student-Centered Activities* a half-dozen times. I scored low marks for my assessment of student understanding. But Roxy was correct in one respect: Mrs. Jenkins drew several smiley faces in the “teacher disposition” column, which means, I suppose, that at least I have one. Mrs. Masterson told me not worry about it. “First year teachers” she said. “Your goal is to make it out of here alive.” *Alive*, I think. *Hold steady*.

We’re called *Region One* because we were the first area of the state to integrate several school districts into a community of active educators anxious to share teaching strategies. I’m pleased because they’re supposed to pay back a chunk of my law school loans if I complete five years of teaching. *Yeah, right!* The building is filled with African artifacts and painted concrete floors. For the first time in years, I feel like I’m back in Washington D.C. in an expensively-appointed office suite. I file past a large metal gong the size of a student and wait for training to begin in the Cameron Room, which apparently is named after a nearby county. Hidalgo county is all I know because that’s where I teach. I look around. None of the other new teachers from my school, including Ms. Santos, are here. I’m not discouraged, though. I’m up for the challenge. Maybe I could use a little training.

“Don’t take any crap,” says someone in my group later in the day. She’s a large woman with shiny metal earrings. She’s fair-skinned, freckled, and has something

written on her hand. “They used to call it a crap-detector.” She squishes her face as she says it. *Now that’s funny.* “It’s all about reading and math,” she says, “like all the history teachers can do is dress up like Pilgrims and Indians.” I glance at her red and blue shirt emblazoned with Treviño elementary and two child stick figures tumbling off a building. “We’ve got the bias built-in. All that stuff about Lewis and Clark and happy-go-lucky Benjamin Franklin. Are you kidding me?” She closes her mouth slightly, as if she’s waiting for a response. *No, I’m not. I don’t think so. Am I?* She lowers her voice and whispers at me and Gerry, my partner and defense coordinator of a nearby high school football team. *I can’t believe he’s talking to me!*

“That’s crap!” She says it so low she sounds like she’s growling at us. “Schools are subversion, man.” *You’re scaring me, Miss. Cici.* The kids are tumbling round and round off the schoolhouse. “We pull the crap from the history books. They hate us. A social studies teacher can’t keep quiet. *Social*, you know? We hate rules. Screw the norm. How can you expect to improve if you kiss ass all day?” Gerry makes no attempt to squelch a rude laugh. I bump his leg under the table, look seriously at Miss. Cici’s outraged expression. “Fucking Margaret Mead had it right all along.” That’s the first time I’ve heard Ms. Mead’s name since my graduate anthropology class five years ago.

Surprisingly, she’s right. The next three hours confirms her rebellious disposition. We’re told to create history museums. Find narratives with a moral. History puts context into our lives. *History Museum? Are you kidding?* I just want to tell stories. Gerry asks me where I’m going for lunch. Incorporate literature. Everybody participate. Don’t connect the dots for them. *Is she serious?* I can’t even get Roxy to spit her gum out. Teach chronology. I think of my timeline and smile. Gerry

looks at me. He'll never be on *my* timeline. I'm still a skinny kid on the tennis court afraid to ask a stranger to play. I can't make eye contact. History is controversial. Don't let your administrators talk you out of anything. Race, class, gender—even sexuality—should be at the center of your teaching philosophy. The freckled elementary school teacher raises a defiant hand. I'd be happy if Gerry and I go to lunch together.

Gerry and I do go to lunch. We share a pitcher of beer. Burger for him; I poke through a Cajun Chicken salad. He tells me he “has a feeling” why I'm single. He says it serenely, calmly, makes no attempt to hide the suspicious smile arching from his lips. I return my gaze to my salad. The dressing is too spicy.

That night I think about the anthropological perspective. I imagine living *inside* a culture and simultaneously being outside of it, as I felt with Gerry earlier in the day. What right do I have to tell my story? What about a Mexican kid raised in America? Here the kids don't refer to themselves as Mexican-Americans. For them, *Mexican* is American. No Chicanos here. *We got here first.*

I've never shed the ambition to be liked by legions of men. Perhaps that's why I'm still thinking of Brian. Or why the boy with the long eyelashes mesmerizes me. Gerry put his phone number into my phone; I know I'll never call. For too long I've thought of myself as the crap—not the detector. What about *my* interests, *my* struggles, *my* school? I think that's what attracts so many heterodox males into the teaching profession. But *what about me?* It's a second chance to assert my masculinity in a safe place. A refuge: *La Nuestra Señora del Refugio* Mission, the last Texas Mission to be secularized, two hours of *whoosh whoosh* fast driving from Edison. Am I going to let a

nun scare me off the bell tower, startle me to my death? Retreat into my own objectivity? *This is history, dammit!* I've got my own movies to make.

Mrs. Jenkins wrote, in the tiniest print I've ever seen, that a teacher must be careful to keep strict boundaries between himself and the students. Then, much larger—No touching! I'm sitting in the bathroom flipping through the social studies teacher's Bible, *The Week* magazine, when I stumble across a column from London's *Daily Telegraph* newspaper about a man who was asked by an airplane stewardess to gather his belongings from his seat and accompany her to the cockpit. The man in question was the columnist himself.

"We have very strict rules about adult men sitting with children," the stewardess warned the flabbergasted Mr. Johnson. She was unaware that the erstwhile victims flanking Mr. Johnson on either side were his own children.

"But he's our *father*," one of the children screamed, providing the witty British writer with fodder for his latest column.

"In that absurd exchange," wrote Mr. Johnson in the *Daily Telegraph*, "we can see the pernicious view that all adult male contact with young people is potentially a bit dodgy." He explains that this view is partly responsible for the "hemorrhaging" of male teachers from British schools—down 50 percent within 20 years.

I've learned the numbers are similar in American schools—male teachers are quickly and quietly leaving the classroom. While a hearty male sexual appetite is applauded in our society, it must be conveniently turned off or quickly put away in the presence of children, particularly if you're attracted to members of the same sex. Women, on the other hand, are expected to keep their sexual appetite permanently on

hold, which leaves them free to touch, caress, hug, and otherwise handle young people of either sex with impunity.

I, like most decent Americans, am shocked by the recent number of teacher-student romantic liaisons capturing the nation's headlines. Even more unsettling is that a number of these incidents occurred in middle school. While I'm not surprised that a young teacher fresh out of college might be attracted to a high school senior only a few years younger than her, I can't imagine an adult having an affair with a thirteen year old. Now that I'm a teacher, that image is even more disturbing.

The most highly-publicized cases reveal an unsuspected trend: male victims and female perpetrators. Particularly in the middle school context, the numbers suggest that the offending teacher is more likely to be female than male, due, I suspect, to the higher number of female teachers in middle school. But let's be honest: when the average parent imagines inappropriate teacher-student contact, the image of the perverted male teacher sneaking glances at adolescent girls usually comes to mind.

I'm one of two male teachers in the seventh grade. I can count on one hand the number of male teachers in the school, not including our four male coaches. Only two of us are unmarried, which I'm noticing places me in an awkward category. *What's my deal?* Edison promotes itself as a place for families, and the average age of marriage here is significantly lower than the national average. Men are expected, almost encouraged, to live at home until they marry, at which time the new wife picks up the duties left behind by her husband's mother. The tradition is common throughout Latin America, but it leaves those of us who left home at an early—and appropriate—age in an odd position. To most of my colleagues, marriage—although not absolving a man from

all potential wrongdoing—provides a solid presumption of innocence. While our married coaches (all) might glance at Ms. Hesbrook's firm bottom from time to time, that glance firmly locates them within a larger paradigm of healthy male sexuality. *All that's good.* He must be sure, however, to keep those glances from gravitating toward the even firmer bums of the blossoming teenager girls vying for his attention.

As an unmarried male, I'm burdened by several presumptions, the first being my suspected uncontrollable sexual appetite. My colleagues on Team 77 whisper lurid details of my supposed wild weekend adventures, presumably in a Mexican whore house. I'm a bachelor by my own choice, it's assumed, which allows me time to maintain as many sexual partners as I can handle. I like the attention. I've not told any teachers that I'm attracted to men. Already assorted pastries have shown up in my teacher's box. *How sweet!* I can't help but feel, however, that Mrs. Jenkins was referring to an uncontrolled sensuality festering beneath the surface. Who knows when I'll burst into a fit of lascivious behavior and begin humping the water fountain or anything else in my way. The married man has at least shown an ability to zip it up until the appropriate time and place.

The second presumption concerns the unmarried man's assumed irresponsibility. Marriage is seen by many as the only way for a man to enter God's kingdom of solid emotional attachment and financial stability. One image of the proverbial "bachelor pad" should suffice. Unmarried men are perceived to be disorderly, lazy, and gluttonous. No teacher can thrive in such an atmosphere.

The early demise of my law career was partly due to my inability to focus and lack of rudimentary organization skills. "Your honor," I said to an immigration judge

one morning during my first case for the law school's free immigration clinic. "I'm not really sure *where* my client's deposition is." One glance at Betsy's wobbling frame and fluttering papers and I'm back in the courtroom frantically searching for a misplaced file. The free-spirited bachelor cannot be expected to color-code and file the mounds of papers overloading his desk or get excited—as do those around me in the teachers' lounge—by Office Depot's fall catalogue of hanging files and plastic organizers. *Ah, hell: Maybe it's me!* My vertigo is not a new phenomenon.

Finally, the unmarried male is burdened by another specter of immorality and filth, particularly of interest to me: the possibility that he is either gay or a pedophile, the thrust of Mr. Johnson's column. The unmarried male teacher is continuously under surveillance, not only as a potential future husband as I've experienced, but as lethal danger to the very students he is entrusted to care for. Perhaps this is the thrust of Mrs. Jenkins' comments. Does she see something I don't? This final prospect is the most unsettling to society because not only are our precious girls in danger, but so are our most prized possessions, our growing little boys. My nephews are far-more influenced by my countenance and action than my two nieces. Boys, as the research suggests, must be *made* into men, while girls need only follow their natural instincts.

So now what? Can I rebut the three presumptions—licentiousness, inattention, and attraction to young men—by borrowing the model of Mrs. Masterson and other teachers I witness each day: keep a firm, professional distance from students at all times, poised and friendly, yet never overstepping their specific mission to educate, not nurture, their students. Yes, how quaint. But that's not me. *I like men, dammit!* Not just Gerry. It's an awkward position. Most of these boys have never had a male teacher. They play;

they delight; they hang on me like I'm an older brother. I am an older brother. They tug at my shirt, tap on my shoulder, wrap me from behind in the newest WWE wrestling maneuver. A female student would never be so brazen. They practically fall over themselves when I high-five each girl on Friday afternoon. "Just watch out," Mrs. Masterson warned me. "The administration is weird about that stuff." How much student contact is too much?

What's my game? Am I here to teach strict, state-mandated academic objectives? Can rigorous academic goal-setting and achievement, and nothing else, enhance student self-esteem in a way that reaches beyond the classroom? Or do I teach the *hearts* of children, along with the tiresome, academic stuff? Am I a crap detector? Will I finally go to one of Rafael's football games? Will I listen to Jacob's endless ramblings about the *Lord of the Rings* because I know it makes him feel good? Or is it enough that I grade papers with great care? *Oh, those papers!* Assuming, of course, I'll start grading student work one day.

These questions deal with love. I understand now how some teachers can misuse their position and slip, little by little, into the teenage world. Maybe that's why Mrs. Jenkins smiled at me. For those of us teachers still making sense of our personal lives, it's easy to inhabit instead the vicarious dramas of adolescent life, a brief respite from an often inhospitable, scary adult world. But this does not excuse deviant behavior. Every teacher, at some point or another, must answer this question: How do I express my love for these children in an appropriate and satisfying manner?

But that leads me back to Mr. Johnson's column in the *London Telegraph*. Am I doing anything wrong? According to Mr. Johnson, no. My reflexive concern is merely

a recognition of our “dementedly phobic and risk-averse society.” That’s all good and fine, but there’s a notable difference. The kids in the plane were his; my students are not. Will my assistant principal come to me one day, much like the stewardess, and ask me to move somewhere else? Will my romantic longings undo me?

CHAPTER 6

It's true. I don't know what I'm doing. On Fridays I've taken to driving across the border and slumming through filthy ranchero bars dotted with rugged cowboys and loose women. My neighbor follows along because he says I don't understand the dangers of border life. "Mexico's not like here," he says. *Thank God!*

I shouldn't complain. At least once a month, the school takes a collection for a teacher who's lost a loved one. We raised over one-thousand dollars when the Jimenez family home burnt down. Not the kids from my advisory, but somewhere else in some other hall. I don't like giving my last twenty dollars to someone I don't know. I'm selfish.

The more money for drunken forays along the border, the better I'll do. At least there I can be myself—stare at men and the possibility of romance. No more khaki pants and collared shirts, anesthetized language and feigned indifference. I love the ease with which Mexican men assert their manhood. Swinging balls and licking lips. Parent conferences are a joy! The school building emasculates me the same way it emasculates boys like Rafael and Javier. *Give me something I can feel!*

My neighbor asks why I don't do that here. "It's dangerous in Mexico," he says. He brushes hair off his face. "You can find someone here." I ignore his comment; I know what he's getting at. *I'm no fool!*

"I think it reminds me, Mika, of Peru," I say. "The first men—"

“Yeah, I get it.”

“I’m just saying—”

“The definition of insanity is repeating the same behavior and predicting different results.”

“Thank you, Einstein.”

“Relax. I just mean some *gacho* guy here isn’t going to give you what you’re looking for. We see guys like that at customs all the time”

“I don’t even know—”

“Whatever it is you’re—”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Hurry up.” He swigs the remainder of his beer. “I want to get over to Boys Town before all the tourist *gueros* get there.”

“Too expensive?” I say.

He snatches my beer off the table and finishes it himself. “Whatever.”

“I thought they hated Homeland Security, Mika?”

He flexes a lazy bicep. “Not if you got two of these.” He smiles like a burly vaquero after a hard day’s work. *Time for the ladies*. I’m lucky he moved in next door. He’s the type of man I could love.

Love is when you leave your dog alone all day and he licks your face anyway. Love is when you and a friend play basketball. Love is finding something you’re good at. I sent several students, including Adrian and Roxy, to the office this morning, only to have them returned to class ten minutes later. Roxy handed me a stapled note from Mrs.

Martinez, which Roxy had carefully pulled apart. In it, Mrs. Martinez suggests that I observe Ms. Ruiz' class. "During your conference period," the note says. "You may find this more useful than running around outside," the focus of last week's geography lesson. I run my fingers down the side of the note. Is she suggesting *I'm* the problem?

Ms. Ruiz changed her hair. It's curly, now, and no longer blond. I've heard stories about her rigid disciplinary regime, but can't visualize the quiet, unassuming young woman at team planning as *la jefa*, her nickname in the seventh-grade hallway. Brian says he once vomited in his own hand because he was too afraid to run to the trash can. (Ms. Ruiz had her back turned, assisting another student, he told me, and therefore could not see his raised hand.) When Roxy complained about the odor, she received a stern reprimand and was forced to stay after class. "Really," Roxy had told me. "All I did was cover my nose." *Yeah, right!*

"Mrs. Martinez told me why you're here," says Ms. Ruiz. I nod quietly. "That's ridiculous." She slides a workbook across her desk. "We're working on soil." She hands me the workbook. "The many layers of soil."

"Okay," I say. "Soil." I take a seat in the back of the room and flip through the workbook.

"You can leave in a few minutes, I bet. No one will notice."

I look around the room. "Soil." The clock behind her desk is broken

Students enter a few minutes later. A dark-skinned boy with almond-colored eyes walks toward Ms. Ruiz's desk and pulls out a pile of notebooks from a large plastic crate. I wave at Javier. He doesn't notice. I raise my hand higher and wave it in a circle. He makes eye contact with me, but his expression doesn't change. He tilts his

head in the direction of Ms. Ruiz and widens his eyes. I think he's warning me. He finally raises his hand from his lap, only slightly, but just enough to acknowledge me.

Ms. Ruiz notices. "Javier," she scolds. "Settle down." I avert my gaze.

"I'm sorry ma'am." Javier looks toward the front of the class and opens his notebook. I'll apologize later. I lean back in my chair and inspect the back of my hand. An image of my eight-grade English teacher, Mrs. Moran, comes to mind. I hope Ms. Ruiz doesn't strike them.

I'm surprised to see all the students, even Adrian, copying something from the board: *the role of soil in geology*. Javier moves his pencil. I spend most of my period calming down these boys.

La jefa instructs five group leaders to retrieve colored pencils. Two girls stand up and walk toward a box containing several Ziploc bags of organized colored pencils. Inside each bag is a sharpener. Two students pass out colored paper. *Is she serious?* The scene resembles something from my undergraduate Soviet Cinema class—the proletariat gain control over the factors of production. Ms. Ruiz watches the room from her desk. A piece of green paper falls out of one of the boys' hands. Ms. Ruiz walks toward the spot where the paper had fallen and folds her arms. Adrian rises and reaches for the paper. I'm so happy I nearly cry.

Yes, I'm impressed. Yet can this behavior achieve real academic success? *I doubt it!* I'm staring at a roomful of frightened Rwandan refugees. "The unimaginative teacher provides her students with repetitive busy work in an effort to keep them under control," my training manual had warned. "Effective discipline is not the same as effective teaching." My students can either be quiet or learn—not both.

I flip through the textbook pretending to look busy. Bored with soil, I scan the room and notice the back of Javier's shirt is decorated with a large marijuana leaf. I wait until Ms. Ruiz turns around and approach Javier. He's probably coloring another of his herbal sketches. He's hunched over and concentrating. I look over his shoulder and am shocked to see a carefully sketched diagram of soil erosion. He spends several minutes shading the layers of soil by brushing over the pencil drawing with the sleeve of his shirt. The layers blend seamlessly. A boy interrupts. "Ms. Ruiz," he says. "My green lead broke." Ms. Ruiz slowly walks toward him, her hands in the front pockets of her cardigan, and inspected the colored pencil. She looks sad.

"You may sharpen it." The boy pulls the plastic red sharpener out of the bag and begins sharpening his pencil. When finished he continues coloring his sketch, tapping the pencil on the table. Ms. Ruiz approaches and confiscates the newly-sharpened pencil.

"Okay, students," she says, "we're going to break into our groups and discuss our drawings." *A-ha!* I wait in nervous anticipation. Would someone dare speak? "The timer is set," she continues. "Please begin." Students at each lab table begin their discussion. Within a few seconds the room fills with loud conversation. Rafael laughs. *I'm vindicated!*

Reveling in my small victory, I don't notice that students are actually talking about—is it true?—*soil*. Soil development; soil maintenance; soil production; artificial soil. Ms. Ruiz wheels out several plastic containers of soil and disperses one to each group. Eyes follow her across the classroom. I stand expectantly, arms folded, not sure if I should help. I watch Adrian. *For God's sake, open the box, fool.*

“Don’t be fooled,” says Ms. Ruiz. “There’s more inside this box than you think.” Now I’m intrigued. “Open it.” Students dutifully pour small amounts of soil on their desks and pass the grey cardboard box to other group members. Ms. Ruiz calmly circulates through the room. “Okay, get ready to switch with the other groups.” I notice Reymundo rise, walk over to the next group, and casually place his box of soil in a girl’s hand. Around him students glue layers of soil onto cardboard backboards in neat rows depicting the layers of soil in the ground. “Your models are due by the end of the period,” Ms. Ruiz reminds the students. Three students stand up to pick up materials.

I’m mesmerized! The Greek historian Strabo described the Hanging Gardens of Babylon with a magical description: “These waters irrigate the whole garden, saturating the roots of plants and keeping the whole area moist . . . [S]triking how the labor of cultivation is suspended above the heads of the spectators.” Staring at the mix of eclectic soil diagrams on her desk, I want to know how Ms. Ruiz, like the ancient Babylonians, makes it look so easy. How does one evoke the art of royal luxury? I speak to her briefly after class.

“How do—”

“Tapping that pencil.”

“Pardon?”

“I don’t care if Jonathan taps his pencil on the desk.”

“Right.”

“Exactly.” She stares ahead of her. “No one told you, did they?”

“I’m not sure—”

“About my first year.” She walks across the room away from me. She organizes three textbooks next to group five’s silver sink.

“First year?”

She returns with an authoritative posture, small steps clicking on the science floor. Her new haircut makes her forehead look broad. I notice her small stature. She sits behind her desk and lowers her head. “It was the worst,” she sighs. “I swore I wasn’t coming back.” *I’ve been told the world is flat.* “I cried every day.” When she lifts her head I notice that her eyes have moistened. Her posture is loose. She’s letting go. “They just wouldn’t listen,” she stammers. “Wouldn’t listen.” She stands up and picks up papers from a nearby lab table. She keeps her back toward me.

No, me, haven’t cried. Don’t cry. I’m, you know, adjusting. So how long have you been, uh-huh, like how long—

“Hell, no!” She turns around. “Adrian didn’t push in his chair.” I look at the tall laboratory chair a few feet from the table. “I warned him.” I reach for the top of the chair. “Oh, no,” she says. “He’s coming back.” I move away and gathered my things. She moves toward the door, where, miraculously, Adrian is waiting. He approaches lab table number four and pushes in the chair. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“Very good, Adrian.” She pats him on the shoulders. He smiles timidly (a first!) and looks at me. He looks back at Ms. Ruiz with a wide smile on his face. This time I’m sure I see a tear slide down Ms. Ruiz’s face. She brushes a tiny clump of soil in her hand until it disappears between her fingers.

In the end it doesn’t matter if the Hanging Gardens of Babylonia exist only in the minds of Greek poets and historians, as many scholars insist; I’ll still savor the image of a

sloping hillside garden. It's essential life force, and that of our students, is a vast underground irrigation system saturating young roots and soil. *Hey, that's me.* But the river must be channeled first, as Ms. Ruiz discovered, before such beauty can flourish. Can't let the inmates take control of the prison. So maybe Mrs. Martinez does know a thing or two. I'm just not sure if she wants me to regularize the kids—or myself. Good God, I'm no Ms. Ruiz.

A few weeks later Principal Cerda asks me to coach the tennis team. “You'd be an assistant,” he warns. “So you can get some experience.” I haven't held a tennis racket in years.

“Actually, sir,” I remind him. “I applied for the football position.”

He thumbs his hair and stares at me intently. “If you don't want the job I can easily give it to someone else.”

“But I was hoping for foot—”

“I'm only going to offer you this one time, Mr. Girman. Several teachers already inquired about the position.”

“I wasn't aware of—”

“It's a prestigious position,” he says. “I've seen you running around the school with your cart and thought you might like some more exercise.” He rises from his chair.

“I think you'd like it.”

“Can I think about—”

“It's now or never.”

I feel like I'm at a used car dealership. “I guess,” I say. “Sure.”

He tosses me a key ring. “You start tomorrow.”

Later I discover he's been trying to find someone to coach the tennis team for several months.

"It's worth it," Ms. Ramos tells me the following morning. "You can kick the kids out if you don't like them." *If only I could kick the kids out of class!*

"It's just middle school," I say. "How serious can it be?"

"You're not from here." She rolls her eyes. "I wouldn't say that again if I were you."

"But it's tennis." I swing my arm in a forehand motion.

She backs up half a step. "You might want to work on that." Then she leans over and shows me a bruise on her left calf. "Girls basketball," she says, flexing her calf. "It's hell."

After school I research the district's sports program and discover an article about a man who stormed the field during his son's high school baseball game and attacked the umpire. Holding an ice pack to his nose after the game, the umpire admitted to blowing the call. That was, in fact, the father's defense in court: that the umpire had started the melee by calling his son out when he was clearly safe. "I think," said the judge, "you're missing the point." The defendant's response: *But it was the championship game, your honor.*

Over eighty-five students showed up for try-outs, including quiet bookish types I'd rarely heard in class. I spent several hours researching proper hand position for a variety of strokes. After ten practices, we narrowed our team down to fifty-one; inclusion is the buzz word for middle school athletic programs. Most of the kids can't hold a racket, fewer can serve, and no one knows how to keep score. Two weeks later

we choose our top ten boys and girls in each grade and distribute our mismatched *Edison Middle School Tennis Team* t-shirts. Despite our imperfect uniforms, we resembled a real team.

As one might imagine, tennis is not a popular sport in the poorest school districts in the state. At least half of our opponents wear jeans and call balls out no matter where they land on the court. “That’s how they survive in the ghetto,” I tell Nathan. I’m concerned, though, when the angelic Julia in the jazzy headbands calls a ball long that is more than two feet inside the line.

We win our first three matches in a slew of botched calls and incorrect scorekeeping; both sides, as best I can tell, cheat equally. When I ask Coach Rivas what we should do about it, she looks as perplexed as if I’d asked her what we should do about the large yellow orb in the sky.

“Do about it?” she repeats. “That’s tennis. Get used to it.”

“But can’t we call a line judge?”

She looks at the eight dilapidated courts around us. “Does this look like Wimbledon?” She returns her focus on a girls’ doubles match. “*We’re* the line judges.” My age of innocence ends as abruptly as it began.

CHAPTER 7

Good God, I'm learning the hard way. The *No Child Left Behind Act* has done for education what a giant black condom would do for my elbow: absolutely nothing. Because of this far-reaching federal initiative (the *Act*, not the prophylactic), I now have another six "severely-challenged" and "psychologically-impaired" learners recently exited from the school's self-contained unit. The students are integrated one class at a time, beginning with history, which has a reputation as the least challenging class. Hell, at least it's not just me.

In preparation for the students' arrival, I was required to attend a two-day training focusing on the latest federally-approved method to "subdue" out-of-control students. But that is only the beginning. These beltway bureaucrats have ravaged our school with impunity, banning pep rallies and casual Friday. (Apparently, teachers wearing jeans limits the students' ability to concentrate.) Likewise, a monitor is permanently stationed outside the copy room to investigate copyright violations. Fine, I'm exaggerating, but only slightly. Due to their high grease content, our breakfast tamales have been replaced by Hot Pockets. I explain to my students that the change is racially motivated and propagated by a federal bureaucracy out of touch with local conditions. I don't notice that the students prefer Hot Pockets.

The state of Texas will not be outdone by the federal government. One result of this federalist pissing match is the Texas legislature's strict interpretation of the *No Child*

Left Behind Act. Texas has implemented the *Act* with such rigor that the most austere federal employee now feels like one's beloved bohemian uncle compared to the state officials roaming our hallways. Hot Pockets are the least of our problems. The most severe example of this statewide, bureaucratic fanaticism is our week of standardized testing.

Can't say I'm upset—I get my own classroom for a week. No more Betsy wheezing down the halls on her last two legs. I also don't have to worry about lesson plans or my troublesome first, second, well, *all* of my classes. Today I'm searching for my testing room. I walk down the eighth-grade hallway looking for room 127. "Over there," a student says, pointing toward a room at the far end of the eighth-grade hallway. I knock on the door and enter.

"I just came by to check the room," I say. A lean man, all bones and angles, looks up from a high stack of papers.

"They're letting you test?" he says.

"Um, uh-huh, I'm suppose—"

"I didn't know you were certified."

"Yes, sir. I guess, I'm—"

"I'm Mr. Chapa," he says. He walks around his desk toward me.

"Congratulations." He hands me a large roll of tape. "You've got lots of work to do."

"Right," I say. "Lots of work."

"Surely someone mentioned it to you?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Classroom preparation."

“Actually,” I say, turning around toward Betsy, “I’ve been living out of a cart all year.”

“Oh, my,” he says. “That thing has seen better days.” The man clasps his hands together.

“Tell me about it.”

“The thing is,” he says, “the instructions are in your testing manual.” I inspect the jumble of disorganized papers and binders weighing Betsy down. “You did get one, right?”

“From the faculty meeting?” I pull out a thick pink and white booklet with several rips in the cover.

Mr. Chapa glances at the booklet. “Page eighteen.” He darts his long, bony finger toward the booklet. I search the pages. He smirks.

“Yes,” I say. “Lots of work.”

“I’ll be on vacation.”

“Vacation?”

“Yes, with my family.” His zips shut his black computer bag. “I take off testing week each year.”

“With your family?”

“Oh yes. With my wife and kids.” He glances at a purple-framed photo of two boys with oversized sunglasses and baseball caps on their heads. “Twenty years,” he says, handing me the photo, his fingers lingering over my hand. “The love of my life.” I inspect the room, rotating my head like a sprinkler. “Good luck,” he says, quietly sashaying out the door.

I return to the manual. “All desks must be at least four feet apart and all distractions must be cleared from the walls.” *A-ha!* So that’s why I’d seen dozens of teacher carrying yards of colored butcher paper down the hallway. “For the walls,” Clarissa had told me, a trail of mustard brown paper blowing wind in my direction.

I choose light blue. Armed with Scotch tape, not the ugly silver tape Mr. Chapa had handed me, I haul myself atop a student desk and begin working.

A neighboring teacher warns me I’m doing it all wrong. “Oh no,” she says. “That tape will never hold all week.” I stare at a giant sentence diagram on the opposite wall.

“Huh?” I ask.

“The tape. It’s not strong enough.”

Pieces of tape hang from my forearm. “I’m sure it’ll be—”

“*Bueno*. Suit yourself.” I go home to enjoy a three-day weekend.

On Sunday afternoon I receive a strange call. “Mr. Girman,” says a female voice.

“We have a problem.”

“Who—”

“The walls.”

“Walls?”

“Yes, Mr. Girman. What are you planning on doing about the walls?” I remain silent. “At the school?”

“The paper.”

“Not enough.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’m not sure.”

“Mrs. Baxter,” she says. “I’m from the Texas Department of Education.” I imagine her in an ugly grey suit and flat black heels. “I’m looking at my notes here,” she continues. “I see several egregious violations.”

“Egregious.”

“Yes,” she answers. “Of the utmost urgency.”

“Urgency,” I echo.

“Two desks were perilously close together, Mr. Girman, and several words were clearly visible from the walls.”

“Which words?”

“It says here a partially-covered poster and something about the ‘Seven Secrets of Writing.’”

“Seven secrets?”

“Yes,” she snaps. “The bottom two were clearly visible.”

“How awful.” *Crazy conservative!*

“May I remind you, testing begins on Tuesday. This is a serious matter.”

“Yes ma’am.”

And check the boxes,” she says. “On top of the cabinets. The labels are still visible.”

“Of course.”

“One last thing.”

“Yes?”

“That tape won’t hold.”

“Tape,” I repeat.

“You need to replace it on Monday. I’ll be back then.”

Exhausted, I hang up the phone and close my eyes. “Betsy,” I mutter, hugging my pillow, “what have I gotten myself into?”

I arrive Monday morning to a floor full of crumpled butcher paper just as Mrs. Baxter had feared. Mrs. Martinez sits at the desk wrapping a rubber band around her wrists. “I’m sorry,” I say, bending down to pick up paper from underneath my boots. “I’ll get this cleaned up.” Mrs. Martinez shakes her head. “Promise.”

“There’s very little time,” she says. “She’ll be back before lunch.”

“That’s almost three—”

“Such a pretty blue,” she says. Her sincerity surprises me. She hands me two enormous rolls of tape, big as bicycle tires, and exits without looking back.

I enlist the help of my first period class, which covers the room in a mere thirty minutes in return for my promise to go outside Friday after the final test. “So much for that last second math review,” I say, staring out at a room of yellow paper fastened to the wall with enough tape to stop the world from bleeding.

What’s this, no traffic? The usual mass of cars spilling into the teachers’ parking is barely a trickle. I meander in the hallway. I see Mrs. Martinez ahead of me scampering around like a silly mouse. *Relax, woman!*

“Where have you been?” she says, grabbing me by the arm with her pudgy fingers. She looks around nervously as if we are being watched. “We have to get you the materials. *Andale.*”

I hurry behind her. “But ma’am,” I say, winded by Mrs. Martinez’s steady gait, “I always get here—”

“Didn’t you read your manual, Mr. Girman?” She stops and pauses? “Your testing manual?”

“Yes, yes. Of course.”

“For God’s sake, hurry up.”

She leads me to the seventh-grade custodian’s office. She looks both ways, gives a steady knock, and enters. I expect to be handed a plastic baggie of marijuana. Instead, an unfamiliar woman in a red scarf presses a clear plastic tub into my stomach. Inside the tub are testing manuals and answer sheets.

“Ordinarily we’d need your signature,” the woman says. I recognize her voice. Beneath her brown hair, on her collar, I notice a laminated nametag in the shape of Texas. “Just go,” she says, releasing the giant tub. “And remember, the tests must be locked up at all times.” I nod. I turn and march down the hallway as if delivering a shipment of enriched uranium to the Middle East.

I put the tests on Mr. Chapa’s desk. Late for hall duty. I notice a packet of pencils sandwiched between the test booklets and the plastic tub. I make sure to lock the door on my way out. All is safe.

I’m surprised to see Javier and Rafael reviewing a piece of paper covered in yellow highlighter. Rafael points at the paper several times. Javier nods. On closer inspection, I’m shocked to see an outline entitled “Five Tips to the Perfect Essay.” Curious, I lean over one of the boy’s shoulders. *By God, I’ve been too easy all year. No wonder they misbehave!*

I'm startled by a strange sound coming from eighth-grade hallway. I recognize Mrs. Martinez's voice. When I arrive, she's standing in front of Mr. Chapa's door fumbling with an enormous ring of keys. A custodian stands behind her shouting in Spanish.

"Mrs. Martinez? Is everything okay?"

She swivels her neck at me, but keeps her hands on the door.

"The tests," she says. "I can see the tests."

I look over her hunched shoulders. "Yes, ma'am."

"They're supposed to be locked."

"*Sí*," says the custodian. She looks condescendingly in my direction. "Locked."

I pull Mr. Chapa's unicorn keychain out of my pocket. "Here, let me do it."

Mrs. Martinez backs away from the door. "Hurry," she says, glancing down the hallway. The custodian stares down the opposite hall. Mrs. Martinez pulls the testing materials close to her and staggers toward the back of the classroom. "I need the keys," she says. I hand her the keys. "Dammit," she says.

"I don't understand—"

"Do you take anything seriously, Mr. Girman?"

Harsh Accusation. "But she said to lock up—"

"Just forget it." She locks the plastic tub in the cabinet. She wipes her forehead.

"That was close."

"*Sí*," the custodian agrees. "Close."

“Your manual,” says Mrs. Martinez. “It’s all in your booklet.” I follow her gaze and notice the infamous booklet, wide open, resting atop Betsy. *Whose side are you on, Betsy?* “And you need to,” she says, staring at Betsy, “cover that thing up.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Behind me I hear Brian Anzaldúa’s voice. “Good Morning, Mr. Girman,” he says. *Game on!*

The students eat breakfast with the solemnity of a last meal. Angel shuffles his little feet to the trashcan. I scan the room; for the first time all year, no one is absent in advisory. A teacher’s dream? Perhaps. I’m suspicious. I remember the time Reymundo offered me a piece of candy that nearly burned off my lips. “Sorry, sir,” he’d said, still smiling. “It’s a Mexican thing.” I see him in the back of the room—he isn’t smiling anymore. Despite the subarctic temperatures, he’s sweating. “Freezing,” I say to no one in particular. At least Betsy’s warm, covered in a blue psychedelic sheet I’d found in Mr. Chapa’s cabinet.

After breakfast I unlock my cabinet and retrieve the tubs. I open my testing manual and read the instructions aloud:

TODAY YOU WILL BE TAKING THE OFFICIAL TEXAS ASSESSMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS (TAKS) READING TEST. IN A FEW MOMENTS YOU WILL RECEIVE TWO NUMBER TWO PENCILS, FOLLOWED BY AN ANSWER SHEET. DO NOT WRITE ON THE ANSWER SHEET UNTIL INSTRUCTED BY YOUR TESTING FACILITATOR.

I raise my head from the testing booklet. Samantha's newly-straightened hair, which she had been so proud of on Thursday, curls itself like a frightened caterpillar. I continue reading the directions:

DO NOT ATTEMPT TO POKE OUT YOUR EYEBALL, AS YOU WILL STILL BE EXPECTED TO FINISH THE EXAM. LIKEWISE, ANY SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS WILL BE QUICKLY BANDAGED AND A CLEAN ANSWER SHEET WILL BE RETURNED TO YOU BY YOUR TESTING FACILITATOR.

Okay, I'm fibbing. But that's what I wanted to read. I pass out the pencils and, for the first time all morning, hear a low murmur overtake the room. "Sir?" someone asks. "I need a new pencil." I walk toward Reymundo. He hands me his pencil. I roll the lead over my fingers. "Sir?" He looks up at me. "I need another." He raises his other pencil in the air.

"Me, too."

"Sir, mine's all flat."

The students demand new pencils. I reach into the tub and open a new package. Their eyes follow me as if I'm a UNICEF volunteer in Sub-Saharan Africa. At least half of the pencils I trade are perfectly sharp. "But these are fine," I tell Angel. "You can't get it any sharper." He raises his head. "These are number two lead, right?" The room becomes silent.

“Yes,” I say. “Don’t you guys trust me?” Silence reverberates off my inquiry. Mrs. Martinez isn’t the only with doubts—maybe I am a fraud. *Be serious, fool!*

I continue reading the instructions:

LOCATE THE SPACE MARKED “NAME” AT THE TOP OF YOUR ANSWER SHEET. WRITE YOUR NAME IN THE APPROPRIATE BOXES. BUBBLE IN THE LETTERS BELOW.

The students dutifully fill in the bubbles as I read the remaining eight pages of instructions. After thirty minutes, we begin. I wish them luck.

I read the remaining monitors’ instructions to myself. I must stand the entire test. Furthermore, I’m expected to walk up and down the aisles “actively monitoring” student progress. Most importantly, I’m not allowed to talk to students under any circumstances. If asked a question, I must respond with the following phrase: “I’m sorry, but I cannot help you.”

Things are fine until Samantha, clearly agitated, raises her hand and looks around the room. I kneel down in front of her to see what’s wrong. “Look,” she says, pointing at her booklet. “These two pages are stuck together.”

I glance at her booklet and notice that the tops of two pages have not been cut properly. “Don’t worry,” I whisper. “Just carefully tear them apart.” I reach my hands toward her test booklet.

“But won’t the seal break?” Several students stare. It is prohibited, under “any and all circumstances,” to break the seal and possibly reveal the remaining sections of the test, which are to be tested later in the week.

I’m not sure what to do. I consult my testing manual, which offers no guidance for such an unforeseen situation. *What to do?* I take the risk. I pull a small pin out of Samantha’s hair and use it to slice open the top of her test. The offending pages split apart. Samantha moves her fingers toward the back of her test, revealing a partially-torn, though still closed, seal. “Got it,” I whisper. I place the pin on her desk. She picks up her pencil and slides the pin off her answer sheet. I crack my wrist before rising from my squat in front of Samantha’s desk. Outside the door I see Mrs. Baxter writing something on her clipboard.

“I’m sorry, but I cannot help you,” I say. Samantha looks at me, the door, then at her desk. She holds her pencil in the air. Relieved at her quick wit, I return to Mr. Chapa’s desk to retrieve a new pencil. Mrs. Baxter continues writing and lifts her head one last time to look through the door. I hear her loud heels *click click click* down the hallway marking her disgust. I turn around to see Brain clutching his pencil tight like a claw. His answer sheet is blank.

Fine! As you will! We finish morning testing and are shuffled to the lunchroom. Instead of the usual chaos, the students dutifully march down the hallway like robots, making swift right turns and pausing to let another class through. Most disturbing, no one says a word. Not even Roxy. We eat our lunch in silence.

After lunch I retrieve the tests from the cabinet. “Sir?” Reymundo whispers. “Didn’t you *lock* them?” I pretend not to hear.

We resume testing. Most students have already finished, but the manual warns that students are not permitted to “do or say anything after the test.” Maria has the nerve to read a book! “What do you think you’re doing?”

She lifts black curls from her forehead. I place my testing manual on her desk and point at instruction eight: *Violations must be reported to the district monitor.*

“Now look what you’ve done,” I say. Maria yawns and turns her head to sleep.

Day two. Brian and others have lost the ability to form complete sentences. They resign themselves to their fate, softly placing their heads on their desks or dozing off in an upright sitting position like patients at a retirement home. Brian glances at me. I’m sad. Reymundo puts his arms inside his shirt to stay warm. His sleeves dangle lifelessly in the air. I think about thousands of young American soldiers wounded in the Iraqi war. Not my Reymundo! I reach for the boy’s elbows through his shirt. *Whew!*

Later that afternoon I need to use the bathroom. I walk the aisles hoping the urge will disappear. I look out the door at an empty hallway. I shift my focus. I count to one-hundred, finger the lint in my pocket, rearrange Betsy’s top shelf. I watch the door. *No one!* I cover my genitals. Every few minutes I look out the door. Finally Reymundo raises his hand and motions for me to approach.

“I can get someone,” he says. He stares at my crotch. My knees nearly rest against each other at awkward angles. I stare at the trash can. I remember an incident from my childhood when I’d attempted to urinate into the hospital bed pan but ended up pissing all over the bed and myself. The nurses were infuriated.

“I can do it,” says Reymundo. His gaze is firm, unyielding. I relent.

Two minutes later, Reymundo returns with a stunning young woman in a form-fitting yellow dress. Her auburn hair hangs loosely over her shoulders. Her lipstick is a shade darker, the color of ginger, and she smells like caramel custard. “This is Mindy,” Reymundo explains. I ignore Reymundo’s informality; I can correct him later. I shuffle out the door.

A few minutes later I return. Why is Mrs. Martinez in my room? *Yikes!* I notice tight lines along her mouth and forehead. Her fingers are crouched into fists.

“But bathroom breaks are permitted,” I say. “Page twenty-two.”

“We’ll talk later.” Her composure unnerves me. I asked Reymundo what happened to the teacher in the yellow dress.

“She went to pick up Felix.”

“Felix?”

“Her brother.”

“Brother?”

“Uh-huh”

“She’s not a teacher?”

Reymundo laughs. “She’s in college, sir. She’s helps out here sometimes. They’re going to the dentist in Reynosa.”

I pat Reymundo’s shoulder. *It’s been nice knowing you, kid.* I notice his soft burgundy cheeks for the first time. I feel like I’ve met my neighbor the day before I move out.

My visit to Mrs. Martinez's office is surprisingly brief. "See this form?" she asks. "This is what we have to fill out for each of your violations." I finger the pale grey form on top of her desk. "I have three of them," she says, peering at me above her glasses.

"Three? That seems a bit—"

"Tests improperly secured."

I nod my head. "Yes, ma'am."

"Improper conversation with student test takers."

"But—"

"Partially broken seal. I lower my head. "Answer sheets not in alphabetical order."

"Why does that—"

"Read your testing manual," she says. "I'm not even going to mention the uncertified testing reliever."

"Is that all?" I ask.

"Calm down," she says.

"Look at those kids." I point toward to the other side of the wall behind her desk.

"What would you have done?"

"Sir?"

"I don't want to do this anymore." I look at her directly in the face. "I'm sorry."

She rises from her chair and walks around her desk toward me. She motions at someone outside the door. She sits down in the seat next to mine. "It's not easy," she says. "Why do you think I left the classroom?" I clear my watery eyes and look up at

her. Her purple eye shadow casts a rarefied hue between us. I've never imagined her in the classroom. "I want you to go home and think about this past week."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Relax and think about what you learned this week."

"So I'm not fired?"

She rises from the chair beside me. "Fired?" she repeats. "Only you and Mr. Pardo haven't quit."

I'm flabbergasted. "Ms. Santos," I ask. "Debbie Santos?"

Mrs. Martinez turns her pen upside down and jiggles it in her hand. "Ms. Santos hasn't been here in months," she says. "Since Christmas. I thought you knew that."

I leave the office vowing to leave no child behind despite the nefarious mandate of the same name. Mrs. Martinez is only doing her job.

CHAPTER 8

Friday and fancy free. So long state testing. Reymundo has arms again.

No more pencils

No more books

No more teachers' dirty looks

Grab your stuff, kids—we're goin' outside. That's right. Out we go. Take a desk, Jackie. Help, Mary. Wake up, girl! Share the load. *Mary?* Get up and go. Time to frolic. Walk in the park. *Espiritu de Jesus*. That's right: Martín de Leon. The man who started the cattle brand. EJ. No, Enrique. I mean, Kike. Not your initials, no. Well, yes. You know what I mean. The folder, yes, that's for me. Thanks, Kike. Guard it with your life. Two desks, please. Get ready, ladies. We're going to run.

My gifted and talented girls never stopped giggling. Glazed expressions; sprinkled jokes; hibiscus hair. Dark Mary: infectious smile, volleyball kneepads dropping out of her bag, habitually absent. *Ribbons, bows, headbands, oh my!* She's beatific in her white visor staring straight into space. With her girlfriends, though, she comes alive, the movement in her eyes, zigzagging through tight rows tapping heads. Today she lags behind. A tiny hand barely drags the desk down the hall with Jackie. Little Rogelio does a pirouette. Mary drags no more. Christina and Johanna lift the other desk.

“I’ll do it,” says Rogelio. Jackie rolls her eyes, braces for a heavier load. Mary leans against a door. Across the hall a teacher investigates the noise. Her chestnut brown hair silhouettes brown-orange mascara. Jackie drags the desk herself.

“That’s too loud,” says Cristal.

“Pick it up.”

“Noise hurts my ears.”

“Lift it,” says Jackie. Mary slouches out the door.

The April breeze blows the grass. “You can be,” I say to Mary, “down here with me.” Jackie drags the desk a few feet in the mud. “Good.” Two lines. Two groups. “The first person in each line put on the football helmet and meet me and Mary down here with the questions.”

“Football helmet?” says Cristal.

Today I experiment with fresh perspectives. I’m alive! Walden Pond, no more. This pond of stagnant rainwater will suffice. Twenty Questions. The red team chooses Jane Long as their name; the blue team, Stephen F. Austin, the Father of Texas. Large Lola runs the first length. Her knees swap together. Jackie arrives first. A jacket on her head hangs outside the football helmet. She looks a superhero. Mary hands Jackie the red card. The blue team cheers Lola on. Jackie arrives at her teammates before Lola picks up the question. Lola drops the dry erase board on her way back to the group. *Here comes Logan!* He’s written *empresario* across the board in red marker. I hand him a new question.

The blue team catches up. I think Mary forgets to give them some questions. Logan runs up to tell me the Old Three-hundred were actually two-hundred ninety-seven.

“Close enough,” I yell. The girls cheer each other on. Jay looks lost in a sea of silver earrings. The noise increases. Mary tells me her head hurts.

Halfway through, on about question fifteen, Margaret the security guard marches outside and approaches Mary and me. I hold up my hand to stop the game, but the girls continue. Mary takes over both sets of questions.

“You triggered the alarm,” says Margaret. “Mr. Cerda doesn’t like alarms.”

“Of course.” I can barely hear over the noise. “We’re almost done.”

She looks at the girls, at me, hands on waist, unconvinced. “Didn’t Mr. Palacios talk to you about Christmas Break?”

“Christmas?”

“Throwing the football.”

“Yeah.”

“On the lesson plans,” she says.

“Lesson plans, right.”

“You have this on the lesson plan, right?” Margaret, security guard turned Queen of Pedagogy, waits for my response. She turns down her walkie-talkie.

“Well, I hadn’t planned—”

“Just so you know,” she says.

“In class, usually, but the weather and the kids from testing—”

“Uh-huh. She walks inside. A loud scream grabs my attention. The red team wins. Girls jump and holler, spin in circles. Jackie and Cristal on the Jane Long team link hands and spin in a circle. Soon all the girls join. Jay jokes with Logan against the brick wall.

“Come get your candy,” I say. The verbal girls win again. I turn toward Jackie. “I can’t think of anything better than being a twelve-year-old girl.”

“Thirteen,” Mary corrects me. “Well . . . I’ll be thirteen pretty soon.” I wrap an arm around her shoulder and walk with her toward the group. It’s not only boys like Rafael and Javier who need my attention. Mary’s here, too.

I don’t claim immunity; I know there’s only so much I can do. *I’m no idiot!* But I can do something. *I can.* I may not possess Beverly’s idealism, but I’m no slouch, either. Call me Sancho. Call me whatever you will. We had fun today—me and the fifth period girls. Little Logan runs like a girl. So, what! What’s so wrong with that? Yeah, I’m lost. Who isn’t? Who doesn’t want to write the great American novel? One more month and I can start. I’d say Quixote was an anthropologist, himself. So am I. *Hooray!*

The final weeks are poison. I’ve lost control and there’s nothing I can do. Jesús refuses to speak English. A boy in a San Antonio Spurs jersey disappeared and never returned. Gabriela Rincón never arrived. Yesterday Adrian was suspended for the remainder of the year for stealing money from Roxy’s purse. Apparently they’re dating. Roxy shut down and no longer listens closely like she’s taking shorthand. Her makeup has switched to a darker palette, musty greens and dirty browns cascading over plum red lipstick. Kids call Logan gay. In most periods, the class and I play geography games outside, watch movies, pass the time in anything that keeps them quiet. They refuse to do any more worksheets. Brain failed the TAKS; the infectious smile that greeted me in the beginning of the year has turned inward. We barely talk anymore.

Believe it or not, I'm pleased. Nothing to do but wait. The time it takes to conduct class each day has brought me out of my mood, the narcissistic obsession with where I'm at in my life. I'm thirty, healthy, and ready to embark on a new project. Life's never what you expect! Mary still wears headbands, and scarves, and tiny earrings of Disney characters. Good for her! I'm still learning how to express myself. I can learn a few things from these kids. *One of two new teachers remaining.* Yeah, I'll take that. So what if no one's learning anything. They'll be time for that later.

On Monday I'm summoned to the principal's office. Obviously, I've oversimplified; I've left something out. I'm accused of misaligning TAKS objectives in my lesson plan. Mr. Cerda points at my lesson plan for the previous week. "I see nothing here about an outdoor review game." I'm stunned. I notice a large pile of suspension forms on his desk. "Mrs. Martinez says she's never received one of these from you." He holds up several pink and yellow copies. I stopped sending students to the office last semester. *She knows that!*

"The lessons," I say. "They're not designed to . . . um, well, not for, you see." I stop. I'm trembling. Everything returns in a rush. Why do I allow others to dictate my mood? I want to tell him everything. How I'd never really bothered to be a lawyer. How I was hired at the State Department as a Foreign Service Officer. How I never received my initial contract after waiting on the list for the maximum eighteen months. There, I admit it! I lost my dream job and here I am. Instead of being out in the field, I'm inside this stuffy office. What happened to my big dreams? I want to bare my soul to this man of the outstretched moustache, too-tight khaki pants, and animal-skinned boots.

“It’s not what I’d thought,” I say. Nothing bucolic comes to mind, no coupling of shelter and soul. I see it clearly now. The man stares. He does not move. I continue: “Not this. No.”

He laughs with raccoon fangs and manicured halo eyes. His face and body are discordant. The halls fill with awkward teenage angles, bones before flesh. Javier peers through the window. His indifferent brown eyes stare. “Testing violations are a serious business.”

“Too much,” I say. The principal taps his fingers against his chin. He waits for me to finish. Javier’s face squishes against the office window. “Too much *shit!*”

Mr. Cerda turns toward the window. “*Shit?*” he says aloud. Javier’s stare persists. The boy knocks on the window. He stares at me. I am a headless chicken flailing in the principal’s office. I am a little boy with nothing to write about. “Strong word.”

I stare at a pile of dark green folders. “Perpetual,” I say. I can’t be bothered. Sleep softens my lower eyes. I am exhausted. I yearn to cry. Or scream. I see a blue silhouette in a khaki suit; green eyes in a dark man; him, in me.

“A lawyer,” he says. He’s baiting me, hooked on my own hedonistic self.

“Yes, that’s correct.” I rise. I am no match for him. “Yes,” I repeat.

“Don’t get up.” He says. He rises and looks out the window. Javier is gone.

“Sir?” I ask.

“Are you satisfied?”

I don’t know how to answer.

“I mean, in general”

Scattering my ashes.

“You know, in *life*?”

Pulling me over the edge.

The principal is polished stone, a middle-aged *mélange* of sweat and dust. His figure is square, his hands remarkably hairy. Do bureaucrats wear *regular* clothes? I’ve been told I look good in shorts. The principal’s head is as hairy as his hands, a dashing peppery silver color I’ve seen in catalogues. I wish I were in shorts right now. I imagine myself in cowboy boots. My thoughts are muddled. He asks what I expected.

“Expected?”

“From this job. What, exactly did you have in mind?” His shoulders squared, his demeanor relaxed, he sits as still as a mahogany armoire. A bowl of candy corn sits between us. I am stunned into silence. I do not know what I expected. I mutter something about summer vacation. His stare penetrates.

“Every year, they come and go. The new teachers. Impossible daydreams.” I’m staring out the window, hardly listening. “Making a difference, yes, that’s one thing. I think what you are doing is wrong.” I’ve been accused.

“No one asked you to come. We’re perfectly fine and have been for some time. Lots of students. Great teachers. A family atmosphere. I’m not sure where you’re from, but I noticed it in your interview. Remember? Save your sparkle for someone else. We’re quite self-sufficient here. Mexicans look after themselves, don’t take kindly to outsiders.”

So I’m a colonist? Just as I’d feared.

“Have patience, young man. Wait it out. The winding snake captures his prey. Or if you prefer, *Rome wasn't built in a day*. Yes, of course, the Romans stuck it out.” My mind is numb. “Look around at this beautiful school. Nothing lacking, here. If you ask me, you'd be better in a place more suited to what you're used to.” I notice his desk, moan beneath my breath at the trappings of bureaucracy staring back at us: framed diplomas, scattered paperwork, new streamlined computer, fancy stapler, three-hole punch with Texas A&M stickers along the edges. If I don't get recognition soon, I'm not sure what I'll do. Where I'll go. I see him gossiping at faculty meetings. He pats the coaches on the shoulders. They call him *guero*: the white man. I wonder what they call me, if they even think of me.

Ms. Ramos knocks on the window and motions toward our classrooms. I look at my wrist. “I have class.”

Mr. Cerda stands. I stand. He clasps my hand and grips my upper arm. “We're here if you need us,” he says. I pick up my tan folder from his desk. I grab a handful of candy. “I wouldn't eat those,” he says. I exit his office and bite the tip off a piece of orange candy corn. It's fake. I chew it, anyway.

I'm ready for feedback. I ask the girls on Team 77 to evaluate my first year performance. “The truth,” I say.

Ms. Ramos tells me I'm too frenetic. “You're all over the place.”

“I move.”

“Each day.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Like you’re up and down.”

“Bipolar?”

“Some days, you’re all nice and talkative with us—”

“And other times,” interrupts Ms. Ruiz, “it’s like *where’d he go?*”

“Go?”

“You’re here, but you’re not *here*.”

“Present,” says Ms. Ramos.

“I’m disorganized,”

“Who isn’t?”

“And I have my favorites.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Maybe I’m too intellectual.”

Mrs. Bermuda enters the room. “Sorry to interrupt,” she says. “I need your AR sheets for the meetings this week.” I’ve left mine in someone’s classroom. “They’re confidential,” she says. I excuse myself and roam the corridor in search of my forms. *I think what you are doing is wrong.* I knock from room to room. *Have patience, young man.*

PART III

AUGUST 2007

CHAPTER 9

Ah! A new year! Remorse. Redemption. The opportunity to recast confusion and blunder as an abstract work of art. I imagine my reentry from a historical perspective. Prior knowledge, that's the ticket. Scaffolding my way to success. Don't be shy. We're all historians: multiple activities and purposes. Interpretive biases. Controversial natures. *Shh*, listen closely; I will tell you something about stories—her stories, my stories *his*-stories: they aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled.

I spent the summer writing a book. It has a name, *The Chili Papers*; a function, to tell my story; a publisher, Velluminous Press; and a cover: a giant red chili paper in the shape of a penis. I don't much like chili peppers, no, but a book's a book, and royalties a reward to rent a cheap room somewhere on the Mexican Emerald Coast fronting the Gulf of Mexico. *Early one April morning, my mother spray-painted the lawn.* I'd call the book a redemptive tale of awkward youth. My publisher decided instead on this, for the back cover: *If you're a clean-cut, all-American boy looking for enlightenment in all the wrong places.* Add middle school to the list of wrong places. One line, though, came directly from Texas History class, in which I compared myself to William Travis: *I refuse to believe I am waiting at the bottom of the ocean, dressed in elegant attire and poised for my own decay.* Last year Brian said I looked like Travis, all fancy-haired and nicely-dressed, white, leaving his kids behind for another life in Texas.

“He’s an actor,” I’d said. The boy looked confused. “A movie, you know? Billy Bob Thorton as Davy Crockett. Jason Patric as William Travis.”

“So he’s white?”

“I guess.”

“He looks like you.”

“I don’t have kids.”

“I know, sir.”

“None.”

“We’re, like, your kids.” He smiled, cheeks came out. I kept his little puffy cheeks in my mind all summer, even if our relationship chilled.

In the summer of 1982, my family and I were awoken by a series of low-flying planes. Innocuous enough, I’d thought, but by the time the publishers *chopped scrubbed hashed teased* it out, *The Chili Papers* had changed to a comic travelogue replete with love interests, diplomatic blunders, and a gay university softball team called the outLaws. Pun intended! The book thus changed to fiction and I’d become, according to the cover, a *novelist*. All that’s fine and dandy, but a guy’s got to make a living—seventy dollars a month doesn’t cut it— so I’m back for year two, and hopefully my last, of the great teaching experiment.

I’m armed, too, with the Wing-Wong book. I’m carrying a crisp red folder with multiple copies of my attendance chart, seating chart, and an index card notated with seven different codes, from Edusoft Testing software to BrainPop, delightful animated movies about a boy and his robot conducting historical investigations across time and

space continuums like the Harlem Globetrotters. They'll be no dead mistresses or murder among the missions this year.

Oh the exhilaration in my new Nissan! The *whoooooosh* of the open window against my hair. It's a new school year. *Accelerate, fool*. Forgive me: I've never driven a new car. I remember the old Volkswagen commercials, the ones with the boxy silver vehicle gliding breathlessly across the German countryside: for the drivers in life. I'm attracted to those commercials the same way a mild-mannered librarian prefers a gruesome crime novel or scandalous erotica; like her, I will never be behind the wheel of that car—despite my shiny new vehicle—or tied to the bed by the old gardener's virile son. I am one of life's passengers. The nervous college boy never missing a deadline. The small boy dutifully excelling at his father's favorite sports. The wanderer. The all-American boy. I do what I'm told. Perhaps my publisher has a point. *No matter*. In return for relinquishing my radio privileges (the driver, of course, picks the music), I am free to enjoy the view. South American capitals. Bartender shenanigans. Giant red penises! What a view it's been. Yes, yes, it's easy to look out the window when you don't have to drive and, true, I haven't done anything worthwhile with my law degree, but it's not so easy to sit still and adjust your temperament to whatever's playing from the radio. *Believe me*. I deserve some credit. But if I don't get behind the wheel soon, these kids might send me down a steep ravine. Life is hard.

I stab at sliced strawberry and turn the wheel. I'm suddenly overtaken by a sudden, inexplicable feeling of complete tranquility. A field of decaying sunflowers appears to move. I reach for my protein shake. *What the hell?* I'm not used to feeling at all. The crumbs of my breakfast bar scatter across my History Club t-shirt. I wonder

about dark chocolate mood enhancers. And what's this about brightly-colored fruit? I did eat an orange the other day. Or was it a grapefruit? They look alike down here in the Rio Grande Valley. Sweet jazz beats pulsate from my satellite radio. Serotonins from my morning workout? Both hands on the wheel, I can hardly contain my enthusiasm.

The Volkswagen commercials never mentioned where they're going. I, of course, am on my way to school. I pop the last thin strawberry slice into my mouth. Perhaps God had given me a destination after all—if only I can take it. Savoring the strawberry's sweetness, I narrowly avoid two eighth grade students running through the teachers' parking lot. Is that Rafael and Javier? *But the kids don't come back for another week!* A year ago I wanted to run away. My nomadic tendencies remind me of the Palestinians. I should be so lucky—Palestinians are a proud people. Unlike them, I hadn't lost a thing; my ignorance and ineptitude that first year were of my own making.

Last year during my conference period, I graded papers atop Betsy's sagging, bony back in the teacher's lounge while trying to ignore the old security guard's frenzied battle with his chewy *tripa* tacos. The kids treated Betsy well. They wrecked havoc, however, on our temporary locale, breaking pencil sharpeners, mini-blinds, and at least one DVD player. By the time the bell rang each period, the floors had been littered with notes, scraps of paper, and the remnants of spitball battles—anything they could do to keep awake. I was a *persona non grata*, according to Mrs. Masterson, who said the expression like a badge of honor. “You know they lock their drawers,” she'd confided.

Unable to access teachers' computers without a code, I spent much of my first year explaining to the high-strung ladies in attendance that I would try harder to get my forms in on time. “The funding,” they'd say repeatedly. “We need the funding.” I

didn't know what they meant, but I politely nodded and repeated the word "funding" several times with a grim expression on my face. I'm over Betsy. The truth is she was a common farm horse. No amount of fringe can disguise her pedigree. She ended up in the math storage room holding pencils and math charts. I saw her Friday doubling as a dessert station for our Friday luncheon, the last day of freedom before the kids returned.

I'm getting a classroom this year.

God help the student who touches my stapler.

God help the stapler who touches my student.

Not this year!

I've got a room.

Principal Cerda hands me the silver key to room 208 in an elaborate morning ceremony. "Don't lose it," he says, pressing the shiny object into the palm of my hand. "I can have your ass back in the hall in no time," he warns.

"No, sir." I attach the key to a rope-like contraption around my neck, commonly referred to as a "lanyard." Damn those teachers in their fancy lanyards—keys, highlighters, all the other accessories as if to draw attention to, while jangling down the hallway, those of us who had no need for a lanyard. I add two small keys for the filing cabinets and ceremoniously place the lanyard over my head. My time has come.

Room 208! Lila Dolan's old room. I unlock the door and peek inside. Seven windows and a storage closet. Speckled linoleum. Giant rectangular dry erase board. That clunky metal desk belongs to me. *Finally, a room of my own. A place at the table.* Oh the enormity! My law diploma suddenly means nothing. Even my book seems extraneous. Sure, I'd rather be doing anything other than standing in front of a roomful

of adolescents, but at least I'll be doing it in Room 208, the many-windowed, seagull-colored, bastion of student-centered learning *back here way back a full 321 steps* from the teacher's parking lot. Up against the wall, no more! I've made it!

Hey, I'm no fool. I know classroom décor follows a certain protocol. Desks must either be placed into neat rows facing the front or tightly-clustered "work" groups separated by just enough room for a slender female English teacher to squeeze her buttocks between groups. Last year I nearly crushed Jacob when he dared lean sideways off his desk one afternoon. The teacher's desk must be located in the front of the classroom. The desk must not be too close to the students (in order to maintain an authority position), but close enough so even the most minute disruption can be quickly quashed by the master's menacing glare. Only the most audacious instructors place their desks at a slant, something frowned upon by the administration, who correctly surmised that awkward angles and fresh perspectives might incite a radical student movement. New vistas must be strictly controlled.

Oh, God, it's all coming back—the random posters of inspirational slogans urging children to "Think Before You Speak, or reminding them that "Even the Best of Us . . ." according to a chimpanzee with an overturned bowl of spaghetti on its head ". . . Have a Bad Day." Keep a wall bare for student projects. *Like what?* Some brown bag reproductions of the Alamo?

Bulletin boards must be edged by a mysterious substance called Bordette. "It's capitalized," Mrs. Masterson says. "The way Kleenex is really called tissue." She points at a brochure: *prefabricated bulletin board decoration paper*. "Like wallpaper border." She hands me a pile of tacky flowers, patriotic print and motivational slogans

like *Adjectives are Awesome!!* Indeed, they are. One Bordette looks like exploding nachos. She says an entire wall of the local school supply store is devoted to Bordettes. I look away. “You better get there soon if you don’t like these.” I turn up the sides of my lips. “And don’t forget to laminate them,” she says on her way toward the door. “The staples are hard to get out.” She looks at her hands. “Especially on your nails.”

I see Mrs. Bermuda in the hallway. “Better do it now,” she says, large stack of posters and green Bordettes pulled toward her chest. “The laminating machine gets busy next week.”

Stupid me says I’m not planning on using Bordettes. “They’re so ugly.” Mrs. Bermuda, the consummate Christian, relaxes her cheeks and giggles out of sight. “I like the corkboard,” I yell. “It’s more industrial.” She does not turn around. Ms. Ramos says a teacher at her mother’s school, who eschewed Bordettes in favor of her postcard collection from around the world, found her postcards on the floor the next morning, sliced into pieces, along with a mean note.

“I’m serious,” Ms. Ramos says. “My mom’s the principal.”

“Who signed it?” I ask. “The Grammar Snobs?”

She looks at me and rolls her eyes. “Did you learn *nothing* last year.”

I got news for you, Ramos: *I’m the driver now!*

I won’t be deterred by the fascists of classroom décor. My arms are wrapped around rolls of plush fabric: espresso-colored silk drapes I’d never had a place to hang; baby-blue chenille curtains; old serapes from *Saltillo*. All boxed and nowhere to go. Until now!

I plug in my drill. Oh, hell! Cinderblock! On to Masterson's glue gun. Nothing a little hot glue can't fix. I cover two windows with silky drapes. Above the others I glue matching fabric. One bulletin board I cover in fancy blue suede; the others I leave in their corked, natural state. Atop the corkboard, I affix a variety of inspirational messages in fancy fonts:

You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test—George Bush

Start off every day with a smile and get it over with—W.C. Fields

I make more mistakes before 9:00 a.m. than most people do all day—Mr. Girman

I place the desks in concentric half-circles in an attempt to mimic a college classroom. *Shuffle shuffle mince move*. Perfect! I stare at my handiwork, my makeshift oasis. The sun has set; it's dark. I see Mrs. Masterson flitting outside my door. "Come in," I say. *Look around*.

Her eyes focus, as I'd hoped, on the maroon curtains flanking the back walls, which I'd added to complement the more sheer espresso-colored window coverings. She stares in silence; she's impressed. I follow her eyes throughout the room. "Nice, huh?"

"Yes," she stammers, her eyes focused on the desks. She takes a breath. "But that can't work."

"Right."

The kids will get confused."

I look at the desks. “Of course.” It looks like a jumbled mess. She’s right. “Nothing’s permanent.” I move a desk closer to where I’m standing. “Still working on it.”

She sighs and closes a tiny button on her pink shirt. “It’s nice.” She meanders toward the back of the room. I walk a few steps behind. “What about student work?” I look at my bulletin boards, most of which are already covered. Funky posters line the walls.

“You need to get those posters laminated,” she reminds me. “Especially this nice one.” She points at a poster of a giant black and yellow eye I’d bought outside a Dominican art exhibit in Santo Domingo. “The kids are going to write all over them.” She’s in a vivacious mood.

“Right, yes.” I admire my giant eye. “I’ll find a place—”

“That’s what it’s all about,” she interrupts. “Student achievement.” Her giggle turns into a high-pitched squeal. She’s uncomfortable. *What’s this?* If the ebullient Mrs. Masterson doesn’t like my décor, no one else will.

Well, shit, I’m not done. No supply money until mid-October. I rummage through some boxes in my closet at my apartment. My neighbor Mika helps me carry them to my car. My most precious memories: all wrapped up and no one to see. Finally an appreciative audience. I hang my finer *serapes* from Saltillo with double-sided sticky tape on the painted-white cinderblock. My matching ponchos drape both sides of the door. The right one, yes, has blotches of blood from a breached calf in the Bolivian highlands. *Oh the memories!* Behind my desk I glue two framed black and white photos of what appear to be sleeping *indígenas* outside a church, but are actually dead

Guatemalan peasants, the victims of government violence in the early 1990s. The pictures were given to me by the soldiers themselves, who pointed out the blood on the back of the peasants' heads, and otherwise were hospitable to me on my travels throughout the region. Why had I boxed the memories of those elated, existential sojourns, the chirpy point of view, the vast emptiness of solitary travel, blessed reunion of seeing yourself in everyone? I am social, inquisitive, appreciative; I am not the insular fellow quietly following his appointed map. Yes, I'm the breached calf, but I'm that alpaca-woven poncho as well, and soldiers with clean faces, and indigenous folks all over the globe. I can teach anything I damn well please. *Hear me?* Anything I please. I'd been a fool to box up my memories—to box up myself.

I call it “rustic chic,” light fabrics enhanced with a light-wood motif embodied in the state-issued, shabby teacher's desk, which I cover in thin wooden planks, alternately stained light and dark affixed by industrial-strength glue. Over the top? *Maybe.* I'm happy with this hand-carved flowered jewelry box from the Dominican Republic. I've got pens, pencils, markers, anything I need. Screw these hideous plastic paper holders stuck on my walls. My walls, dammit! Each period receives its own “Breakfast-in-Bed” tray my mother sent me after learning of my alleged more “bohemian” lifestyle choice. *Yes, mom, I'm a great big fag!* My favorite, an African monkey with his giant red butt stuck in the air, will hold student papers with panache and style. See that, Masterson—I haven't forgotten the kids!

Most teachers find my décor somewhat alarming. Some sneak glances around the small stained-glass cross I've affixed to my windowed door. “I bought it in El Salvador,” I admit. *How many peasants had to die . . .*

On Monday morning Mrs. Masterson tells me they're going to steal everything. "They always do," she says, struggling to glimpse the armoire I'd made out of a broken black filing cabinet in the back of the room. "Mr. Girman," she says. Her face becomes lively. "I didn't know you were so crafty." I smile, pleasantly. I want to give her a hug. I'd created the armoire from a metal filing cabinet Mrs. Dolan had left in the back of the room. Covered in exquisite fabric, the armoire stands open in the back of the classroom like a history museum displaying some of my most prized treasures: a square, stone jaguar head about the size of a fist I'd found somewhere in Mexico; another stone reproduction with rabbit ears and cat fangs, missing legs, and sprinkled with glitter; a two-foot boat from the floating *isla* of Uros in Lake Titicaca. None of the artifacts are real. *Hey, I'm no fool!* I kept the Haitian machete on my kitchen wall and have no plans to bring in the tiny Mayan sculptures of copulating duos, the male of which (although sometimes both were male), sport disproportionately large penises. I imagine explaining to the boys, in particular, how cultural artifacts are mere representation of life and not to be taken literally. Yes, that's me: *The Teacher Man*, as Frank McCourt puts it—no one can slow me down.

Ah, here they come! The administration sniffs me out. Those in charge are threatened by art and beauty.

"The children will trip," says Mrs. Martinez. Her head points down at my largest rug.

I drop my head like her. "Right. Right."

"The custodians can't sweep."

"Yes, ma'am."

“Extension cords are not allowed.”

“Right.”

“Why do you have—” Her eyes follow the cord, which stretches to the side of the room with all the windows. “Why do—”

“The lights,” I answer. “The white ones around the tree.” She approaches the tree, a faux model I’d purchased on a trip to Monterrey, and brushes her fingers along the waxy, wooden trunk. She giggles with such heft it turns into a snort. “Be careful with the rugs.”

So on the whole, tolerance prevails. What’s wrong with creating a comfortable environment in which creativity soars? Ms. Ramos walks by in a snug sweater. “Killing them with cleavage, I say.” I’m relaxed. I smile, my hair gelled back in Pacino-like perfection. So what if the kids slip on a rug. I’m gentle, life affirming. *Domesticity and coziness combined with the grand manner*—that’s how the story goes.

CHAPTER 10

This morning the counselor gave me an intriguing file. The student, Matt Treviño, suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, or ADHD. I'd heard the nurse passes out Ritalin like candy from a Pez dispenser, but I'd yet to experience a real-life Pez dispenser in my classroom. I'm looking at his file: *narcolepsy, temper tantrums, strange disappearances*. "Good luck," says the counselor, head down, sinister smile, shuffling feet. Hell, it's a new year—someone ought to give the boy a fresh start.

My new thing is cooperative groups. Matt sits somewhere in the back of second period. I hadn't heard a word from the boy the first week of school. When he enters second period I see a mousy little fellow with unruly blonde hair and a long black Kiss t-shirt. I say hello. He walks past me, mumbles something to himself, and puts his head down on his desk. "He's been that way since second grade," someone says. "We're used to it."

I look for a new seat closer to my podium. In front of me is a group of boys. One of them, Daniel, has a tattoo of a heart on his left forearm. Where's *his* file, I wonder. The boy opposite him speaks little English. "Good Morning, Sir," he says each morning. "So nice to vision you." I examine the remainder of the cooperative groups. According to their standardized test scores, only twenty percent of second period reads on a seventh-grade level. The other twenty percent are recent Mexican immigrants whom, like Oscar, struggle with basic greetings. The middle twenty percent

of students, according to my records, have struggled with various forms of dyslexia and, although improving, remain several grade levels behind. Of the remaining students, half struggle to write a complete sentence; the other half have yet to say or do anything in class. They stare at me when I'm explaining a lesson, yet I can't determine if their silence is a brilliant prelude to, perhaps, a passionate defense of the Karankawa Indians or mere contemplation of which window offers the best escape route. *Don't worry—I'm on it.*

"The natural landscape determines who you are," I say. The boy with the tattoo finally looks up. His eyes are green as Lake Atitlan. "What did the Karankawa eat?"

"Fish," he says.

I nod. "How'd you know?" He looks at the map in front of the room. "Why fish?"

"Or shrimp," he says. "We eat a lot of shrimp when we go to the island."

"South Padre?"

"Yeah, South Padre. The place near the light house."

In the middle of his heart reads the letters M-O-M. "You and your mom?"

"My uncle."

"So the Karankawa eat shrimp?"

"Or fish."

"Right, fish." I scan the back of the room. Matt's head sits sideways on his desk.

"Because . . ."

"Because of the water," Daniel says, arching his back and sitting straight up like a fishing line pulled by a quick Drumfish.

“Good.” Matt has fallen asleep. “So we’re the products of the environment in which we live?”

“Exactly,” Daniel says.

I ask a dark-skinned girl in geometric designs to pass out large sheets of white and blue butcher paper. She looks at me when she reaches Matt’s table.

“Put it on his head,” I say. She does as she’s told, and I see something extraordinary: Matt smiles. A slow smile, yes, as tepid as his movements, but the boy moves his face. *Extraordinary!* The girl smiles back. Love struck little boy. Short-lived: he puts his head on the desk and promptly falls asleep.

I’m up for the challenge. After lunch I review the “cooperative learning strategy” from the green binder I’d received during summer training: *Pairing low performing students with higher-level thinkers will expose the lower performing student to alternative cognitive strategies aimed at raising the student’s skill level in the context of his/her own initiative.*

Mini-tutors throughout the room?

You betcha!

The next day Matt’s notebook remains empty. He raises his head and exposes a giant red mark where his cheek had rest against the desk. He looks surprised. His eyes widen. “I didn’t know,” he says. He turns toward the door. “The thing—”

“What *thing?*” I interrupt.

He sits with one leg propped underneath him shoving pencils in a giant red backpack filled with books. He looks around. Light freckles cover his face. He twirls in his chair in front of me, distressed. Thelma waits behind me to ask a question. “What

thing?” I repeat. I notice Carlos give me a dirty look from across the room. I should know better: don’t alienate the popular kids. I serenely turn toward Thelma. “Yes, dear?” She whispers something and moves out of the way so Matt can leave. I do not try to stop the boy.

“Do you want me to help?” she asks.

I look about the room. “Well, um . . . no, I’m, ugh . . . okay, I guess.”

“With Matt,” she says.

Eureka! Why hadn’t I thought of that? I look out in the hallway at her group’s giant Regions of Texas map. “You’re sure it’s not too much work?” Their map even includes an expanded key and extends all the way out to the Zuni Indians. “For real?”

“I’m the oldest of seven.”

“Nice.”

“I bathe my brothers all the time.”

Two weeks later the formerly angelic Thelma has turned shockingly pale. She does the best she can. Class starts with the two of them on the floor sorting through Matt’s backpack in search of pencils, paper, and several key chains Matt fingers on his desk. Sometimes the boy, despite Thelma’s best efforts, falls asleep clutching a heavy wool poncho hanging from the wall near his desk. Okay, *one* time! One time I lost track of him and he fell asleep on the poncho. And I knew what he was doing, *yes ma’am*, just watched it happen, surprised no one intervened. *Always been like that.*

“I’m fine,” Thelma pleads. She looks tired.

“You’ve done the best you can,” I say. “It’s my turn now.”

She glances at the floor and looks up at me with a resigned look. “Will this affect my grade?”

Sweet, Sweet Thelma. “Yes,” I say. “Probably.” I don’t have time to tell her I’m kidding before she lowers her head and walks back to her desk. *A new year, huh?* I might as well be pushing Betsy around campus again.

CHAPTER 11

Hmm, something's wrong: the first two groups near my desk are entirely female. In every class! *What's going on?* Mrs. Masterson tells me seventh-grade boys are an exasperating band of uncontrollable, hyperactive snots with little respect for anyone around them. "It's because they're babied," she says in lunch one day. "On account of them being boys."

"Really, Clarissa?" I tear my sandwich into three equal parts. "So how do you handle them?"

She pulls several strands of grey hair off her forehead, revealing smooth skin seemingly untouched by her long teaching career. "I don't put up with anything," she says. "Those boys need to sit there like anyone else and do their work." I nod my head. "If the girls can do it, so can the boys." I guess I was too busy to notice these things.

After lunch I rearrange the seating chart. Mrs. Masterson watches my classroom so I can use the bathroom. Later she tells the head of the history department that I am one of the best new teachers she's seen. "I didn't hear a peep out of anyone," she tells Mr. Hiate. "Quite an improvement from last year." She looks me over closely. "I told him you have total control of the boys."

I'm flattered. I'd taken feminist studies courses in graduate school, and I'm familiar with the disparity between boys' and girls' performance, particularly in math and

science. The disparities became most apparent in the middle school years. The problem, as I understand it, is that a subconscious teacher bias encourages boys more than girls, calling on them more often in class and excessively praising their responses. *Is that so?* So here I am again; it's the second time I've been warned about boys. In EPIC training, Mrs. Randolph inundated us with scholarly articles depicting the damaging impact domineering young males can have on impressionable young females. "Most females perform lower in math and science," wrote one author, "precisely because the male students are dominating the classroom with their appalling overconfidence and childish antics." This more recent line of research favored by my EPIC instructor, contrary to my graduate school courses, suggested that the boys themselves, not the teachers, are the root cause of seemingly every classroom conflict.

Armed with this up-to-the-minute data, and buoyed by Mrs. Masterson's autocratic approach, I'm not about to let any boys rule the roost. *That's right, I'm in charge.* I'll break the back of any penis-wielding monsters who dare to steal the limelight from my female students. *You know what I mean.* Little girls are people, too.

Sit down, Daniel.

Shut up, Marco.

Michael, where's your homework?

Wake up!

Sit Still!

Write, dammit!

Two boys in seventh period show up late to class every day. The larger boy, with hair that feathers naturally like mine, talks softly and refuses to look at me. His friend

Michael is thin as licorice with putty-colored skin. Together they run through the halls flaunting their strength. Both are code R, at risk, and ED, economically disadvantaged. Rolan, the husky one, wears the same three shirts and Michael does not come to class without his red jacket. I'm exasperated. This morning Rolan punched Matt Treviño in the arm.

"So you're a bully?" I ask Rolan after class. He continues walking toward the door. "I'm asking you a question, sir."

Rolan stops, bends one leg forward, and casually turns around. "Huh?"

"Not *huh*," I say. "We're here to learn, not show off." The boy's cheeks are large like mounds. He stares at me, his mouth parted thin enough to slide the Eucharist inside.

"I didn't—"

"I saw you shoving Matt this morning."

"So."

"So, you think that's cool?"

He turns toward the door. "We were just—"

"Just *what*?"

He takes a step back and leans against the door handle. Students gather outside the door behind him. His red shirt looks wet around the neckline. He shields his eyes from the light pouring in through the sheer draperies behind my desk. I move between him and the light. He rotates his right foot on the rug below him, then scratches his head and looks at me. He transfers his weight to one foot. His head shifts toward the ceiling. Eyes black as bats. He blinks his eyelashes and smiles. "I like the rugs, sir." He says it slowly, almost a whisper, and stares at the dry erase board. His eyelashes are long and

dark. I forget about the students knocking on the door. I stare at his brown face. He stares at mine. “You have colored eyes,” he says.

Now I remember where I’ve seen the boy. “Tomorrow you’ll be sitting by me.” He exhales like a sneeze and jerks the door handle. On his way out he looks back at me and says nothing.

The next day Rolan sits by my side. “You forgot to shave,” he says. I run my fingers along my jaw, tiny whiskers poking me like pin cushions. He sits in front of my podium like a bench at the foot of the bed. I could reach out and touch his face. “I forget sometimes, too” he says. I gaze at the boy’s bronze skin, smooth as polished bamboo. He touches his face with the back of his curved fingers. His cheeks are high and change colors at the top, a rugged dark brown, like many of the Kaqchikel people I’d met along the shores of Lake Atitlán. His lips wet themselves when he talks. “I’m joking, sir.” Between pauses his tongue eases out of his mouth. “I don’t shave yet.” A blue aura rings his eyes like the smoky sky after a storm or a teenage girl with too much of her mother’s eye shadow.

“I’m bored,” Michael says from the back. “When are we going to do something fun?” Rolan turns around, but he remains quiet. “Colonization sucks.”

Well put, kid. “What is it, exactly, that you have a problem with?”

“There’s nothing in here about us.”

“For instance?” I end the statement in a higher voice as if speaking Spanish.

“Football.” His eyes widen as he says the word.

“Football?”

“Yeah, football. You know, a football team, sir?”

Little shit. “Yes, Michael, I know what a football team is.”

“You never watch us play.”

“Yeah,” says Rolan in a thin whisper.

“You haven’t had a game yet?”

“Uh-huh,” says Michael.

“We beat Memorial,” Rolan says. Michael flexes a skinny bicep in the air.

Several boys in the room start talking. A.J. and Omar pretend to tackle each other from their desks.

“I’m a cheerleader,” Meagan says. She winds her arms around in a circle above her head. The enthusiasm spreads quickly.

“Come tonight,” says Michael. His lips are full. I glance at Rolan, as if waiting for an answer. The boy shrugs.

“I’m a safety,” Omar says.

“Tight-end,” A.J. shouts. Meagan covers her mouth and giggles. “Yeah,” A.J. repeats in Michael’s direction. I’m shocked. I’d never thought the boys of seventh period could do anything but whine and arrange themselves sideways across their desks. Rolan stares at the front of my podium.

“What about you?” I look at Rolan. He lifts his eyelashes and opens his eyes wide.

“Fullback.” He scratches his elbow. “I block a lot.” He gnaws on half a toothpick. “For Carlos.”

This I have to see—Rolan and A.J hustling down the field for Carlos. Discerning the order on a field of chaos. In class they can’t remember the damn heading. *Name.*

Date. Period. Yes, you must write the full month. Why? Because I say so. How? With your pencil. Now they expect me to believe they can follow a simple blocking pattern. Spirit their teammate down the field in an enthusiastic burst. This from the blockhead punching Matt Treviño in the arm? How gullible do they think I am?

I haven't been to a football game in years. Aluminum bleachers stick to the bottoms of my thighs like sticky paste. Ms. Ramos walks up the stairs with an individual bag of Cheetos and a spoonful of nacho cheese inside. The spoon sticks out like a tiny doll's arm. "Here," she says.

I take the bag and offer her a soda. "A.J.'s mom gave us these."

"How'd she—"

"Kids talk."

"Uh-huh."

"We're dating now?" She rolls her eyes.

"Apparently," I say.

"I don't date older men." *Ouch!*

"Point taken."

"Shhh. The game's about to start."

"Right."

"The kickoff."

A little boy in a Edison blue uniform darts to the ball and kicks it out of bounds. Before long number twenty-one dominates the field. Daniel, the skinny boy with the MOM tattoo, drags kids like he's tossing them down a ravine. A woman in the second

row screams loud enough to vibrate the bleachers. Her raspy voice is not smoky or seductive.

“Crazy lady.” Ms. Ramos points. “I wish I had her voice in the classroom.”

“Right.”

“Here’s Carlos,” she says. *Right on time.* Number fifty-one rolls through the backfield on roller skates. He jukes like a hand-held wooden snake. He trips along the left sideline. On third-and-two he runs over two orange jerseys. Pops off the grass like a break dancer. “He’s something,” she says. “Last week, too.”

“Carlos?” I ask.

“Oh, he’s so cute.” *The boy who looks at me with mean stares?* “Sweet and sour.”

“My ass.”

“Oh, wait, there’s Villanueva.” Ms. Ramos stands, shields her eyes from the sun.

“Rolan?”

“Yes, Villanueva.”

Way in front of Carlos surges hulky Rolan, number thirty-three, buffed up wide in shoulder pads and drooping pants, *pumping pushing shoving* little orange boys out of the way like the shards of grass beneath the lawnmower.

“Go baby,” says a woman in a red baseball cap in front of us. She stands up and shouts. “Come on, Carlos.” A large man in a City of Edison shirt kisses her and sits down. Ms. Ramos glances at me. “*Carlitos está mejorando,*” she says to the man. The man brushes his mustache and turns toward the game. I watch number thirty-three.

“Rolan’s a good blocker,” I say.

“Troublemakers usually are.”

“You think?”

“Got trouble written all over him.”

The woman in the red hat turns around. “Hi, I’m Carlos’s mother, Reena.” She holds out her hand. We shake her hand and wait a few seconds before we move higher in the bleachers.

“There’s something about him.”

“Clarissa hates him.”

“Mrs. Masterson? Why?”

“Says he gets up all the time.” She pulls her phone out of her pocket. “Won’t sit still.”

“Yeah.”

“She sent him to my class twice last week.” Ms. Ramos stares straight ahead. “Couldn’t take it anymore.” I picture the boy wandering the room like a nomad in the desert. Expelled from his own homeland. “Rough kid.” The woman in the second row screams so loud I can barely hear Ms. Ramos.

“A shame,” I say. Carlos barrels in the end zone and hugs A.J. “Team seventy-seven kicks ass,” I yell. Ms. Ramos shakes her head. The woman in red turns around. On the two-point conversion, Rolan’s body rumbles in the end zone, but his hands embrace the ball like a toddler’s blanket. I lower my soda on the floor and clap. I’m smiling.

Game over. Line of boys running toward the bleachers. “Hurry up,” says Ms. Ramos. One hand on the rail. Go boys! Running warriors slapping hands down the line.

Twenty-seven. Twenty-one. Forty-two. Fifty-one. Number thirty-three jumps high to slap my hand. The screaming woman from the bleachers is now screaming next to me. She's short with orange-lizardy skin and giant hoop earrings. A heart tattoo covers her neck. Daniel takes off his helmet and gives the woman a hug. She punches the back of his jersey. I'm not sure if he sees me. I notice the tattoo on his arm. M-O-M—more than a three-letter word; it's a lifestyle. I watch Daniel dive on his teammates in the middle of the field. This boy might not be so bad after all. Number thirty-three has disappeared.

The next day a note appears in my suggestion box, a trick I'd stolen from one of my education books. "Yelling at boys isn't nice," it says. I recognize Carlos's handwriting. "Matt wasn't like this before." I think about Bev in my EPIC training course. *Physical aggression and bullying are unlikely to help this boy.* "His mom took him off medicine last year." *What?* Is Bev seducing unsuspecting Carlos in a nefarious Teach for America plot? Was I the bully? Is Carlos, dare I say, an advocate? I think back to last year. Just you and the kids. *Yeah, right!* "But thanks for coming to my game," the note says at the end, a small smiley face etched in red marker.

Something more is at stake. Premeditated logical structures aren't the only way to teach. So maybe I wasn't so bad last year after all. The trouble, though, is how to make the next leap—from the enthusiast's infatuation to "anti-entropic feedback systems," as the great Neil Postman puts it. That is, how do I give feedback to my students and maintenance to the system? Where's the time? I'm starting college again in a few months. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* If inquiry is the basic mode of discourse, how do I develop

sound lessons from student responses? *No judging. No single right answer. Let the kids decide.* Do I measure success by the frequency of Daniel's challenges? Or the conviction of Rolan's heart? Does the subversive stare in Carlos's eyes mean anything more? Teaching boys is a whole different ballgame.

CHAPTER 12

Despite Mrs. Masterson's commendations, I can't get these boys off my mind. Like my own version of Dante's *Inferno*, I'm still responding to the boys with the same behavior I'm attempting to squelch in them. How can I enliven class with animated conversation and physical movement if I expect the students—especially the boys—to sit still and wait to contribute until they're called upon? Yet I rarely call on boys who raise their hands. I've already moved the most intellectually gifted boys to the back of the room. Isn't it bad enough I've emasculated myself?

One morning the vibe is lively, and Daniel playfully leaps on my back in some WWE wrestling move he'd seen on television. "Mexican wrestler," says Oscar. He steps forward to feel my bicep while Daniel hangs on like a rangy dog. I'm shocked when Matt Treviño asks how much weight I can bench press. I drop Daniel on the beige rug beneath us. He holds a silver candlestick in the air like a prize. "And the winner," he says. Matt watches the action; I think I see a small smile emerging from his lips. *This might be my chance!*

"Heroes," I say. "Let's talk about heroes." The class calms down at the serious tone of my voice. I draw a KWL chart on the board—I *know*; I *want to know*; I *learned*. I speak more tenderly. "Let's see what you already know." Daniel and I make eye contact. "Here's a list from sixth grade," I say. "Tell me some of the heroes of America." The room remains quiet. "Okay, now I—"

“George Washington,” Thelma says. “We learned about him in elementary school.”

“Alright,” I say. “Write in the K column the things you know about George Washington.” No one moves. “What makes him a good leader?” I stare at Daniel. “How did he become president?” Thelma cracks her knuckles. A.J. squats down in his desk and mimics bird’s wings with his hands.

“Abraham Lincoln,” Thelma says.

“He freed the slaves,” says Daniel.

“Right, so why does that make him a good leader?”

He slumps back down in his seat. “Beats me.”

I return behind my podium. *Okay fine, I give up.* “Write about leaders in your own lives.”

“Anyone?” asks A.J. He lifts himself higher in his seat.

“Why not?” *So much for American heroes.* “Instead of a chart, write a paragraph about the heroes in your own lives.”

“Leaders or heroes?” asks Daniel.

“Whichever.”

The students doodle on paper. Some begin writing. Samuel, who rarely speaks, stops drawing graffiti letters and appears to be making notes in the top corner of his paper. I wind around in his direction to investigate, but he covers his paper with his forearm. *What’s he writing?* I’ll have to find out during my conference period. I give my following class the same assignment.

During conference time, I sort through the letters. Some good. Some bad. Poor Oscar can't write in English. For the first time all year, the boys have more to express than the girls. I'm surprised by the uniformity of responses among my male students. Nearly all the males wrote about a father, older brother, or uncle. Hidden within their praise is a longing for a more emotional connection with their fathers or other older males in their lives.

“My dad is a good leader because he puts rules in the house. He gets busy a lot, but I understand. A good leader doesn't always have time for little stuff like soccer games and when my sisters cry and stuff.”

“When my dad goes away on business or vacations, it's so hard to make decisions without him. I hope one day if God willing I grow up to be half the man he is!”

“My uncle works hard to keep his family in a house. He's a great leader to me but my brother says he's ok and can be a lot better. I told my brother 'you can't even take care of yourself,' but I think he's just mad because my uncle works a lot.”

“Great leaders like my brother sometimes have to be very serious. One mistake and they could lose the respect of many. You have to be extremely responsible to be a leader.”

“My dad is a good leader because he always teaches me stuff, like how to use a knife. He stands up for us and what is right. He writes me letters from jail, even though he doesn’t have to. I think he has a lot of courage for being in jail and still trying to better himself.”

Finally I arrive at Samuel’s essay:

“My father would never be a good leader because he’s not there for me, and I don’t even know where he is. A leader has to be someone who would take a bullet for you, like my brother.”

Well, isn’t that jolly! Truth is, I’m holding back tears while reading the rest of the essays—the truth of these boys’ stories is partially my own. I’m afraid to get closer to these boys because I really don’t know how. I’m a thirty-two-year-old man without a male role model. What is it about the inner workings of the male psyche?

I flip through large plastic binders of training material I’ve accumulated from last year: *Iconography of the American Revolution; English Second Language Learners; Reaching the Gifted Child; The Disciplined Classroom; The No Child Left Behind Act—full text*. Note to self: review these sometime. However, not one of them addresses this sizeable subgroup of students, boys, who clamor most for my attention. On the internet I stumble across a book called *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. I’m intrigued.

Oh dear! I'm not yet finished with the first two chapters, and I already realize that I'd been perpetuating, unwittingly, the "*miseducation*" of boys." Nothing to do with facts and figures, but the ways in which boys are steered away from their inner, emotional world. I'm trying to turn these boys into the same lifeless, stern, emotionally withdrawn male prototype I've become. No horse-play in the classroom or the hallways. One quotation nearly drops me to the floor: "[A] confused young boy grows into an angry, emotionally isolated teenager, and, predictably, into a lonely, middle-aged man at risk for depression." An image of my father appears like waving seaweed in my head. And what about me? I'm concerned about more than these young men; I'm concerned about myself.

Let's see. I'm not fully convinced until I investigate—the anthropologist in me has returned. Can I find authentic expressions of male emotion?

For several days I allow the boys to be themselves. I do not stop them from wrestling in the hallway in front of my classroom, or laughing loudly at my jokes, or rubbing my chin to let me know they see I haven't shaved. Rolan brushes the back of his hand over my jaw at least once a day. I become an observer. By Wednesday, I notice the level of care and concern the boys demonstrate for the girls on our team—and for one another. How had I not noticed it before? Now that I've stopped yelling at Martin for hitting people on the head with pencils, I realize he's been sharpening the pencils for them all year. And it's a *boy*, Daniel, who taps on Matt's shoulder to make sure he's awake before I round the corner toward his desk.

On Thursday Michael gives me a Red Bull he smuggles into class seventh period. "I remembered how much you like them," he says. "So I stole one from my dad." I'm

back in the seventh-grade being yelled at by one of my former teachers, Mr. Dotson. I threw up in my own backpack because he refused to let anyone use the bathroom. At the end of the period I dumped the contents into the trashcan. He approached me after class, startled by the stench from my backpack, and derided me mercilessly. The shock numbed me. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he screamed.

“But I thought—”

“That’s an *emergency*,” he interrupted, picking up my backpack and pulling out a stack of papers covered in liquid vomit. “That’s disgusting.”

“But I didn’t—”

“And you’re not that smart,” he added, tossing the papers back into my backpack and throwing it on the floor. “Don’t think you’re that smart.”

Twenty years later: Me? Dotson? Truth is, I had a crush on him. Innocuous, yes, but still a crush. I’d become Mr. Dotson. That’s how I thought a good teacher—no, good man—should conduct himself. Mr. Dotson had not succeeded in scaring the emotion out of me; he merely forced me to bottle in up until it had no choice but escape in a different, more dangerous form. Fear! Angst! Avoidance! I look at Michael. “Thank you,” I say, gazing into his chocolate brown eyes moist and anxious for recognition. I’ve been given a *second third fourth* chance and I intend to use it.

But how does one address the emotional lives of boys within the context of a functioning classroom? What will be my role? One line from *Raising Cain* suggests an answer: “Boys need male modeling of a rich emotional life.” I need to bring my own emotional life into the classroom. But how? Do I even have an emotional life?

I've decided, against the advice of Ms. Ruiz and Mrs. Masterson, to share personal information with my students. Hell, I might even share the first draft of my first-year teaching manuscript. Something about my first year struggles mirror their own adolescent insecurities.

Trust the process! Well sure, more easily said than done. Maybe I'll call my father. So yes, I'm learning along with the boys. Yeah, I'll make mistakes. I'm already noticing how a boy in need of a male presence, like Rolan, can latch on so quickly. Maybe I should not have told the kids that a Mexican transvestite across the border, one I talked to briefly while waiting for a taxi, had stolen my wallet over the weekend. "So that's why I couldn't buy you the candy," I explained, followed by a lengthy description of sexual and gender identity involving various props I'd borrowed from the bowl of papier-mâché fruit on my desk.

"So that's a trans, you know, a trans-thingy?" asks A.J. later. Oscar, from Mexico, looks at me and smiles. "Sí," he says. "*Mi primo.*" He gets it. Boys from Mexico are used to gender inversion. The macho follows the *maricón*, as the saying goes. Oscar knows. Daniel draws a stick figure. Officer Margaret walks by—I see you. Big deal! I've never held the kids attention for so long. I should add an extra credit question on their test about gender expectations.

"Sometimes it's hard," says a note in my suggestion box later that day. "To always have to be tough. I wish I could be a kid again and play with toys and not worry about this stuff. I didn't know transwomen or whatever existed." The note is signed with an "D." I smile. I want them to understand that all people are different, including themselves. *Hell, me!* They should not be afraid to express themselves. As *Raising*

Cain explains, this is a crucial time of their lives; by the tenth grade, masculine anxiety hardens into an impenetrable fortress, sometimes lasting an entire lifetime. I should know.

CHAPTER 13

Oh winter's breath! I'm beneath the Mulberry bushes strolling on crisp diagonal walkways. I've got no time to worry, fool! I taste snowflakes on my lips, cold sweat lingers around the eyes, a soft brush of breeze tumbles my blonde hair. The air pulses through me! I flip through Updike's anxious prose, finger one hundred years of solitude, I'm a vixen, slumbering nude in January's cedar-scented glow.

Okay, Mulberry can't survive here. It's the Valley, fool! I'm short stepping it from one mesquite tree to the next. But, Oh the flagrant flowers! The spiraling Bougainvillea release me. Palm trees saunter in the distance. *Born again, I say. Born Again!* No more abortive evenings wiping sticky syrup off wooden bar tops. No more fetching bottle caps. No more missed study groups and dismal first-year examinations. I'm going out in style, a fine piquant beret hung loosely on my head, a skullcap slinky low over one eye. Bring it on, Sontag. I'm a castaway, you hear: *The Strange Surprising Adventures of a One-Eyed Mariner*. I'm a writer. Today I start my Masters of Fine Arts degree at the University of Texas Pan-American. What a name! Gabriel Garcia Marquez could not have planned it any better. I once read Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* atop a Peruvian cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. You didn't know. How could you? I'm the Latin American novelist no one's ever heard about. When I stand in front of thirty-five seventh graders, they will listen, dammit!

Ask for autographs. Stand before me with gaping eyes and wonder. *The Chili Papers* was only the beginning. I knew him when . . .

I sit in a small room of tender eyes. Three girls joke like they've been here before. I find out the professor is head of the creative writing program. She's squared off at the shoulders, with bulky plastic glasses framing her eyes. Seven of us sit in a circle. The professor speaks softly. "Creative nonfiction," she says, "is a risky business." I'm the only one who writes. The girl to my right has soft curls and a relaxed disposition. Her skin holds a red-clay hue reminding me of somewhere else. The professor lays several objects on a table. "Take a look at them," she says. We pass the objects around. Four drink coasters mingle with an indecent clay vessel the size of a horse's genitals. A heavy bookend shines like gilded gold. I caress a soft pink baggie. Half a pink, plastic egg rolls furtively across a table. Tom introduces himself as a Methodist minister. "Describe five for next week," says the professor. *Accuracy is the hallmark of nonfiction*, I learn. "But don't be afraid to add your own voice." I walk out of class stepping so high I can almost touch the starry sky.

In school the following morning I ask Rolan to find five objects from around the room. "Wander around a little bit." He immediately gets to work. I ask Michael to make room on the table. Potential troublemakers must be given physical tasks.

"For what," Michael wants to know. *So you can give birth*. "Are we going to play the lie game again?"

"No, it's for—"

Rolan comes between us and dumps several items on the table. I see a colorful *huipile* vest from the Guatemalan highlands, a box of markers, a reed boat from Lake

Titicaca, a hacky sack abducted from the shelf inside my teaching podium and a pair of black cleats clogged with dirt.

“Where did you—”

“From my locker,” he answers.

“When did you—”

“Just now,” Rolan says. He looks at me with slanted head as if shielding his eyes from the sun. He wears baggy blue jeans, no belt, and a long checkered shirt. His light brown hair, as always, parts itself as if running from the wind.

Michael takes the objects and lays them across the table.

“Today we’re going to describe what we see.” No one says anything. “Up here.” I point at the objects. “We’re going to describe the objects on this table.” Several students rise and peek from their seats.

“What for, sir?”

“For accuracy,” I say.

“Huh?”

“To practice describing things as they really are.” I’m confusing myself. “In history,” I continue, “we have to remember that we’re describing true events.”

“Like the president?”

“Exactly. It’d be fun to say, I don’t know, Selena Gomez is president.” Several girls laugh. “Or Lebron James.”

“Tono Romo!”

“Yeah!”

“Tony Romo, idiot!”

“Right, right. It’s fun, but we all know the truth.” Josh stares into space. “Right, Josh. Who’s president?” We wait, hold our breath. “President of the United States, Josh. Who is it?”

“George Bush.”

“Good. So when we describe these objects, we can’t, you know, say, um . . . say Rolan’s smelly football cleats—”

“Ah, sir.”

“We can’t say Rolan’s shoes are ballet slippers.” Rolan casts a muted smile. His lips are large, buoyant, and pink.

“Gross,” says a girl in the back.

“They don’t smell, sir.”

“Right, I’m kidding. Point is: Describe what you see, smell, touch, hear. That’s what history is made of—event, description, interpretation.” *Okay, going too far.* Several students look inquisitively at the objects. Nic walks up to the table. “Touch them if you want.” Other students abruptly hop to the center of the room. They trade artifacts like sharing potato chips. I wait several minutes and direct them to write. Apart from Meagan, no one writes.

“If you’re confused, start with color. How big are the shoes?”

“Seven-and-a-half,” shouts Rolan. I circulate through the room. Nic writes *purple marker* on his paper. I look over Rolan’s shoulder at a blank sheet of paper. I lean over, whisper in his ear: *look at the colors of the vest.* He stares ahead.

“You chose it,” I say. “Right?” He looks up at me but writes nothing. I look down at him, say nothing.

“Can we draw?” someone asks.

“We’re not in kindergarten.”

“No,” says Nic. “She means can we draw the objects.” *Yeah*, someone says. *I’m better at drawing*. The class nearly tumbles down a ravine. Me, too. I relent and the kids draw. The boats turn out nicely. Michael asks if he can pass out colored pencils. Megan draws the markers: evenly spaced, properly-proportioned, part of a set. Nearly everyone draws the round hacky sack. Rolan hunches over his desk with a tiny pencil in his hand. He draws small hexagons that together form the tiny sack. I point out a section of his drawing that doesn’t fit perfectly. “It’s dented,” he tells me. I approach the ball, pick it up. *Damn the Sir. He messed it up*. “I mean, smooched,” says Rolan. “Not dented.” He blinks his eyes, flutters his eyelashes.

I watch the remainder of the day as students draw the objects. Shadows form where I hadn’t noticed. Serpentine laces drape to the right of both cleats. The hacky sack has a dull green hue. Even the markers are drawn in packs of eight. Rolan spends the entire period on one ball. Few words are written: *dirty, colorful, cute, boatpeople*. But the drawings, oh, the drawings are magnificent! I glance at Aaron’s light face in ninth-period, the tightness of his expression as if cracking the center of an avocado. Can I take my students to class tonight? They’ll draw the campus through knowing eyes: setting sun over glass gymnasium, Sawgrass woven round slender poles; sensuous women; robust college men. Okay, they’d draw how *I* see it on a good day skipping along the sidewalk waiting for the sky to fall. But can they take me there, their home, a river along a landscape lined with fruit trees? We can toss the hacky sack in front of the Jimenez building. Study in the fountain lined with Mexican tile. *Stop, fool*. I’m staring

out at a mass of ninth period faces instead of finishing my descriptions. The bell rings. I grab my backpack and take off behind Aaron. He says he'll guard the hallway just case a principal walks by. I'm leaving early. I flip through my descriptions as I drive out the parking lot.

The minister Tom insists it is the strangest ménage à trois he has ever seen: three bronzed turtles stacked vertically, a perfectly balanced bookend protecting bound treasures. The tag on the bottom reads, Made in the Philippines. "Not that I've ever seen a ménage à trois," Tom adds, unconvincingly.

Three hacky-sacks sit like tiny beanbag chairs. One masquerades as a third-world artifact, sewed with flamboyant fibers and triangular designs like a white Rastafarian at Oberlin College. The middle ball is covered in green corduroy and feels good against my face. The final ball, a hideous lime-green color, reminds me of the hacky-sack I throw to my seventh graders. The balls, like my students, are fragile: (com)pliant.

The professor likes my descriptions. The question, she reminds the class, is if we can describe things as we really see them. *Hurray!* I'm not so dumb after all. Nowhere in my descriptions, however, do I explain my students' trouble with words. How does one frame the creative experience with functional literacy? How do we give voice to

what's inside? Does text necessarily threaten the artistic impulse? Can we describe what we see and feel?

The following week in my seventh-grade classroom, I write the words *Word Scramble Wednesday* on the board. I instruct the students in second period to copy down whichever vocabulary word I provide and, in an allotted time period, construct as many new words as possible by switching the order of the letters. For example, HISTORY might be broken down into "his," "Tory," "story," and many others. Each group assigns one person to write down the words, while the other students brainstorm new words.

I'd kept the seat next to Matt empty in second period. Across from Matt sits Spanish-speaking Oscar and Alfredo, a skinny boy perpetually dressed in black and covered in multi-colored scarves wrapped tightly around his forearm to his wrists. I'd recently added Caroline to the group, a petite, well-developed girl, who'd been kicked out of her previous middle school. She responds to Matt's antics as I'd hoped Carlos would have, smacking him with impunity in a way the boy enjoys. Instead of napping on the soft poncho, Matt rises with inexplicable vigor and sharpens his pencil. When he returns, Caroline has the correct page waiting for him in his notebook. Yes, I notice Matt's tiny eyes sweeping up her body and pausing below her neckline. *Sue me!* I also notice him flipping his textbook to the appropriate page or finishing copying his notes. Year two, and I'm a better teacher already.

Of course not everything is perfect. Matt and Caroline's group has a combined verbal diagnostic score not much higher than Thelma's *individual* score, a clear violation of the cooperative learning standards I've tried so hard to emulate. Worse, they call

themselves the *Superstars*, which they spell “Soup or Stars” on the large placard in front of Carlos’ desk. I don’t bother to correct them. Oh hell, maybe words don’t matter.

I write CLIMATE on the board. “In your notebook,” I remind the students. “Write it in your notebook.” Carlos talks quietly to someone in the back of the room. Thelma lowers her head toward her desk and writes a few words. Daniel is absent today. In front of me, however, Matt scribbles furiously in his notebook. His head is shaking and I’m not sure if he might fall out of his seat. He keeps writing. Caroline calls out words at a furious pace: *climb, tame, tail, mile, mail*.

“A man?” asks Matt, his head bobbing in the air.

“Como *carta*,”

“Oh, a letter.”

Oscar sits on his legs and presses his forearms into the desk. “Clima,” he shouts, lowering his body back on the desk. *Tema Lima Mita Ame*. He fires in rapid succession. “*Mate*,” he says. Alfredo raises his head and looks at Oscar. “It’s a drink,” he says. Alfredo keeps his head up and adds a few words of his own. Matt copies without looking up.

“I’ve got one,” Caroline announces as time expired. She whispers to Matt. He rocks back and forth and raises his thin body to Caroline’s level. He puts his hand over his mouth and whispers something to her.

“It’s a word,” says Caroline. Matt looks up at me. “Just write it.” He faithfully complies, giving the Soup or Stars a class record, thus far, of forty-five words. Matt leaves the room giggling, repeating softly to himself their record-breaking word.

Of course I don't bother to look at their final word until I receive a Post-It later in the day informing me, in adult handwriting, that the school has a strict policy against displaying vaginas on the wall. *Vaginas?!#* I reread the note and recognize Ms. Ramos's handwriting: *You might want to check out your Word Scramble winners before you put them on the wall.* Ha-Ha! I walk down the long corridor back to my room, only casually glancing at the seven winning group entries I'd glued to the wall. Then I see it, sprawled at eye-level near my door, the winning entry from seventh-period, the word "clit" written in large letters across the page. *To give voice to what's inside.* I swiftly cover the paper and look up towards the security camera. I hear Ms. Ramos giggling from her room.

Okay, so I'm not perfect. In the future I'll monitor student work before I display it in the hallway. But let's face it: you have to make exceptions for exceptional cases. I can see the improvement in my student's vocabulary. Rolan's stuck on three letter words, but at least he's doing something. Even Tom the minister has his faults. I'm learning language, too. The battle between truth and meaning continues to stymie me. *Smoosh. Dent. Boatpeople.* What are my students trying to say? Why Rolan's intense stare? Yeah, this writing's a risky business. *Qué quiere decir, sir?* I'll have to leave myself open to the possibilities, or the moment when I see Carlos's football jersey wrapped around Alfredo's desk. I won't hold my breath.

On his way toward the door, Alfredo stops me. "Sir," he says. He adjusts a turquoise scarf over his right hand. "You've got to describe things as you see them." He looks at Carlos on his way out the door. Does Alfredo see something I've missed, the

continual process of making meaning visible—the flexible, inquiring, creative mind
which faces ambiguity without disorientation? Is *he* the crap-detector?

CHAPTER 14

Good God, I've done it again! *Boys. Boys. Boys.* The girls get second shift around the warehouse here. I know what you're thinking, but it's not my fault. The girls are so good. With the boys you must be vigilant. *Hyper-vigilant.* Grab 'em by the balls and yank. Well no, it hasn't turned out that way. They'd rather be patted on the back. Lucky for me, yes, but the guilt is excruciating. Homosexual banter rules the room. I'll pat a behind after a perfect test score. Mere performance. Artifice—nothing more. Modeling a rich emotional life.

“Not even a cheek,” says Daniel, pouting in the front of the room. “Hey, it's my first time above 90,” he says to the class. “What's a guy got to do to get a little love around here?”

I'm not surprised that Mrs. Martinez wants to see me in her office. “I'm not going to beat around the bush,” she says. “I think you're having too much fun with the children.” Her cheeks are beige and pink. The foundation is crumbling.

“I'm not sure—”

“Oh no, nothing terribly wrong.” She looks distressed. “I'm not sure you understand how, uh, how impressionable the youngsters are.” She shuffles sheets of paper in front of her and puts on her glasses. “They just might, you know, get the wrong idea.”

“Is there a particular student?”

“Oh, heavens no. Haven’t heard a thing from any children.” She smiles.

“Okay.” I nod. I smell something burning.

Mrs. Martinez takes a sip of her coffee. “The security guard was walking by and—”

“Grandpa?”

“No, no, not Mr. Anaya. He was walking by and—”

“And what?”

“Strange behavior.” She throws up her hands like sprinkling magic dust. “He said he saw strange behavior.” *Yeah, right. I know it’s Margaret.*

“Like what?”

“Just . . . I’m not exactly sure. I thought I should talk with you.”

“About the aforementioned ‘strange behavior,’ I assume.”

“Yes.”

I arch my back like a lawyer. *Hissssssss . . .* “You do know I’m an attorney, right?”

“Well, yes, no need to bring that up. No big deal. Just wanted you to know.”

Her lips part asymmetrically, left side stretching close to her ear. Right half sits still.

“No, no. We’re pleased, very pleased.”

“Thank you.”

“Just remember—‘boys will be boys’ isn’t tolerated around here.” Her lips are large, covered in a nice shade of mauve lipstick.

I’m still in lawyer mode. “There’s this book I read over the summer,” I say.

“*Raising Cain.*”

“Oh, Cain?” *Don’t be snarky with me, missy!*

“Uh-huh. It’s by a couple of psychologists, I think.” She tilts her head and looks at the clock. “It’s about the emotional lives of boys.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is *so*.” I feel my eyes opening wide. “What Margaret calls ‘strange’ is actually sound educational theory.”

“Margaret?”

“Yes.”

“Educational theory?”

“Yeah,” I exclaim. “I know how important your *data-driven* theories are to you.”

Take that, Ghingis!

“Well, yes, I’ll be sure to check that out.” She stands and holds out her hand. “The benchmark exams are coming up, so let’s put our focus there.” She takes my hand in hers. Her hand feels warm. “The last thing we need is a distraction.”

“Right, distraction,” I say on my way out the door. The secretary smiles at me and returns her attention to a pile of Level II forms. How about talking to those teachers, *fool*—the ones sending kids to the office each day like lightening bugs in a jar.

Two days later I receive my first parent complaint. Uh-oh! Better be careful. It seems I didn’t allow a girl to use the bathroom. Well, *duh*, I don’t let anyone use the bathroom. Is it my fault girls have to comb their hair all day? I should have expected this. Perhaps I am more interested in the emotional lives of boys—rather than girls—because I’ve been surrounded by girls my entire life. I lived with my mother and two sisters after my parent’s divorce and have never forgotten my mother’s favorite summer

refrain: *No one needs to eat three meals a day.* At ninety-five pounds, she clearly had never been a teenage boy. She didn't understand me—all 135 pounds of me; in turn, I made no effort to understand her. The same can be said for my two sisters, both of whom were prone to outbursts of tears following haircuts, rejections from cute boys, or nearly anything else. Eventually I gave up.

So here's my second chance—I'm blowing it. Yeah, I've spent much of my time advancing the cause of female achievement, but I don't know who they are. "That's normal," Mika told me last weekend. "Otherwise they'll think you're some great big rapist." *Me? A rapist?* I told Mika they make me nervous. He looked me in the center of my face. "Me, too." The girls rip other girls apart like seagulls attacking bread. *Gorda. Bubble-butt. Bitch. She kissed two boys so far this year? No me digas? Yeah, for reals. Can't even dribble. Pendeja!* Usually the victims are friends, like Ali and Christina, pulling each other's hair outside Ms. Ramos' classroom. I'm tired of it.

I've got myself to blame. My assiduous, though unintended (Okay, intended), focus on the boys has led to a subtle shift in dynamics these first few months of school. I've barely mentioned any girls! Every day Julia taps her fingers, flips a page in her book and carefully crafts saturnine stares around the classroom. When she's done, I swear her eyebrows are arched and shaved in narrow slits. *Really!* Beautiful feminine hands, which had earlier in the year gripped pencils, now stroke hair all period like lobster claws. I've confiscated dozens of compact mirrors and enough lipstick for a burlesque show across the border. *Okay, yes, where I'd met the transvestite. No matter! Mind your business!* Afraid to eat, lost in thought, and at least once covered in vertical scratches on the inside of their wrists, my girls are disintegrating in front of me. It might

have taken me years to understand my sisters, but I don't have as much time with these girls. Back to my books!

This time I scour my home collection for something I'd remembered from one of my old feminist studies classes. Yes, I'm a great big feminist dandy, even if I haven't been acting like it lately. A-ha, there it is: *Reviving Ophelia*. Reviving is a perfect word to describe what needs to happen around my classroom. The author, Dr. Mary Pipher, is a clinical psychologist specializing on the emotional life of young girls, according to the back of the book. I open the cover; not a highlighted word in sight. I begin reading.

Pipher contends that we live in a "look-obsessed," "girl-poisoning" culture. She insists that "girls choose to be socially accepted and split into two selves, one that is authentic and one that is culturally scripted. In public they become who they are supposed to be." *Huh?* What they are supposed to be, she continues, is thin, sexy, and stupid. Faced with the realization that they'll never meet these extremes—even if they consciously reject them—they become "deferential," "self-critical," and "depressed." *Eureka!* That's what I'm beginning to see in class each day, not only from the regulars but the gifted and talented, or GT, girls as well, the stars of my universe. I'd just assumed they were bored.

Piper defines the "look-obsessed" culture as emerging from a male-dominated society obsessed with looks. *Oops!* "Girls feel enormous pressure to be beautiful," she continues, "at the expense of their inner selves." *The horror! The horror!* I'm part of the problem. My revised seating chart has all the prettiest girls in front of the classroom. If the class were a sinking ship, the stern would be the first to sink, weighed down by all the overweight girls I had unwittingly banished to the back of the class. I suck! Worse,

I sometimes find myself glancing at the prettier girls as if watching a preseason football game: awkward, sloppy, and painstakingly tedious, the practice games still have the outline of real football. One day in the future they would hold my attention. *Yes, even me.* Who doesn't like a pretty girl? The girls, like the football players, need time to ripen, and I'm the one who should be providing a refuge from the sexualized, violent, "look-obsessed" culture waiting for them outside the school doors. Have I been doing the same to boys, by favoring the football players? Will I reproduce this dynamic or become a force against it?

Here's the rub: *why are gay men attracted to teaching?* Is it like the Catholic priesthood, attracting men who have sexual propensities they wish to suppress? I doubt it. All I know is that I needed a break from the real world. Maybe they're related. I didn't care about the law. No one from the Foreign Service contacted me. I wanted *out out out out out out*. What I didn't expect is a sensationalist urge to touch the kids. Just the boys. *Call the principal. Alert the mayor. Grab your torches and march. There he is! There he is! Get 'em, Jimbo. Shoot, Marciel.* If I had a boyfriend in my own life, I might not care as much about juvenile fiction and fantasies. Yeah, that's it: to restore personal integrity in a scary world stacked against you. Are we the consummate redeemers? Returning to the scene of the crime to make things right? It doesn't matter that no one ever bothered me—I felt it, nonetheless. I'm not as brave as Alfredo in second period, brave enough to wrap his differences in a scarf around his wrist. I felt it, internally. So now I've gone and created an environment favoring charismatic boys at the expense of other boys and, especially, girls. Do I resist emasculation, as Principal Cerda had suggested?

“What do you think?” I say, dropping *Reviving Ophelia* on the table during our team planning period.

“I’ve heard of that,” Mrs. Bermuda says, rubbing her fingers over the book’s glossy cover. “All the trouble of adolescent girls.”

“Right. I feel like I just don’t get the girls sometimes.” I look at Ms. Ramos. “You know what I mean?”

“Oh I know,” says Mrs. Masterson. “I feel the same way about the boys.”

“And you?” I ask Ms. Ruiz.

She looks up from her papers. “They’re all the same for me. I never have any problems.”

“I’m not saying I have problems. I just, you know, feel all awkward around them.”

“Sounds like a personal problem,” says Ms. Ramos. Mrs. Bermuda taps her pencil on the table. “No, I’m just kidding,” Ms. Ramos says. “I feel the same way sometimes, like they’d rather be doing anything else than math.”

“I can definitely relate to that,” I say. “I’ve forgotten all my math the past ten years.”

“It’s not the math,” she says, taking a sip of her Dr. Pepper. “It’s everything. That one group of girls—you know, Ali and Lauren and Maria—they just look at me like I’m the biggest bitch in the world.”

“Exactly. I take it personally, too. Why do they do that?”

“I’m not saying I take it personally. I’m just saying that it gets annoying.”

“Right.”

“That’s girls,” Mrs. Masterson says. “My two boys were never like that. You have to work through it and move on.”

“I remember how self-conscious I was,” Ms. Ruiz says. “I always wore these baggy clothes and hats. I was a complete mess.”

“Me, too,” says Ms. Ramos.

“You?” I do my best to look at her seductively, jutting my thin lips and running my hand down my chest. I feel ridiculous.

“Oh God, I was a smart fat girl.”

I put the cap back on my highlighter and place it on the table. “For real?”

“Yes,” she says. “I had this crush on my history teacher, Mr. Sabatini.” She brushes hair off her forehead. “He totally ignored me. He only paid attention to the athletic girls.” She exhales loudly, pulls out a small green pack of gum. “Like Monica.”

“That must have sucked.”

“Yeah.” She puts a piece of gum in the back of her cheek. “I bet that sucker would like to get a piece of this now.” She stands up and shakes her butt to the side.

Mrs. Masterson lightly taps her on the ass. “You go, girl.”

“Oh, ladies,” Mrs. Bermuda says. “What would I do without you?” She darts her eyes toward me. “You too, Mr. Girman.”

“Thanks.” I say. “What about you, Clarissa?” I swivel my tall lab chair toward her. “How come the girls like you so much?”

Mrs. Masterson hands Virginia a Diet Coke. “Me?” she says. She looks at the four of us as if we’re the Spanish inquisition.

“The girls are always outside your door.”

“I guess. Well . . . yes, you’re right. It’s easier with girls. I know what they’re thinking. My boys, now that’s a different story.”

“But they’re so—”

“Cute,” Monica says.

“Oh yeah, that’s true,” agrees Mrs. Masterson. She smooths her hair under her headband. “But sometimes it’s like, ‘grow up,’ already. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah,” says Virginia. She lifts her head from her palm.

“Fighting and wrestling and never wanting to read.” Mrs. Masterson stops, giggles. “It’s exasperating.”

“Be men already, will you?” says Monica. She looks directly at me. I know what they mean—the energy, excitement, wrestling matches, missing erasers, lost homework, shoving contests. But that’s what I like about the boys; it’s what I understand.

“I understand girls better,” Mrs. Masterson says. She says it calmly, not a hint of regret in her voice. And I—I realize—understand boys. That’s okay, dammit. Stop worrying. It’s not like I’m justifying something sinister, am I?

Relax, fool! My impressive female role models engage one another before my eyes. I’d best start looking around. Roxy’s at tennis try-outs; Pigtales can’t hit a ball. Those girls need me. Thelma’s been lobbying for my attention all year. Mrs. Bermuda softly grips my upper arm. “You’ll get there,” she says. *Hallelujah!* The revivalists are here in town! The line starts to the left. Single file and don’t forget your dollar. *Oh no, nothing terribly wrong.* Then why do I still feel like an incompetent fool?

CHAPTER 15

I don't make the kids say the pledge. Why should I? *I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America* Too Orwellian for me. I make them stand only so I don't get written up.

"Why do we say God?" Meagan asks one afternoon in seventh period.

"Under God."

"No, in the Texas pledge."

"Indivisible."

"It wasn't there last year."

She's right. "Governor Perry."

"At my old school."

"Perry."

"Who?"

"Our right-wing, closeted rifle-toting governor."

Rolan pretends to fire a rifle.

"Right what?"

I feel a teachable moment swooping me up. "There's a group of people that thinks a state is the same as a religion."

"The Jews," A.J. says.

"Good," I say.

“Oh, I just said that, sir.”

“Fine.” I lower my eyes. “What I mean is that Mexico thought all of Texas should be what?” A.J. looks toward the door. “What religion?”

“Catholic,” says Rolan.

“Exactly.” He bites the thumbnail on his left hand. “What about the Americans who came?” I hand Rolan a tissue. “Were they Catholic?” The class shouts *no*.

“So what happens when you try to force a religion on someone?”

“They get mad,” Michael says.

“And what might they do?”

“Fight.”

I see Tina’s small hand raised in the back of the class. “But aren’t we all Christian?” she asks.

“Well, yes, I suppose—”

“I went to my sister’s play at Edison North last Saturday, and we said a prayer at the beginning.” I’ve never noticed her freckles. “Thanking God and stuff.”

“Maybe a few—”

“We pray after the football games,” says Rolan.

“And at halftime,” says A.J. Michael looks bored. “And Mrs. Bermuda has the Ten Commandments on her wall.”

“Behind her desk,” says Tina.

Prior knowledge. Scaffolding. The kids describe the world they see.

“What’s wrong with God?”

Keep it up!

“Nothing’s wrong with God,” I interrupt. “There’s a danger, though.” Tina lowers her hand and softens the expression on her face. “Majority rule.”

“Democracy,” Rolan says. He leans back in his chair, pleased. His bloated cheeks remind me of a rising balloon.

“Right, Rolan.” I switch my gaze to Michael. But does everyone agree on what’s the right thing to do.” Michael shakes his head. “Are we all the same?”

“We shouldn’t have to say the pledge if we don’t want to,” says Michael. He turns towards Tina. “I’m Mexican.”

“We’re all Mexican,” says Rolan. He looks at me. “Except you,” he whispers. Point taken. The kids get it. Recognize difference. The point of democracy is to protect against the tyranny of the majority. Rolan squeezes his palms together. I’m not sure which side he’s on.

I’m shocked at the girl in taut black shorts reaching into the old bin of tennis rackets. She lifts her head and hands a racket to a boy wearing shorts that hang to his ankles. I recognize the boy from last year, a real troublemaker, who disappeared midway through the year on his way to the alternative school. Roxy smiles and hands the boy two tennis balls.

“Hi, sir.” She stops and looks up at me.

“Yes, yes. Good to see—”

“You remember me, right?”

“Regal Roxanne.”

“Sir?”

“How could I forget?” The boy to her right sucks on a piece of candy. He’s stolen a Jolly Rancher from Coach Rivas’s bag inside the equipment shed. On the second day of try-outs! He says nothing. Language skills are a threat to his self-image. Masculine boys like him, those mesmerized by the gang life, don’t understand how verbal cues can enrich their masculinity. Roxy bites into a candy and follows him onto the courts.

A dusty wind blows up the tennis screens. Fragments of a scream echo behind me like pottery shards. I stand still as a fence post. Someone waits behind me. I itch my left ankle with the bottom of my shoe. No escape: Pigtails is back.

“I’ve been practicing,” she says. She stands still as a watered piñon tree.

“Elizabeth.” I open my arms to offer her a hug. I am limber, lime green, soggy.

“You missed me, sir?”

I feel grass clippings on the back of my neck. “Still trying out, I see.”

“Yep.”

“Well let’s see what you got.” I toss a ball at her. Both ball and racket fall to the floor.

“Oops, sir.”

“Yes, oops.” Behind her, at the far end of the last court, Roxy’s friend hits tennis balls onto the school roof. “Over there, Elizabeth.”

Pigtails runs to the opposite side of the court. A ball hits her in the back.

“Hi,” says Thelma. “I want to try out.”

“Good.” I take my racket and follow Coach Rivas. “Line up,” I shout. The eighth graders dawdle. Roxy leans back against the fence, her friend reaching for her

waist. She notices me across the court and eases up from the fence. The boy shoves her back. Her arms move in protest but I see a smile on her face. Her hooped earrings reflect sunlight. He touches her like he's been there before.

Forehands. Backhands. Volley. Now serve. Balls fly through the air like tiny cannon bombs. The returning eighth-grade starters are not invited until next week. We're left with a group of students who have never held a tennis racket. I love it! They smile like only the innocent, ignorant can: honesty and commitment from breasts and elbows. *How am I doing, sir? Is my wrist right? How can I make the ball go more to the left? The right?* Self-confident and self-directing. Limber. Open to evidence. *How can a ball spin like that?* They need me.

I move Roxy's hand lower on her racket. "Bend the wrist," I say. She hits the ball near the court. The boy swings hard enough to make his face tense. I reposition his feet. "Rhythm matters," I say. He ignores me and swings harder. He misses the ball completely. He reminds me of Michael in seventh period, one year older but no longer content to play the surly child. Now he's the disruptive man. He hugs Roxy during her backhand. Poor boy. I don't want Michael to succumb to the pressure. I'm worried. Roxy looks at me as if she'd like my help.

After practice I wait for the final child to be picked up. One of the football coaches waits outside the boys' locker room. Other coaches surround him. "How's track going?" I ask. Coach Aguata turns his muscular body around. He reminds me of the boys from college: sturdy Mexican gait, hard disposition, enveloping smile. Robust Latin lips.

“Good, good,” says the coach. He does not commit himself to my stare. I yearn for the honesty and commitment I saw on the tennis courts a moment earlier. His tone is distasteful and harsh. He stares at his oversized truck in the parking lot. His smirk fishtails through a mud field. I want a gladiator on a white horse. Other coaches surround Coach Aguata. The circle closes in. I’ve no idea how to penetrate this institution of men—hunters, players, athletes, dealings, *Mexicanos, hombres*. On a good day, I am one of them. In the classroom, each day. I know by the way Rolan stares at me. By the way Michael touches my back. Are we adults like the cacti in the canyon? Sloping downhill. Is that what prevents me from calling Gerry? I notice Coach Aguata’s powerful calves. *Take more chances, Girman*. Why all the zigzagging through quiet brush?

Thank God for college! At least I can disappear in my work. Distinct voices. Differing points of view. We’ve got it all. Juan writes in broken English about a Japanese animation film. Marcus fishes. Deana, of the olive skin, strings together potent verbs. One more of my adjectives ending in *ly* and I might *succinctly* throw myself off a bridge. I write a paper about the disturbing lack of females in my life—only two girl numbers in my phone, not including my mother and sister. My teacher’s comments dazzle me. One hundred sixty-five papers to grade before tomorrow. If I make it through the weekend, I’ll give Deana a call. Hop on a magic carpet and enjoy myself some. What’s all this fuss about the pledge? Time to start speaking up a little with the kids. Who cares about Mrs. Martinez anyway? She’s one of them: the establishment. Like Rolan, I’m not sure on which side I’m on.

CHAPTER 16

Out the door, Daniel. Play with rhyme Pigtales. No use being cooped up. It's time I take Alfredo's advice. Let's play. Maybe I'll give Gerry a call. Put on your sombrero, Carlos. No one likes a crybaby. Pass the card. Erase the board. What did the Apache eat? Rabbit Run! Spell correctly. Consult the group. How do the Cualhitecans survive the harsh aridity? Tie your shoe. Pass the baton. Last question, Team Twilight. Here we go: Which Texas natives carried tiny traveling bags? Think hard. Consult your friends. I can't read your writing. Hurry, Carolina. *Aha!* Jumanos! The sun is shining. Life is but a dream.

Hell, I'm no Ms. Ruiz. Come on in, kids. Time to hang your maps—The Regions of Texas. Map keys are decorated in the shape of Texas's economic resources: cattle, cotton, pecans. Daniel glues a giant cantaloupe over the Mountains and Basins region. He looks back at me with a flat, suspicious grin. "What," he says. "That's what the book has in it." He and Carlos laugh. Daniel glues his poster on top of Thelma's oil well affixed to the east side of her group's Coastal Plains map. "It's too big," he says, turning around and pressing the glue atop Thelma's masterpiece. "This way they can see our cantaloupes." Thelma rolls her eyes.

The remainder of the wall is covered in *purple yellow pink green brown* butcher paper. A gray sheep is covered in cotton balls. Nowhere on the sheep does it mention the corresponding region of Texas. I stare. Carlos emerges from behind me with a

purplemarker and writes *High Plains* under the sheep's eyebrow. A giant blowup Houston Texans helmet swings from the ceiling like a piñata.

On the way back to the classroom, Matt asks what I think. About our map," he says. He spits saliva like a miniature sprinkler. I follow his pointing finger to the wall. I'm impressed. The Soup or Stars display an eleven item list of products manufactured in the North Central Plains. I see "insurance" and "retail." Number nine is *the Mavericks*. Carolina puts the finishing touches on giant gothic letters: *Dallas and Fort Worth*.

I put my arm around Matt on the way back into the classroom. Mrs. Masterson opens her door and leans out. "They're going to write on them," she whispers, closing the door behind her. We're in the hallway. "I'll give it two days." *Scribble scribble scribble*. I squint one eye and fold my arms. She folds her arms like mine. "Probably less."

"No, I don't—"

"Those kids are murder." She unfolds her arms and giggles. She's seen the sheep. I feel like a child. "Do what you want," she says. She fixes her collar and turns back toward her room. First Martinez, now Masterson.

Daniel waits for me on the inside of the door. "Sir," he says. "There's mud on the bottom of the desks." He's right—sloppy sticky mud. I can't learn my lesson. I thought it'd be nice to approximate the Native Texans interplay with the land. *Yeah, right*. "I can wash it off," he says. Oh, hell. What's the point? I've got three more reviews games outside this afternoon.

"It's okay, Daniel."

“Yes, sir.” He snaps a rubber band against his tiny wrist. “Carlos can come with me.” I look toward Thelma for approval. “Sir?” Daniel repeats.

Sit, sit. All’s good. Lots to do. Not enough time. “Why so many missions in San Antonio?”

“Huh?” Daniel stares cross-eyed somewhere in my direction.

“Why not just build one mission?” Daniel wraps his arms in a pretzel. I look toward the right side of the room. “Anyone else?”

Caroline raises her hand. I toss her the hacky-sack. “So the different Indian groups wouldn’t kill each other,” she says. She sticks her tongue out at Matt.

“Good.” She sits with an erect back, on-guard, a canine sniffing for drugs at the border. She throws the ball at Matt, sitting next to her. Bam! Right on the cheek. The boy’s awake. He shakes his head, stunned, like a fly.

“Who lived in stone dwellings?” Matt’s looking at the rest of the class for sympathy. “Which native group made their houses inside the cliffs?”

“The rocks?”

“Rocks.”

Matt wipes the side of his face with the back of his sleeve. “The Zuni,” he says, flicking out his fingers like an exploding star in front of Caroline’s face. He throws the ball behind him. Carlos catches the ball and holds his arm out, bent at the wrist, as if shooting a basket. “Eight,” he says, the number of native groups in Texas before the arrival of the Spanish explorers. He throws the ball toward Alfredo. This week Alfredo’s arms are uncovered. No more scarves. He and Carlos exchange mismatched

grins: Carlos, wide and confident; Alfredo, tilted and slight. Alfredo tosses it over my head, nearly hitting Mrs. Masterson in the face.

“Oh, I didn’t see—”

“No, no, just stopped in,” Mrs. Masterson says. She bends over to pick up the ball. The class laughs. “I’m not, fine, fine, yes . . .” She giggles with the children. “Just came to tell you, oh, yes, there there, uh-huh . . . there it is.” She tosses the ball to Thelma in the second row. “Your sheep is falling down.” She stares out the door.

Well, isn’t this embarrassing? I’ve lost my sheep. I move toward the hallway. The sheep dangles. “Poor thing. I’ll have to be more—”

“Not a problem.” Her freckled face emits an orange hue. “No, no.” She smiles awkwardly, much like Alfredo. I’m not sure who to believe. “Dangerous, you know, the balls.” She raises her voice on “balls” as if she’s speaking in Spanish. What’s so bad about a pair of flying *cojones*?

At the end of the period, Lauren and Brenda arrive to type in Easter requests. For the past week they’ve collected dollars for a charity helping Children with blood diseases. So far they’ve collected eighty dollars. Pay a dollar and your friends get a personalized Easter message. The girls work hard typing requests. Brenda cuts Easter eggs and tiny bunnies from the construction paper behind my desk.

“Then we can print the messages on white paper,” Brenda says. She’s wearing less green eyeliner today. “And glue it.”

“Cupcakes,” Lauren says. “We can attach the message to a cupcake.”

“Yeah.”

“Can we, sir? Can we?” Brenda asks.

Why the hell not.

“My mom makes cupcakes all the time.”

“Mine, too,” says Lauren.

Cupcakes, it is. The girls pledge to bring the cupcakes by Friday.

Later that afternoon, the custodian tells me the Regions of Texas Posters are a fire hazard. “No more than twenty-five percent of the walls can be covered.”

“My last period hasn’t had a chanc—”

“Don’t blame the messenger.” He stands with his hands in his back pocket, facing the wall.

“Twenty-five?”

“Yep.”

“Percent?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So I have to take some down?”

“Sure do.” This man I’ve rarely seen before frowns tight-lipped like a miniwafer from La Reyna bakery. He shifts his weight to the side.

“Right now?”

“Safety,” he says. He stares at Daniel’s giant cantaloupes stabbed like a sphere on Thelma’s Spindletop. He grins. “Maybe after school,” he says. He spits a small seed on the ground. “That’ll give you more time.”

“Thank you. Thank you,” I murmur. “More time to decide.” We shake hands and he returns the same way he came. *Fat chance, fool.* I’ve got tennis practice after school. Got to take down East on Saturday. *Our arch-nemesis, fool.* Then I’m

chaperoning the eighth-grade art trip to San Antonio. Essays to write. Stories to read. Cupcakes to eat.

Friday's here! The cupcakes are gorgeous. Baby blue icing and dots of pink frosting. "They look like eggs," I say.

"Well, duh," says Brenda. She laughs and covers up the cupcakes. It's been a long week—I've eaten lunch in my room so the girls can type the notes, printed seventy-eight schedules to find the recipients' classrooms, and cajoled the girls into delivering the cupcakes quietly. The first batch, delivered during advisory class, goes out without a word. I'm impressed. I see Rolan's face on the other side of the door. He's here to help.

"They need someone to hold the box," he says. I've never seen him this interested.

"Nice of you."

He grins. "They said they'll give me one."

"Now I understand."

"No, sir," he mumbles hoarsely, "I mean it." He's wearing a blue-striped collared shirt I haven't seen before. I write him a pass to help.

Ten minutes into class, Mrs. Martinez enters my room behind Brenda and Lauren. She grips the box of cupcakes tightly like a steering wheel. "I need to see you outside," she says. I'm barely out the door when the massacre begins. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Fundraiser. They're raising—"

“Homemade goods are not allowed in the school,” she says. “That’s against the law.” She purses her lips as if scolding a child.

“We were deliv—”

“That’s enough,” Mrs. Martinez tells the girls. “I’ve had near enough from the two of you.

Brenda raises her voice. “He said we can do it,” she shouts. Lauren looks at me and lowers her head. Ms. Ramos stands outside her door.

“Is that true, Mr. Girman?”

“Yes. Oh yes,” I nod. “The girls spent a lot of time making the messages.” I look at both girls. “It’s for a good cause.” I turn toward Mrs. Martinez, then at the girls.

Mrs. Martinez’ shoulders drop. I think she’s cracking. “And I suppose you’ve filled out the fundraising form?”

“F. . . f. . . orm? Well, ugh, no I wasn’t—”

“All fundraisers need to be approved.”

I’m flummoxed. I rest my thumb under my ear, index finger sideways across my lips. The girls are silent. All eyes stare at me.

“That’s my fault,” I say. “Is there any way I can—”

“No, it’s too . . .” She stops and watches Rolan come toward us. “He’s not supposed to be out of class,” she says. “We sent an e-mail letting you know.” Rolan walks between us and enters my classroom. He’s wearing a different shirt. “Ladies, you can go back to class,” Mrs. Martinez says.

“Can we have our cupcakes?” Brenda asks.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“What about after school?” asks Lauren. Her eyes face the floor.

Mrs. Martinez walks out with an enormous gust of air that moves Brenda’s bangs. “Fine, fine,” she says. “After school.” The principal turns around, box between her arms like she’s on her way to the recycling bin. As she walks down the hallway, I notice Rolan’s shirt hanging over her right elbow. Two days later he’s sent to ISS for stealing a shirt out of someone’s locker. He looked nice in his new shirt—happy, too.

CHAPTER 17

Don't mind if I do! Mandatory monthly in-services don't bother me. Sure, I've accustomed myself to Mrs. Masterson's long discussions about menopause, and on one occasion integrated the term "hot flashes" into my lecture on the Revolutionary War, but I still don't feel part of an intellectual community. Not for history, anyway. After six hours of invigorating discussions on the Lewis and Clarke expedition, however, I'm back in class with something to prove. No more giant posters like a fourth-grader. No, I've got to get on with it. Up the ante. Interpretive biases. Controversial natures. Let me whisper in your ear—*shh*, I'll offer you a piece of myself, fool.

After the bell rings, Christian asks what's wrong with me. "Why do you have that funny smile on your face?" I pat his head and continue passing out cartons of sour milk. I'm convinced that a rigorous study of American History—yes, American—can make a bad world right. I'm preparing the class for my dirty little secret.

Lord knows, I spent hours this weekend preparing for class. My lesson plans are thorough, explicit, and boldly imaginative. I've cut and paste various textbook passages and other sources into integrated worksheets in which the learner, not the teacher, takes control of the learning process. I'm so good, it kills me! My students will understand history in a real-world context, focusing on consistencies and analogies from their own lives to bring the subject alive. I've called it *Living History!* I'll evoke history, not teach it.

“American History is alive,” I declare to my first period class, reaching my arms toward the ceiling. “You have to feel it.” I make a fist with my right hand and quickly press it against my chest. I’m an American soldier. “It’s not about patriotism,” I say, “but passion.” I hold back fake tears and scan the room. Silence. I’m not deterred. “Do not think of me as the great communicator, but the great facilitator.” I clasp my hands together and focus on the right side of the room. “Are you ready to *feel* history?” I say to Thelma. Christina, who wears a Black Sabbath t-shirt today, slides down in her chair. Behind her Christian giggles.

Fine, be that way. I assess the other side of the room. Daniel picks apart his strawberry Pop Tart with precision, depositing the crusted ends on the floor next to him. Someone burps. The enthusiasm never kicks in. Tomorrow, yes. Tomorrow I’ve got something else up my sleeve.

The next morning I arrive in long white shorts and an old man wig borrowed from the theater arts department. “I’m George Washington,” I say. “Perhaps you’ve heard of me.” Students laugh. Daniel whistles from the back of the room. “Does anyone have questions for me?”

“Why are you dressed like that?” Christian asks.

“I’m George Washington.” He stares, his lips slightly parted. “You have to imagine.”

I watch Christian close his eyes. “Imagine what?” he asks.

“That you’re in the same time period as George Washington.”

“Why?” asks Caroline.

“Because I want you to know that history isn’t dead.”

“But George Washington is.”

“True, but—”

“So why are you acting like he’s alive?” Christian says.

“It’s living history,” I say, my hands stretched in the air, palms facing upwards.

“I’m living history. *Living History!*”

“How old are you?” asks Daniel. His hair brushes up in the middle like the Ozark Mountains.

“What?”

“How old are you, sir?”

Pleased, finally, by a real historical inquiry, I answer in the character of George Washington. “Well, let’s see,” I say, chin resting on my hand, “I was born in 1732, so that makes me—”

“No, I mean *you*, how old are *you*, sir?” Oh, Christ! I run my hand through the course grey hair, take a deep breath, and convince myself I’m not a blubbering fool in a bad English accent. I feel sweat trickling down from my wig. I raise my fingers to remove the headgear. I see a hand. *Good ole Christian!* I adjust the wig and return to my eighteenth-century disposition.

“Yes, Christian. Do you have a question?”

He pauses. “Can I use the bathroom, sir?”

My shoulders drop like the blade of a French guillotine. I examine my blue waist coat, run my fingers over the shiny metal buttons. Like the French monarchy, I’ve miscalculated. Big time. “Al-ive,” I shout. “History is alive.” I raise my arms in the air like a champion boxer. Someone laughs in the back. “Good,” I say. “Sound, shape,

texture. This is what history is about.” Black Sabbath appears to be sleeping. A thick web of saliva clings to the side of her face. Behind her, Christian waits with his hand in the air. Good, he gets it now. “Yes, sir.”

Christian bounces up in his chair. “I really have to go,” he says, his hand disappearing under the desk. “Really, really bad.” His brown eyes look distressed.

“Fine.” I toss my *Living History!* binder under my podium. “Go ahead.” Waste of a weekend. I take off my wig. Where the hell does inspiration come from? Christian interrupts me before I have time to consider the question. “Where’s the pass, sir?”

I reach into my back pocket. “Here.” I hand him the small felt pouch I had bought in an indigenous Peruvian village. “Take this too.” I hand him my large coffee mug. “Fill me up with some water while you’re out there.”

“You got it.” His smile relaxes me. The classroom no longer feels like it’s closing in around me. I take off the heavy coat I’d bought from the Army surplus store and lay it across my desk. I admire my wooden planks stretched across the front of the desk; inspiration, I’m guessing, comes from within. I stare at the row of unused training binders stacked behind my desk. *Where’s my water?*

My serenity is interrupted by a voice outside my door. “Go ahead, *m’ijo*,” says the voice. “It’s okay.” I look through the glass and see Christian’s sheepish expression, his tiny face partially hidden by someone’s hips.

“Mr. Girman,” says a man as the door opens. “We need to talk.”

Mr. Palacios holds my mug in his hand and looks at me with giant eyes. “No mugs are allowed in school.” He focuses on my long white shorts. “Proper restroom passes must be used at all times.”

“I tried to tell—” Christian says.

“No, no, son,” Mr. Palacios interrupts. “It’s not your fault.” He pats Christian on the shoulders and rubs his red hair. Christian lowers his head and looks at me from the corner of his eyes like a Siamese cat. If I am George Washington, Christian has stepped into the role of Pocahontas, astutely balancing his alliances for the greatest possible gain. “You were just doing what you were told,” says the eighth-grade principal. “You did nothing wrong.” Christian rubs his head against the back of Mr. Palacios’s hand. I half-expect him to purr.

Mr. Palacios takes a giant step toward the door. “Can I see you outside?” he says. He releases Christian’s head and shoos him back to his desk with a swift pat on the behind. Christian glides in front of me toward his seat, grinning the entire way as if he’d just hustled my last twenty dollars.

Politically, I lean to the left. I accept Alfredo and Carlos’ budding relationship (or create it myself, perhaps), and support the rights of any other individual or group—women, non-white minorities, catamites, Catholics—who have traditionally faced discrimination in our much-applauded land of the free. Really, what choice does a gay man have? Who’s to say if I allow Rolan, Michael, and Daniel to get away with so much because I respect their *silent defiant villain vato* voices or because I’m certain they’ll grow up to be the type of men I love. I expect a man to be defiant. Beggars can’t be choosers. Lucky for me, history is one of the only subjects at the middle school level in which a teacher’s political philosophy is embedded within daily instruction. Helen Keller. Malcolm X.

Alexander the Great. Cesar Chavez. Jane Addams and the Hull House. The list is exhaustive.

Those on the right insist that history instruction should focus on the lives of great historical figures. I call this group the “George Washington” contingency. In addition to famous historical figures like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, this group emphasizes the memorization of key dates, famous battles, and precise exploration of historical documents. These historians might spend two weeks analyzing the banal Articles of Confederation, but only twenty minutes examining Native American cultures wiped out by European diseases.

The left, on the other hand, is interested in a holistic approach to history. Hey, that’s me: postmodernist, poststructuralist, the voice of National Public Radio. This side emphasizes the inconsistencies and paradoxes of traditional history instruction; addresses overlooked historical figures; seeks out written testimonies of how important generals might have felt during key battles; and ignores precise dates in favor of examining the order of events in a larger causal sequence. I call this group the “Pocahontas” contingency, named for the daughter of Chief Emperor Powhatan, who helped the early Jamestown settlers survive. Those on the right would never know the name of Pocahontas’s tribe (Powhatan), nor would they be concerned that Matoaka, not Pocahontas, was the child’s formal name. Her father, the chief emperor, was also known as Wahunsunacock, which the wittier students in my GT class shorten to Emperor Sun Cock.

The state organization in charge of assessing history standards embraces the “George Washington” model without reserve. Everything else, according to the

organization's spokeswoman Sylvia Broadsmith, is merely a garnish. "The meat and potatoes of American history," she explains at a recent state conference, "are presidents, wars, and historical documents." She's wearing a dress so long I can't see her ankles. I scan my copy of the state-mandated Texas and American History objectives. The objectives are dominated, as Sylvia explains, with fact-based assessment of the American and Texas Revolution, The U.S. Constitution and its Texas counterpart, and several lengthy sections about Texas's roll in the U.S. Civil War. Slavery is not mentioned.

I raise my hand. "Yes," she says, pointing in my direction. "What can I do for you?" *Stupid me.*

"I was reviewing your standards here," I say, holding the list in the air. "With so many of them, I was wondering if there's time to go over anything else?"

She brushes back her hair with a swift jerk of her neck. Then the glasses come off. "These are very thorough standards," she says. She smiles big enough to sell me a pair of conch-shaped earrings on the Home Shopping Network. "What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know, ma'am. Maybe a few things about the *Tejano* influence in early Texas." I close my lips. "Or the free blacks who helped settle East Texas."

"Please," she says. "Call me Sylvia." She replaces her glasses and slowly meanders to my table. "I'm fairly certain there are a couple of paragraphs, in your *textbook*, on the Mexican influence in Texas." She raises her head and looks at the other participants at my table. "Am I right?" Several women nod their heads. Sylvia smiles, gracefully as a horse's mane, and turns toward the podium.

“I don’t know,” I say. I wait for her to turn around. “I don’t know if a few paragraphs are enough.”

She fingers a small microphone on her left breast. *Oh, God—a Stepford Wife.*

“Where are you from?” she asks.

“Edison.”

“Oh, District One.” A half-moon smile sticks to her face. “How long have you been teaching?”

“Almost two years.” I hear laughter behind me.

Sylvia’s lips part like a pretzel ring. She places both hands on her podium. “I understand your concern.” She brushes her cheek. “Teaching so close to the border.” Her smile softens. “But we have to follow federal standards. You know, the meat and potatoes.”

I look stupid, don’t I?

“Yes, yes, of course. But I should tell you,” I say, crouching low as if ducking a fastball, “that our school serves quesadillas on Friday.”

She picks up a large binder, which appears to be covered in stars. “I’m sorry?”

“No, it’s just that you said ‘meat and potatoes.’” I sip water from the plastic cup in front of me. “We have tamales sometimes and the quesadillas—”

“Excuse me?”

“Yes?”

“I think you missed my point,” she says, dumping the large binder on the podium and walking toward my table. “I’m perfectly aware that you people down there eat Mexican food.” Her firm tone of voice belies the smile plastered on her face. I notice a

layer of orange make-up smeared across her cheeks. “What I mean is that all this stuff about the American Indians and slave narratives are great, but—”

“You mean it’s great, like parsley?”

“Exactly. I think that analogy works.” She smiles narrowly, coquettishly, revealing small lips. “We want to give our students a well-rounded, balanced approach to history.” Agreement from the crowd. “But we must not forget we’re dealing with middle school students.” She puts her hand on my shoulder. The women at my table clap their hands quietly together.

I look up at her. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I think you’ll understand what I mean,” she says, “after you’ve taught a few more years.” She squeezes my shoulders and examines the roomful of experienced teachers as if they share some great secret. I write “Clit!” in large print across my notebook and show it to my new friend Carla across the table.

One of Sylvia’s helpers drops six giant patriotic binders on the table in front of us. “Here it is,” Sylvia says from the stage. “Everything you need to successfully complete the objectives and help your students to master history.” I see stars on the front of my binder. The stars are part of a giant hologram containing the American flag. The complementary image is a tank appearing to demolish a small village. *Okay, fine, I’m exaggerating.* The stars turn into a kitschy Statute of Liberty. Cue my cute salute!

Hey, I’m no asshole. I read the packet and it’s not so bad. All I have to do is write Kings James and King George a few times, stretch cotton balls for hair and figure out what each one has to do with the thirteen colonies. I’ll make Sylvia proud. “Just the facts,” I tell fifth period. Melissa colors in the final category on the *Jeopardy?* board I’ve

constructed out of butcher paper to help the students memorize important historical facts. Hey, I might even gain an understanding of my own place in history's endless cycle. I'm an overeducated American white male—the very group under attack from the leftists to whom I claim allegiance. How much longer until I develop a voice of my own?

The opening exercise requires the students to read the British Bill of Rights, the precursor to the American Bill of Rights. I start with fifth period because the girls are smart. Jesse reads aloud: “And they do claim, demand and insist upon all and singular the premises as their undoubted rights and liberties.” Jesse stops, looks at me. I nod my head—continue. “That no declarations, judgments, doings or proceedings to the prejudice of the people in any of the said premises ought in any wise to be drawn hereafter into consequence or example.” She stops reading and look forward at Meagan. Meagan dips her head under the desk and darts her eyes toward her knees. Jesse lingers on each word. “To which demand of their rights they are particularly encouraged by the declaration of his Highness the prince of Orange.” Meagan mouths the word orange. “As being the only means for obtaining a full redress and remedy therein.” Jesse pauses. *Stop the insanity!*

“Excellent,” I say. “Excellent.” I examine the room. “Who wants to read next? Does anyone want to continue?” No one makes eye contact with me. “Well, okay, maybe I should continue reading.” I place my glasses on the tips of my nose like my eighth-grade English teacher. “Let's skip to the meat and potatoes, shall we?”

I turn a few pages in my binder: “[A]ncient and indubitable rights and liberties of the people of this kingdom, and so shall be esteemed, allowed, adjudged, deemed and taken to be; and that all and every the particulars aforesaid shall be firmly and strictly

holden and observed as they are expressed in the said declaration.” I take a deep breath. Half the class sleeps. I’ve bored my GT class to death. Miranda, pressing the side of her scissors toward her wrist in mock exaggeration, looks poised to end her tragic hair day. Even I’m bored. I close my giant binder and, in an unprecedented move, toss it in the trash. Those students who have not fallen asleep erupt in a giant cheer, causing Miranda, thankfully, to drop her scissors. “Enough” I say, moving in front of my podium in an exaggerated display of excitement. “I can’t take it anymore.” *The hell with Sylvia.*

I commence by explaining that indigenous women throughout the Americas fell victim to Spanish and English colonists’ annihilationist instincts. “Pocahontas,” I say “was not exactly thrilled to be John Smith’s, uh . . . how shall I put it? *Friend.*” I make eye contact with Ricardo.

“Don’t worry,” he says.

“We get it.” Meagan nods.

I tell them how Holland bought Manhattan Island from the Canarsee tribe for twenty-four dollars worth of beads. “Early American wealth,” I say, writing a dollar sign on the board, “was built on the backs of Indian and slave labor.” The Boston Tea Party was far from inevitable given that the early American colonists paid few, if any, taxes. I imagine the horror stretched across Sylvia’s face. By the end of fifth period, my class knows that our first four presidents regularly slept with slave women and that Benjamin Franklin was anti-Semitic, and a drunk. Some might call it revisionist history; I call it leveling the playing field.

Meagan's mom calls me a few weeks later. It appears, she says, Meagan scored poorly on the second-semester district benchmark exam. She's not the only one. Only fifteen percent were able to identify the main battles of the American Revolution.

"I forgot all the names," Meagan tells me. "And all that boring stuff about the taxes."

"Tariffs?"

"Uh-huh, the import taxes in Texas."

I feel like a failure. Everyone knows Meagan absorbs information like a sponge.

"All I kept thinking about," she says, the side of her face tilted softly toward the floor, "was that letter from the soldier."

"Yes, the letter."

"Remember? The one that said to kiss their children for him?" I place my hands in my pocket. "He died right after he wrote it to his wife." I inch my finger around the top of my eye. "I didn't know how sad things were for the soldiers."

"Well, yes, the sadness—"

"For both sides," she says. She leans forward on her toes. "For all the soldiers."

Oh, dear. I look into her soft eyes. "Of course I remember." I put my arm around her shoulder, then in the center of her back. I turn a quick half-circle. She moves in closer. "How could I forget?"

She nudges her shoulder against my chest. "Why can't they test us on *that* one day?" I shake my head; we part as if ending a cheer. One last look at her chestnut-colored eyes convinces me that part of that soldier's wife is buried deep inside.

CHAPTER 18

Panther tennis rules. Two years and still undefeated. Our final match against undefeated East Middle School energizes the children. “Finally a team that doesn’t suck,” says Ricky. He bounces a rock off his racket. We unload the bus to expressions of disgust from our opponents. “They don’t even have air conditioning,” yells one of their players in a purple collared shirt. A group of tan, purple-clad youngsters carrying expensive rackets laughs with her. Our team wears faded white shirts.

“Snobs,” Rachel hollers across the courts, clutching her new Adidas racket bag. Half our team examines the tennis complex as if they’d landed on the moon.

“Look,” Ricky said, clutching my shirt. “They have ten courts.” He points a long distance away. “See? There’s one, and two, and three, and—”

“Yes, I see.”

“Four, and five.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Down there,” he points. “Another five.”

“Yes, yes.”

He takes off his hat. “That’s more courts than I’ve ever seen.”

I shake my head and hand him the enormous yellow drinking container. “Try to look like you know what you’re doing.” He hoists the container over his head. “It’s bad enough they make fun of us.”

“Don’t worry, sir. We’re going to kick their butts.” *My, my.* His confidence is appalling; he rarely serves the ball inside the court. Or maybe I mean *inspiring*. He’s spent most of the year as our ad hoc team manager. “I hear they have an ice machine.” I smooth back my hair and prepare for a long afternoon.

We start strong. Nathan beats a boy in a flashy headband and matching armbands.

“He kept looking at me all weird and stuff,” says Nathan. “All gay.”

I sip the cold bottle of Gatorade I’d stashed in my personal cooler. “That’s tennis,” I say. “You might as well get used to it.” *Another lost opportunity.* Nathan swipes at my Gatorade. “Nice try.”

“Coach Rivas is looking for you,” he says. He leans down to tie his grey shoes. “She needs a tiebreaker.”

“A tiebreaker?”

“Uh-huh.” He points to the court next to us. “Over there.” Coach Rivas approaches. Nathan smiles, presents his tiny teeth. “Can I have your Gatorade *now*?”

“Coach Girman!”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Get your ass out there.” She points toward a court on the eight-grade side of the clubhouse. “Court three.”

I arrive to find East’s coach already positioned on the far side of the net. “I’ve got it,” he says. I turn around toward Coach Rivas. She watches us.

I turn toward the other coach. “I’ll just stay here,” I say. He’s dressed in the same outfit as his players, including the headband.

“I’m Coach Gonzales,” he says, extending his head.

“Coach Girman.”

“Yes, I remember you from last year.” I’m embarrassed by my long basketball shorts and Manu Ginobili jersey. “Ever done a tiebreaker?” he says.

“Of course.” He twists his lips to the side. “Many.”

“First one to seven wins,” he says to the players.

“By two.”

“Right, by two.”

Monica, our top player, picks a scab on her knee and walks back to the service line. “By two,” I echo in her direction.

“Let’s go,” says Coach Gonzalez. Sweat drips under his headband.

Good points. Yes yes. Score tied at four. Monica serves an ace nearly a foot inside the center line. Her opponent walks to the back fence to retrieve the balls for her own serve. “*Dále*,” I shout. Monica smiles.

A loud scream interrupts our dialogue. “Out,” hollers Coach Gonzalez, screeching as if he’s calling lines at the French Open. Monica looks at me. Together we turn toward the coach. His eyes remain transfixed on the imaginary spot where he saw the ball land. I shrug my shoulders because I’m not sure what else to do. *Anyone can make a mistake.*

Monica loses the next two points. She finally unleashes an angry forehand down the line, her best shot. Her opponent reaches out in a valiant attempt to return the ball. The ball barely bounces over to Monica’s side of the net, several feet outside the court. *Take that, Gonzalez!* Monica stops running and breaths an audible sigh of relief.

“Good match, girls,” says Coach Gonzalez. He walks toward Monica’s side of the net. “That was great.” He places one hand on Monica’s shoulder and shakes her hand with the other. Monica’s hand sticks out like an iron statute in the middle of Prague. Coach Gonzalez comes toward me with an outstretched hand. I shake his hand. *What else can I do?*

I quickly come to my senses. “But sir,” I say, letting go of his hand. “I think the score is tied at six.” I look at Monica. “Right?” A tear slides down her cheek.

On his way off the court, Coach Gonzalez says something to Monica about never giving up on a ball. “You have to keep running,” he says. “You never know when—”

“When someone is going to *lie* about the call,” I say under my breath. I should have spoken louder, sooner, but here I am standing in the middle of the court with a dumb look on my face. I slowly move to the other side of the court to congratulate Monica’s opponent. Monica cries and drags her racket behind her off the court. She borrows a phone and disappears. Her disappointment is obvious—not at losing, but at me.

I needn’t worry. Our seventh-grade team ties it up. The boys’ matches complete, the championship hinges on girls’ singles. The only girl remaining, however, is Pigtales. Yes, Elizabeth! I’d promised her she would play some time this season. “She hasn’t made any other sports,” said her mother over the phone early in the season. “It would mean so much to us if she could play.” I remained silent. “To me,” she said.

Okay, fine—what the hell? Then I see East’s number five player warming up on an eighth-grade court. We’d been tricked. Coach Gonzalez had moved their best player

down to number five in the unlikely event of a tie. *Bastard!* He flashes me a cool smile and adjusts a visor he's placed over his purple headband.

Coach Rivas grumbles beside me. "We could play Vera," she says.

"Vera? Vera *Palacios*?" The most gifted athlete in the school, Vera had quit the team because our practices conflicted with track practice.

"Yes, Vera."

"But I thought—"

"Her mom teaches math here," Coach Rivas says. "Vera goes to our school because our track team is the best." She points to a far-off court where Vera practices with her father.

"I don't know if that's a good—"

"We can ask."

I glance toward Pigtails. She's putting on her wristbands and stretching her legs.

"Sure coach."

"Can't hurt to ask," she says.

"Nope." I examine Pigtails' expectant face. She sees me and approaches.

"She looks good, coach." I carefully consider my response. To my side I see Vera running, racket in hand, onto the court.

I turn Pigtails in the opposite direction. "There's been a change in plans," I say. Her eyes narrow.

"That's okay, coach." The softness under her eyes puffs out like an empanada. "I understand."

Vera wins a close match and hoists the trophy over her head along with the other members of the seventh-grade team. Coach Gonzalez throws a tennis ball in an empty field. Pigtails is not around to celebrate. But I can't worry now—the eighth graders are nearing the end.

Like the seventh-grade matches, the eighth-grade competition continues in a fierce battle. One match is disqualified because of excessive cheating on both sides. As a result, the competition ends in a tie, which had not happened in a district match, I learned, in nearly two years. We agree on a mixed-doubles match to settle the tie. Word spreads quickly through the school's practice facility.

Each school must choose a boy and a girl who haven't played so far. Coach Rivas and I examine our choices. *Pathetic*. Our best remaining player, Carlos, had broken his glasses and went home early. That leaves Sammy, a nice boy, large like an *oso*, who serves the ball well and limps around the court. It'll do. We can't find Inez or Luisa; rumor is, they're inside watching a boys' basketball game. No matter. "What about Pigtails?" I ask Coach Rivas. I point at the young girl, who'd removed her team shirt and wears a black sweater

"Pigtails?" She snorts a guttural laughter.

"Someone find Luisa," she shouts. "She spins around the sidewalk like my first day as a teacher.

I ask Pigtails if she is ready to play.

"But coach," she says. "My parents are on the way already."

"We need you."

"But I thought we already won."

“This is *eighth* grade,” I say. “We need you for an eighth-grade tiebreaker match.”

She hunches her shoulder. “I’m in seventh.”

“I know, but—”

“I can’t.”

“You can play up a grade.”

She looks over my shoulder. “But they’re too good.”

I turn around and notice Coach Rivas approaching. “Is she going to play?” I see Pigtales’ Mom approaching.

Pigtales sees her mother. “I’m in.” She sits up and removes her black sweater. “I won’t let you down.” She runs to her mother.

The match, *no surprise*, is pathetic. I am surprised, however, that Pigtales can finally hit a backhand over the net. She falls over twice, and is hit in the head by one of Sammy’s errant serves. Both of them laugh, as do their opponents. She does not give up. Neither side keeps score correctly. We wait. Ricky sends photos of the action to various friends. “Look,” he says. “The ball went in *el canal*.” As I fear, the score ends up tied at seven.

I arrive on court before Coach Gonzalez, determined to take control of the tiebreaker. By the time he approaches the net, I’ve already issued instructions to all four players. I wipe sweat from Sammy’s forehead. “Good luck,” I say. I make eye contact with Pigtales. I’m not sure which one of us is more nervous.

The points are grueling. I fear Sammy might choke on his own saliva. His shirt is covered in sweat. Finally, leading six points to five, we arrive at match point. Pigtales

serves to her male opponent's backhand, as I'd instructed, but instead of returning it crosscourt, he launches a backhand down the line nearly striking me in the head. Pigtales moves across the court, but can't reach the ball. The ball lands on the outside doubles line and skids into the back fence. "Nice shot," mouths Coach Gonzalez to his player. Pigtales looks at me, disappointment in her eyes, and leans to the side in exhaustion. The boy who hit the ball focuses on me, waiting for the call—he hadn't seen the ball land! His partner at the net doesn't move. Even Sammy stares. Coach Gonzalez is suspended in a half-squat at the opposite side of the net.

Pigtales' mother stares at me from outside the fence. What to do? I think this is called a seminal moment. I calmly raise my left index finger in the air as if testing the direction of the wind. "Out," I say, avoiding Coach Gonzalez's eyes. Pigtales launches her racket into the air. She wraps her arms around Sammy's sweaty body. Screams from the bleachers. Whistles from purple-clad spectators. I walk the length of the net.

"Nice match," I say to Coach Gonzalez. He refuses to shake my hand. *Ah, piss!* The look of joy on Pigtales' face is worth a thousand bad calls. The girl gives me a hug, as does her mother when I approach her in the small set of bleachers. Tears gather in her father's eyes. "You don't know what this means to us," he says. Perhaps I don't. I join our teams' chorus of "East Sucks" on the bus ride back to school. Dishonesty has never felt so good.

CHAPTER 19

“I received a call,” says Principal Cerda. He’s replaced the candy corn. “You have to understand,” he says. “The system works well if we all play our parts.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Rules are rules.”

“Of course.”

“We all like to win.” He opens a folder on his desk. “Your test scores are low.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sometimes you just have to go along. Save your skepticism. I was young, once.”

I imagine him a light-spirited twelve-year-old boy. He walks his horse across a ranch. “I know, sir.”

“You had the right idea,” he says. “With your room.” I nod. “Surround the kids with beauty. Sedate them. Got to teach the kids how to control themselves. Get along.”

“Right,” I mumble.

“Poverty does that,” he says. I notice the deep wrinkles on his face. “The Mexicans.” His dark face is leathery, ragged, a canvas on which the Mexican spirit predominates. I feel close to him. “Be a role model, but don’t go too far.”

“Sir?”

“Out is out,” he says, large teeth smiling, stained the color of cheap rattan. “In is in.”

“Are you talking about the tennis match?” I rise up in my chair.

“In a manner of speaking, I suppose.” He stands. “Just be sure you don’t get yourself in trouble.” We shake. I leave as confused as when I’d entered.

In class Rolan senses my mood. He says nothing and stares at the middle of my body. I sit myself on the desk next to his. “You okay, sir?”

I lean against my knee. “I suppose.”

“Michael’s gone,” he says. “Tagging the restroom.” He throws me the deuce, two fingers opened sideways like scissors. I stare at the ceiling. “Wasn’t me,” he says. “I was keeping guard.” Maribel raises her arm.

“Why do people do that?” she asks.

“So people know who we are,” says Rolan. He looks at me as he says it.

“You’re Rolan,” I say.

“So they don’t mess with us,” he says. He smiles on a slant. I’ve heard he recently joined the TCBY gang, the town’s most violent criminal gang. I’ve noticed, too, he cuts his hair more often. Wears nicer shirts. He never stole the shirt from that other boys’ locker. He hangs out with Daniel more. Since football season ended, both boys have been suspended several times. For what, who knows?

“Boys like you,” I say, facing my body toward Rolan, “have the potential for great things.” He looks up at me. “The challenge is how to channel it.” I stand and rub the top of Rolan’s head. “Nice looking.” I press my hand against his bicep. Meagan

giggles. Rolan flexes. “Football player.” He flexes his chest. “Dumb as a rock.” I flick the side of his head. He settles back to a more comfortable position. “Sometimes people tell you things you don’t want to hear,” I say. Rolan lifts his head. “It’s your job to respond the best way you can.”

“Yes, sir!” He punches his open palm. “Fight ‘em.” He worries me. Is Mr. Cerda correct?

Later that week my teaching manuscript is rejected. “You don’t matter,” writes the editor. “The reader wants to know about the *kids*.” I reread the lines. “Readers want actual events,” the note continues. “Not something going on in your head.” I raise my head, stare in front of me. “If you must, find something substantive from your own life.”

A poetry teacher in Washington DC once explained to me that images are everything. Poems are as amorphous as dreams. *Fine!* I’ll aim for poetic sensibility in subsequent versions. That night I dream.

In my dream I hear a knock on my front door, a frantic rapping, which wakes me out of bed. I put on a shirt and answer the door. Rolan stands in front of me.

“I have to come in,” he says. I’m surprised at the certitude in his voice; he usually speaks to me in a quiet, deflected tone. His face is red and flustered, as I’ve seen after one of his fights. I look beyond him and hear a commotion. I do not see anyone outside, but the trees sway violently back and forth. I hear muffled voices. Rolan again asks to come in, this time lowering his head and switching to a voice I recognize. “Sir, I have to. Please.”

I grab the top of his arm and pull him inside. He smells like bacon. “Your hair’s all wet,” I say, removing my hand from his greasy hair.

He backs away from me. “I was running, sir.” His grey shirt is torn, his pants sagging.

“Stay here,” I say, pointing toward the couch. “You’ll be safe right here.” Rolan sits down, and I return to the door. I look out the peep hole and see a group of boys waiting in my front yard. Several men in their early twenties are waiting by the street. I am terrified. One of them has a shovel. Another has knocked down the mailbox and smashes it with a baseball bat. I hear a sound coming from the kitchen. Rolan rises from the couch and looks out the front window. His movements are jerky, full of adrenalin. I hear the noise again. “Shhh, be quiet,” I yell at Rolan. He looks at me and relaxes his shoulders. I hear it again: the telephone. I run to the kitchen and answer the phone. It is Mrs. Martinez.

“I understand Rolan Villanueva is at your house,” she says.

“What?”

“At your house,” she repeats. “A student.”

I look at Rolan, who has risen from the couch. He wants to fight the boys outside my door. “On the couch,” I scream. “Please,” I repeat in a lighter tone of voice.

“Mr. Girman,” continues Mrs. Martinez. “This is not acceptable.”

“But ma’am—”

“Unacceptable.”

I look at Rolan on the couch. He sleeps peacefully on the couch, snoring slightly. “I know,” I say into the phone. “I know.” I hang up the phone and call Rolan’s parents. I tell them their son is safe on my couch.

“*Bueno*,” says his mom.

“Do you want him to stay here?”

“*Pues*, if you want to.”

“These boys are outside and—”

“Fine. Keep him.” Rolan’s eyes briefly open. “You can bring him back tomorrow.” We make eye contact.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I hang up the phone. I move to the couch and sit next to Rolan. I rub my hand over his wet hair. I see a faint smile forming on his lips like a rainbow. I lift his head and place a pillow beneath him. The noise outside rises. A violent wind whips at the window above the couch.

The phone rings—this time it’s the principal. “That Rolan is a troublemaker,” he insists. “Don’t get yourself into trouble.” He is speaking to me as if he were my father, calling upon his own experiences to correct my naivety. Maybe he’s right. I look outside and notice that the commotion has died down. Only a few boys remain. I recognize one of the boys from the eighth-grade hallway. I awaken Rolan; I will ask him to leave.

But I am powerless against his light breath. I will not force him out. I hear the principal’s admonition: *you are getting too close*. “Wake up,” I say. He pretends to sleep. I nudge the top of his arm. “Get up.” He opens his eyes, as if he’d been sleeping for hours, and stumbles towards the bedroom. He slides under the covers and rolls to one

side, his thick hair spreading across my pillow. I take a dining room chair from the kitchen table and place it next to my bed. *Nothing will harm that boy tonight.* I settle into the chair, one leg stretched on the bed beside me, and look after him until daybreak. I will keep him safe, if only for one night.

When I awake from my dream, I'm surprised to find myself alone in bed. I reach for the pillow across the bed; it is warm and wet. I place the pillow across my chest and close my eyes. Sometime during the night I had made a choice—despite the friendly admonitions of friends, co-workers, and thick binders—to love. I'm the adult, here. The more I care for my students, the more I'm exasperated by them. That's why it feels good to make fun of them sometimes. *So sue me!* It doesn't mean I don't love them.

My real fear, as my dream about Rolan suggests, is that I love them too much, a predicament as unexpected as a bacon sandwich in downtown Tehran. That editor was right: something's missing from my own life. I'm allowed to dream, though. Aren't I?

CHAPTER 20

The year rushes to its end. I'm caught in a whirlwind. Nothing I say can and will be used against me. I'm bruised and battered, questioned around every corner. "If you get suspended for the last day," I tell Rolan, "I'll kick your ass."

Daniel runs his hand over Rolan's hair. "Hear that—you can't get on Palacios' bad side anymore."

"I'm not scared." I stand over Rolan and stare. He looks up at me. "I'm not."

"No one said you were," I say. "But you've been suspended twice this month." His folder drops on the floor. I lean with him to pick it up. "It's important to me," I say.

He stands, folder hanging from his fingers. "Me, too." Beneath his eyelashes an unknown world ripens. His stare lingers patiently. "Are you teaching summer school?" he asks.

"I'll be *in* school," I say. We smile at each other, the two of us standing close atop a rug from Southern Mexico outside my door.

"Can I have one of your masks?" He looks at some cheap masks I've hung in the hallway. What the world must be like through his eyes. *Shh, listen closely.*

Summer School. *A-hem!* South Texas Literature. Getting to know the region where I reside. The professor, a pierced hippy of the Jack Kerouac mold, encourages us to resist the dominant dialogue. He says Mexican-Americans have been ignored in our own home

region. He doesn't say we, but "you" because he's white as Wonder Bread. "The fact is," he tells us the first day, "I've been trying to hand this off to a Mexican professor for years." I'm glad no one's taken it. He looks as defiant as I feel. Or perhaps my defiance has passed. Perhaps I'm happy.

This week we read Rolando Hinojosa's award-winning *Estampas del Valle*. The book, set here in the Rio Grande Valley, won the 1972 *Premio Quinto Sol*. The first three sketches, or *estampas*, emphasize relationships. They are hilarious. Each are titled after specific characters—*Braulio Tapia*, *Tere Noriega*, and *Roque Malacara*, respectively. Other sketches range from a Don Victor's notes in the military zone of Papatla, Veracruz (*Death Once Again*); Jehú's initiation into the art of circus performance (*Learning the Profession*); a short description of a whore named Fira (*Fira the Blonde*); and an amusing preliminary note: "These sketches are like Mencho Saldana's disheveled hair: short, long, and smeared with that human grease that joins and separates it without anyone's permission" *Joined and separated without anyone's permission*. That's the way learning ought to be, like my life: eschewing a linear, complete text in favor of partial insight. *He's got me!* His sketches resemble my new region, where I've chosen to have chosen to live, to learn, to teach, to coach, and hopefully, to love. *I love literature!* I wish I could show my students this, from Hinojosa's book:

"C'mon you sonavabitchin' tire! Aw, fuck!"

"Luck?"

"I said fuck, not luck."

“Yeah, I know, but its rotten luck we’re seven miles from Ederton.”

[Edison]

“That’s fuckin’ luck, you’re right. Jack her up a little more. Be careful, Jehú, that the jack doesn’t slip out from under there and half drown you with muck.”

“No sweat, don Víctor. You’re the one that should be watching out.”

“Ah, ah, ah ahhhhhh—C’mon, you bitch . . . There . . . Hand me that spare.”

Whew, what a mouthful! That’s the language of their lives. As a substitute for engaging with the world around me, however, I enroll in a travel writing course. I’ve been traveling my entire life. *Gym. Read. Travel: Body. Mind. Soul.* Instead of meeting the virile Jehú—and putting to an end my silly dreams of Rolan—I head for the Mayan Coast of Belize to write for my local newspaper. Mika declines my offer. I spend two weeks in Belize and I’m back at school.

“Here’s an article,” I tell my new students. “Next week we’ll start our travel writing.” I feel great. I project a portion of the article from the newspaper on the screen.

The visitor from the Rio Grande Valley should feel right at home with San Pedro’s blend of African, Mayan, mestizo, and European descendants.

The tourist is likely to find at least one segment of the local population sharing similar features. Two small boys playing with puppies along the beach could have been my tan nephews after a long summer in the sun.

Likewise, most inhabitants speak English as their first language, with Spanish and local English-Creole a close second.

“What’s *mestizo*?” Becky asks.

“A mixture.”

She fiddles with her earring. “A mixture of what?”

“People.” Her face remains still. “Languages. Ideas. Cultures.”

Someone pops a bubble in the back of the room. “Mexican-American,” says the boy, tall and skinny with thick glasses. “Like those boys in the photo.”

“Good example.”

“We’re going to start a timeline.”

“Of what?” Jarred asks in the front.

“So we can map the flow of history.”

I show them my travel log from my Belize story:

Tuesday, August 12, 11:00 a.m.—Cross the border into Belize. Told that our rental car from Playa del Carmen is not allowed to cross, but permission granted by a large, muscular man in a crisp white uniform.

12:30 p.m.—Have first beers of the day at a small cantina next to the airstrip

1:00 p.m.—Board Tropic Air flight to San Pedro. Meet Dean and Rocio.

1:20 p.m.—Arrive on San Pedro

2:00 p.m.—Wander through San Pedro and find Mayan Princess hotel.

Angie at the front desk gives us a kick-ass, offseason rate of \$75.00 U.S.

“It says ‘ass,’” the skinny boy points out.

“Oh.” I look at the large screen in front of me. “I’m not sure where—”

“It’s okay, sir. We see it.”

I lower the sheet of paper:

Wednesday, August 12, 1:00-3:00 a.m.—Dance at Big Daddy’s with local women. Mainly spend the time talking with Joaquin, who invites Leon and me to have more drinks at his apartment near the airstrip.

3:00-5:00a.m.—Hang out with Leon and Joaquin.

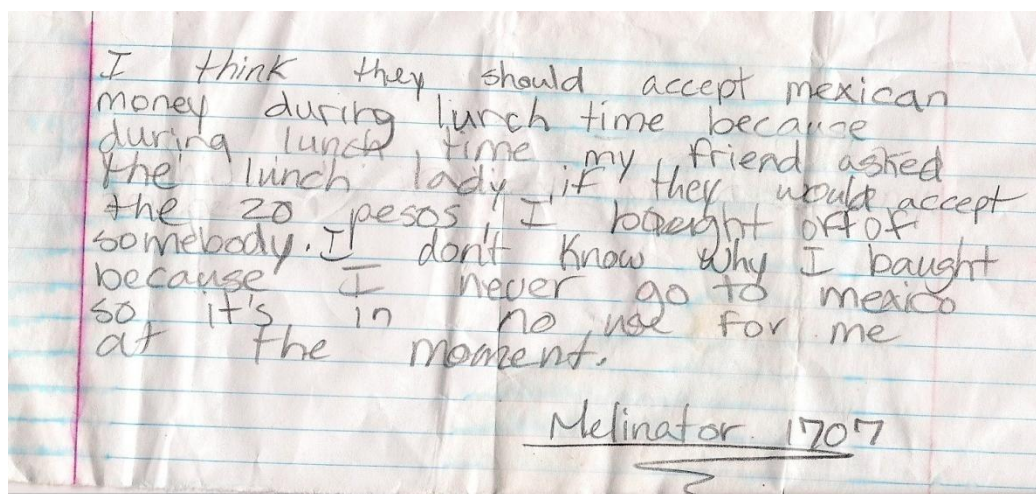
11:00 a.m.—Wake up, shower, pour water on Leon’s head. Drink strong Cuban *café con leche* down the street.

I want to tell the children I spend the night with Joaquin. *A life of my own!*

Newspaper article. Poetry class. Eighth-grade football game. Great God Almighty, I’m back!

CHAPTER 21

What to do? What to do? The new batch of citizens has arrived. Smiling Raul with the high cheekbones. Lanky Becky. A boy with a moustache. Melinator writes a note in the suggestion box:



I tell ninth period to go to Pizza Patrón. “They accept pesos.”

“For real?”

“Heard it from me.”

“No way.”

“I’d like to make you an offer,” I say to Melanie. I’ll give you two dollars for your one twenty peso note.” Jacob opens his mouth wide. “What do you think?”

Melanie shakes her head. “Nice try, sir.”

Jose and Eugene sit on opposite side of the room. Quiet, gifted boys. I see them sometimes staring at the map.

Jarred in third period can't write; can't read; can't multiply simple numbers. He likes movies and he talks a lot. Sometimes his frustration spirals so low he puts his head down on the desk. No prior knowledge. I'm worried my scaffolding might break. Jarred likes to play. Each morning I see him tossing a tennis ball against the wall in an exciting game of Wall Ball. I see what the boy might look like when he finds something he's good at. The muscles in his face open up like a flower and his limbs sway gracefully. His mind is at peace, his smile not diminished by his silver braces.

This year the girls take center stage. Carla and Patricia pass notes like life preservers.

"Give it," I say.

"We were only—"

"No time for mayhem." I smile at Patricia, fire up the projector.

"You're not going to—"

"Read it?" I turn toward the class. Patricia's eyes scurry toward Carla. "Of course not, sweetie." I place the note in my back pocket. Patricia bites her lower lip.

"Fine."

"But—"

"Better, Patricia?" I rip the note three times and throw it in the trash. Pour water from my bottle. Put my foot in the trash and stomp.

"Stop, sir." Patricia stands, laughing so hard her shirt bunches against her stomach.

“Don’t worry,” I say. I look at Juan, his foolish thin moustache. “Boys are idiots.” Carla snorts and I know I’ve got them. Sometimes I feel like I’m getting the hang of this.

I started coaching high school tennis last month. Things are fine. Nathan and Julia are still having fun, and I find out Roxy is pregnant. “Here,” says Julia, holding her Edison North shirt out in front of her belly. “She’s like seven-months already.”

“Don’t stretch your shirt,” I say. I do the backwards math in my head. Of course—they were already having sex last year. God, I’m stupid! High school gossip fills my ears. They practice hard, and have little use for an adult friend. Drama is the catchphrase of their lives. Logan is thinner and tells me he wants to be a mariachi dancer. His voice is high like rising smoke rings. Jackie tells me Mary is dead. “She had a brain tumor,” she says. “I’m surprised you hadn’t heard.” *A student died. I’m sipping rum with a man named Joaquin and Mary is dying.* “Cristal’s still crying,” she says. I see Cristal’s long braid. Jackie stares blankly. “They were best friends.” Jackie tosses a tennis ball into the basket. “Good to see you again, sir.” I miss the petty dramas of my middle school students. These dreams are more like nightmares. *Mary of the colored headbands is dead.*

After practice I cross the track to the stadium, where our eighth-grade boy’s football team plays Canton Middle School. Ms. Ramos saves me a seat.

“You didn’t know,” she says. “About Mary?”

I watch our boys run on to the field. “I was gone for—”

“So sad.” She takes a sip from her soda. Jacob waves from the bleachers where the seventh graders are waiting to play. I see the Melinator throw her arms sideways in a robust cheer.

“Is Daniel still number twenty-one?”

“I think so,” Ms. Ramos says.

I scan the stands for Carlos’s chipper mother. “Is she here?”

“I doubt it.” Ms. Ramos claps. “Go Panthers!” She turns to look at me. “He quit.”

“No.”

“Something about his dad,” she says. “Didn’t get along with the coaches.”

“God, he was—”

“Yeah, I know.”

I lean my head forward, scanning the field for Rolan. All the boys wear helmets. I try to identify him from his dark, muscular ankles. I love to watch that boy succeed. How it reminds me of my athletic youth. Anything to get my mind off poor Mary.

“Do you see Rolan?” I ask.

Ms. Ramos does not respond. I intensify my search. I see Daniel’s tattooed mother. “Rolan Villanueva,” I say.

“Ha-ha.”

“He’s not playing?” I place my hand over my forehead to shield my eyes from the sun.

Ms. Ramos looks at me like Mrs. Martinez did on my first day of school. She places her Diet Coke on the seat between us: *you haven’t heard, have you?*

PART IV

OCTOBER 2008

CHAPTER 22

I jog in tiny steps, weight back, afraid to thrust forward. I'm thirty-four years old, and I have nowhere to run. My father runs in the smallest of strides like a pair of children's scissors, *clip clip*, rounds the curve and cuts me down. I emulated him. Dashed straight-aways with truncated gait. I didn't know that ten-year-olds, eventually, widen their stance. I didn't expect to be here, crying in the pews of a crummy Baptist church with broken windows. Here I am. I notice the sign outside the church's window: *Chinese Worship Services on Sunday*. I'm all cried out. I tie my shoes and flex my calves in the small space between pews. I haven't cried in nearly a decade.

I take off down the street. I'm so tired I could crawl. It hurts to run. I make it to Tenth Street and turn right at Cantu's bakery. I imagine tiny pink cakes in the display cases inside. I see *España* ahead, the Mediterranean restaurant that's intrigued me for months—thick grass, mumbling gardens, baroque imposters visible through the front windows. I run past without looking. I'll make it to the bus station. Board a bus to Mexico and never look back.

I board a plane in the Panamanian jungle; slide across the Rio Plata in a converted Russian Icebreaker; tease a soccer ball between the feet of little boys at the Peruvian orphanage. *What's it to you?* I had my time, my shine, my splendor, the glowing stares and reviews. And now? I know not who I am. Sliding between theories across the giddy

plateau. Nothing in my native language warms my heart. I'll go where *los autobuses* carry me. Jesus prays in Spanish. I won't look back. I'm a handsome Panamanian on a *caballo negro*, tequila bottle strapped on my side, waiting for someone to love me.

I jog past the bus station. Old women in brown sweaters shop next to teenage boys. Plastic flowers and cheap shoes overtake more impressive window displays. I smell *tripas* burning. Avocados ripen. An overweight mother passes with her two small children, skin brown as kiwi. Old men idle, hands poised atop benches. Children stare. I slow down, stop. This area is not for jogging. I cross the street toward a quieter part of old downtown. A block later I see a large *abogado* sign atop a small rooftop. I cross the street.

An old brown sign with blocky letters, Jesús Cantú, leans on a mailbox screwed to the lime green walls. A darker green paint accentuates the window and door frames. I lean up on my toes to see through the narrow window at the top of the door. Comfortable chairs crowd the outside of the waiting room. New computer monitors sit on two desks. The carpet looks thick—I can nearly smell the magnificent scent. Stairs lead to somewhere in the distance. I feel like I'm peering into an old soul.

I follow a tiny sidewalk to the rear of the building. Bars adorn the windows. Potted plants fan out like Chinese fans. Around back, a large lime tree carries bulbs of fruit on its fingers. The sweat drips off my forehead. I wipe my eyes. A hammock swings in the breeze like a moon in the sky. The narrow trunk of the lime tree holds one end. I follow the twine to a rusted pole astride a brown crumbling fence. The hammock sags. I take off my shoes and socks, answer the siren's calls.

I was the one, the bullet-proof soul, the one who let it get away. Mrs. Martinez and Mr. Cerda were right. What had I done for Rolan? I'm no crap detector. *The man who wins acclaim is not the man who gets things done, but the one who follows the rules.* Even nature has rules—the sun is a swirling spiral; the wind a promiscuous maiden; and I, the endless sky. I'm one lime of a bunch, a grain along the island shore. One hammock away.

The languages of life? Sloppy, uncertain, emotional, dangerous. Last Tuesday a group of high school boys dragged Rolan off the school bus and beat him unconscious. “He didn't listen,” Daniel told me after the football game. “Eighth graders aren't allowed to sell in the neighborhood yet.” *And you, son? What's to become of you?*

I jogged to the church to pray for Rolan. Ask God to watch his soul. Once on my knees, however, all I could do was sob. Big blubbering fool. Why does he mean so much to me? I've never learned the language of real human experience. It's all predetermined. *Go back to where you came from.* I would if someone would kindly show me where.

I've lost the mojo; the wings have disappeared; whatever it was that turned heads in the gym has flown away. I no longer feel like a handsome older student playing in the sandbox with fraternity friends. No one notices. This morning, two weeks after learning of Rolan's incident, I ask the manager at the University Wellness Center why no hot water spouts from the showerheads. The spiky-haired, twenty-something kinesiology major looks beyond me at one of his friends in the distance.

“Hot water,” I repeat. He turns his head toward me. “Outrageous.”

He finally focuses on my face. “There’s water.”

A rude gasp escapes my lips. “I’m sorry?”

“I’ve never been told there’s no hot water.”

“Right. Well, sir, I’m telling you now.”

He holds the palm of his hand in the air; his friend wanders off. “Where?” he says.

“In the locker room.”

“Which one.” I’m inconveniencing him with second-hand information.

“Is there someone else I can talk to?”

“Excuse me?” Creases form in the young man’s smooth forehead.

“I’m looking for someone who has some idea what they’re doing,” I say. I’m conscious of the movement of my lips. “I’d like to tell that person that for the past several weeks, there’s been no hot water in the men’s locker room. I work out at six, shower at seven-thirty, and get to work at eight.”

“Oh yeah, sometimes in the morning—”

“Pardon?”

“Sometimes in the morning there’s no hot water.” He smiles and scratches his chest. “You should work out in the afternoon.”

I want to punch him. “The issue isn’t when I work out. The issue is you asking someone who runs the place to see about the water.” We stare at one another. “That’s it.”

He stops smiling and makes eye contact. “The other day I showered and—”

“This is a sixty million dollar gym,” I say. “I’m not concerned about your little story. I’m just letting you know.” I step sideways. “Thank you.” My sleeve touches his shoulder on my way out the gym. I don’t know why I bother.

The change is swift. I start by eliminating Word Scramble Wednesday. “It takes too long,” I tell third period.

“What about the joke of the day?” asks Juan. The boy complains about everything. He strokes down the thin hairs of his mustache.

“That, too.”

Becky slams her folder on the floor.

“It’s time—”

“Why are you taking this out on us?” Becky says.

I squint my eyes in her direction. “It’s got nothing to do with—”

“This used to be my favorite class.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Nothing’s changed.”

“But—”

“I don’t know why you think anything has changed.” Raul smiles and raises his hand. It’s hard to look at him when he’s smiling. How, exactly, am I supposed to tell him no? “Yes, Raul.”

“All we’re saying is don’t become one of *them*.” He looks next door and raises his chin in that direction. “You know what I mean.” The class groans. I think they’re on to me. *What’s your game, Mr. Girman?*

“We need time for other things.”

“Like what?” Juan says. He flicks his middle finger in the air.

I’ll say it again—I’m through. No more outside games; no depicting vocabulary concepts in informal pictures; no three-dimensional maps several days in the making. If you can’t read properly, it’s your parents’ fault. Lonely boys. Poor boys. Bored boys. *Who isn’t?* Restless Boys. Angry boys. Violent boys. *Take a number.* I’ve got more important things to do than breed boys to be slaves to their primitive instincts. Bad choices shouldn’t be rewarded, and every voice—despite what some of my professors insist—does not deserve to be heard. Those who listen get rewarded. It’s about time I start converting the natives and guarding the tower. I never did Rolan any good.

CHAPTER 23

Juan's parents engage their chairs thoughtfully, the slightest turn, shift, cloaked and colored in plaid and denim, a little boy in the back, dancing the periodic table with his fingers. Ms. Ruiz greets them quietly. "Sit here," she says. We're gathered around the table like we're judging a carnival contest.

"The thing is," says Ms. Ramos, "we're concerned because Juan's grades are slipping." She looks at me when she says it.

Juan's mom lowers her head. "The neighborhood," she says, fumbling with various gold chains around her wrist. She looks at her husband; his perfectly-cut goatee adorns his face like a *banda* musician. He takes off his black *vaquero* hat and sets it on the table next to him. "I've tried," says the mother. "*We've* tried." She looks at her husband again.

"His attitude," says Ms. Ruiz, "is less than desirable." I roll my eyes. "He talks in class."

"He talks to my husband that way." The man remains still. "I try to discipline him and—"

"*Ya, mujer.*" The man uncurls his hands on the table. It's about time someone ended this woman's exaggerated hardship. "*Siempre lo mismo, Graciela.*"

"Not here, Hector." She lowers her head. "It was hard, you see . . . Juan's father."

“So you’re not Juan’s father?” I say. The man shakes his head. “I guess that explains it.” Ms. Ramos narrows her eyes and nudges me under the table. “That boy is obnoxious.”

“No, no, no, interrupts Ms. Ramos. “What Mr. Girman means, is that . . . is that Juan, um, could use some work on—”

“Right. Right,” Ms. Ruiz adds. “He’s not working to his full poten—”

“My son is not . . . ,” Juan’s mother says, looking directly at me. Her husband stares at me, silver chain wrapped around his neck. Even his eyebrows are trimmed. “He’s had it hard,” she continues. She looks at her husband. He exhales and looks away from his wife. “His dad,” she says, looking closely at Ms. Ruiz, “is Mexican.” Virginia nods, pinches her lips tightly.

“*Soy Mexicano*,” interrupts the man. He stares at my hands. I’m exposed: a young-smarty rebelling against the fine, detached manners from which I’ve been raised. The man switches to English. “She babies Juan.” The woman fingers her purse. “Our son,” he says proudly, looking at the little boy bouncing plastic spoons against the sink. He pauses. “Rafael *tiene el respeto*.” He clasps his hands like he’s praying. The boy turns around and stares at his daddy. “Juan, ah, how you say it, pretends like he’s a man.” *Finally, someone talking sense in the back hallway!* Juan’s mom begins to cry. Ms. Ramos grabs the woman’s hand.

“I don’t think—”

“He’s a lazy ass,” I say. All three women stare. “He’s a lazy fat ass who thinks he can do whatever he wants.”

“Mr. Girman, I don’t think that’s—”

“Call me a big-ass teacher, but that’s the truth.” I can’t be stopped. “We’re here because your obnoxious son disrupts class every day. Juan’s stepfather arches his back, lifts his head. “We wouldn’t be having this problem in Mexico,” I say to the man. “Because someone would have kicked his ass by now.” I stare directly at the man. Ms. Ruiz stands up, approaches the door. I’ve gone too far. “I’m tired of pretending Mexican kids can’t do anything.” I stare at both parents. “I’d be embarrassed if I were you.”

Screw Jonathan Kozol, the American education guru insisting family life has little to do with educational advancement. *It’s never the family. Imagine a girl, maybe Negro, comes in from a street that is lined with car-carcasses.* For God’s sake, the boy wears Tommy Hilfinger. *Some teenage white boys slow down their car to insult her.* Juan owns his mother. *When something has been stolen, she’s told she is the one who stole it.* Your son takes things, Mrs. Garcia; your beloved son steals girl’s sweaters, and food, and candy off the teacher’s desk. *Once, in Fourth Grade, she got excited at school about some writing she had never heard about before.* I’m tired of pretending. Your child’s no crap detector. Kozol’s full of shit. Postmodernism is a fraud. Yes, there are bullies and forgotten souls, but how is it my job to extricate their voices? Both are lost. Their hard lives are now their own.

Look at her! Fingering her bracelets. This woman thinks it’s all about her. As if she’s not the one responsible for her son’s appalling antics, poor grades, and moody ambivalence. “I’m through pretending,” I say, “that your son is worth my time.” I rise from my chair. My only crime is impatience. “I have one hundred and thirty students expecting a quality lesson tomorrow. I can’t waste any more time on your son.” I take

one last look at the boy in the back of the room, quiet now, squishing a toy star against his head. He giggles when he lifts the orange star in the air. I wonder what he thinks of his brother. I turn and say a polite good-bye as I walk out the door. The boy stares. For sure he emulates Juan. In the hallway I pass Juan. He smirks at me—he's certain he's won.

On my way to the teacher's lounge, I imagine Ms. Ramos's exaggerated astonishment—wide eyes, lips jutting out in judgment, a hand placed supportively across the table. But I'm proud to have staked my turf. Some things I still I don't get. What does Kozol mean when he insists that white suburban kids are taught to think and interrogate reality, but inner-city or ethnic kids are preparing for “nonreflective acquiescence”? He couldn't have had *Juan* in mind, could he? He can't possibly be worried that this defiant child is being prepared for “intellectual subordination”? Juan, and the dozens like him I see each day, do not interrogate reality differently. There's a big difference between questioning, for instance, why the Native Texans only occupy one percent of our textbook, and refusing to write an essay because “I don't know why we have to.” I'm not surprised: Kozol focuses on elementary education.

There's a gun in the school. *Everyone Run!* You have to be selfish to survive. Mrs. Lara tells us yesterday during lunch that my beloved Daniel's brother Johnnie brought a gun to school. “He said someone wanted to kill him.”

“Is that right?”

“Said the gang was moving on his turf.”

“What turf?”

“Who knows? The teeny-bopper books in the library.” She laughs at her own joke.

“Is he the one with the tattoos on his knuckles?” I ask.

“Yeah, that’s him.” Mrs. Lara springs a wide smile across her face. “He’s good in math. No genius, I mean, but never any problems. He’s passing.”

“That’s good.”

“I know. Didn’t you have his brother, Danny?”

“Daniel.”

“Last year?”

“Yes.”

“Did he pass, too?”

“Well, yeah, he was good for us, too. No problems.”

“He got suspended, no?”

“Maybe.”

“Didn’t he have a tattoo of—”

“Yeah, his mom.” I hold out my arm and point. “Right here.”

“Whew.”

“Proud family.”

“I guess.”

“You should talk to Danny, you know, get the scoop.”

“I’ll stay out of it.”

“I told my two boys if they ever . . .”

Poor, Daniel.

“I’d kill them.”

What lives is a lie.

I’m surprised to see Daniel waiting at my door two days later. “Here, sir.” He takes some papers from under my arms. “I’ll help.” The boy looks more muscular, with a thicker neck and the same mahogany hue. His face has grown into his teeth, a Mexican Hugh Grant. I sit on a desk and ask how he’s doing.

“Football season’s over,” he says.

“I know.”

“Did you see any more of our games?”

“A couple.”

“I’m good, right?”

“You got speed.”

He smiles. “And good looks, right?” *Yes, Daniel, you certainly have that.*

“Is that a new tattoo?”

“Oh, yeah.” The boy covers the back of his hand with his sweatshirt.

“Don’t be shy.”

The teeth come out; he lowers his head coquettishly. “I don’t like it.”

“Huh.”

“My uncle gave it to me.”

“Here, don’t be—”

“It’s okay, I guess, but everyone keeps making fun of me.” He gives me his hand. The tattoo, a spider perched atop a small web, looks crude and unfinished. I’d

forgotten his slender hands, wrinkled much for someone his age. I reach my arms awkwardly in front of me, my elbows stretched to the sides, trying not to hold his small hands too tenderly. I look toward the door.

“Next week I’m getting a muscular dude with big arms.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“No you’re not sir.”

“Okay, a chick with giant . . . eyes, yeah.”

“Ah, sir, *eyes*. You’re lying.” I’m sitting on the desk and he’s standing in front of me and I’m wondering why I never did this when I was in secondary school. I never talked to teachers. He stands still, relaxed. It’s nice to see this boy again.

“You heard about my brother?”

“Why?”

“That thing in his locker.”

“But why?”

“There’s nowhere else to put it.” He says it nonchalantly, but his eyes are beaming with color.

“Why’d he bring it?”

“That kid, you know, the one that Rolan got in trouble with.” It’s been weeks since I’ve thought of Rolan. “His brother said Johnnie stole something from his car.”

“What do you mean, kid.”

“His older brother, Sam.”

“Whose older brother?”

“The kid.”

“What kid? Like here at school?”

“Yeah, the eighth grader. He said he would grab his brother’s gun and shoot my ‘bro.’” Daniel has learned to speak like an older boy, accentuating phrases at the right times, slowing his voice for ironic effect. “So my *tio* gives him this gun.” He’s excited now, his voice rising at crucial parts of the story. “*Nadie* gonna fuck up the Tijerinas,” he says.

“I heard it wasn’t loaded.”

“Yeah, sir, it was loaded.” He smiles big. “My cousin from high school gave him some rocks.”

“I guess there’s nothing left to say.” I get up from the desk and erase the board.

“The room looks different,” Daniel says.

I turn around. “How so?”

“No groups. And your desk used to be over there.” I look toward the back of the room. “You never sat in it.”

“True.”

“Where’s the word scramble board?”

“No time this year.”

“That was the most fun.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh, and the review games outside.” He looks out the window. “We don’t do that this year.”

“No?”

“It’s boring.”

“You got the TAKS, don’t forget.”

“TAKS sucks.” I try to laugh. It doesn’t sound as ridiculous coming from a child’s mouth.

“Some things suck but you still have to do them.”

“Yeah, but Mr. Dempsey is boring.”

“You don’t always get to do what you like.”

“We did in here,” he says. I sit down on the chair. Daniel looks free-spirited, wrapped in baggy clothes, long sweater over his hands, pants covering his black shoes. I imagine him back on the football field. *Creativity requires the courage to let go of uncertainties.* “I miss in here.”

I stand up and return to my desk. “Yes, well, there’s no time to be sitting around doing nothing.”

“I thought we were talking, sir.”

“Sure,” I say. “*Now.*” He follows me toward my desk. “What about last year when you and Rolan could have been learning something?”

“Aw, sir, come on.” He sits on my desk. “We always thought you were cool.” He’s still smiling. “We passed the TAKS, right?”

“Look what ‘being cool’ got for Rolan.”

“Hey, I told him not to get messed up with that guy.”

I stare at Daniel’s hand. “What do you think *this*,” I take his hand, “is going to get you?”

“It’s just a tattoo.” He continues smiling.

“Do you do everything your uncle tells you?”

He shakes his head and rises off the desk. “That’s a dumb question.”

“Well if you’re stupid enough to tattoo a spider on your hand, what makes you think your uncle won’t put a giant web over your face.”

“He’s my uncle.”

“A fool.”

“Hey, sir, that’s family.” He leaps into mock fighting pose, his long skinny arms beside him, shoulders hunched up.

“Calm down, crazy.” I hand him a piece of chocolate from my drawer. “I’m just saying it’s nice when you got family on your side, but not everyone does.”

“It’s the street, sir. It’s tough.” I stand up; the boy’s head barely makes it to my chest. In a few years he’ll be able to kick my ass. *Back to being a scared little child.* “I got to go or I’ll be late,” he says. We walk to the door together. He gives me a high-five before he leaves. On my way back to my desk, I pass Rolan’s old seat. I see his unruly hair and sweaty, after-lunch face. His soft voice. I turn away and write today’s TAKS objectives on the board. Ah, it’s nice to have my safe, ordered classroom back. Rolan’s been sent to live with an uncle and aunt in Idaho.

The administration denies the gun. Never happened. The new principal, Mr. Cardenas, doesn’t mention it at the following Wednesday’s faculty meeting. “Let’s go out there and have a great Panther day.” I can do without the peppiness. He looks nice in a red tie. Commands respect; inculcates doctrine. What I’d really like to know is when the metal detectors arrive. Last week a man on probation picked up his daughter after school and disappeared for the weekend. Who’s to say tattoos don’t incite violence? I’m

waiting, aren't I? Come on new guy. *Tell us something, fool.* “So with that I'll leave the stage to Ms. Hernandez, who'll be presenting the new guidelines for the Reading incentive program.”

That's it?

Gladys raises her hand.

“Yes, Mrs. Salinas?”

“Does that mean we all have to stay?”

“Of course, Mrs. Salinas.”

“Because I teach math.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Which does not have to do with—”

“We all want our students to succeed, don't we, Gladys?” As rumors go, they dated as younger teachers many years ago. Maybe even slept together. Okay, I'm jealous. The new principal is more than an eyeful. He's aging as splendidly as a warm Cabernet Sauvignon. Ms. Ramos passes me a note.

*my uncle says Mr. Cardenas refused to let the dogs in
in where?*

*in the school, dope. They told him about the problems a long time ago
dogs can smell guns?*

and drugs

drugs, too. We have drugs?

Mr. Cardenas watches the note pass between us. Ms. Ramos doesn't notice.

why didn't he let the dogs in?

bad pub?

pub?

publicity?

oh

☹ *yep. One year and drugs already here.*

really?

that's what my uncle says

this sucks

the meeting?

yeah

btw, why so hard on Juan's parents?

whatever

his dad slapped him after you left

stepdad

now he's gonna be worse

whatever

Cardenas's watching.

your boobs!!!

shut up, Cris ☺

all I'm saying, Monica, is that these kids need to be watched

watched?

divide and conquer

EEK!

manipulation

Be careful what you ask for, Cris

there's an 'h' in my name, you know?

shut up, Cris H.

very funny

he's watching

about time

CHAPTER 24

The next day I write NO RESTROOM PASSES on my dry erase board. “But what if we have to go?” asks Patricia

“Go before class.” There’s no irony in my voice.

“But it’s too busy.”

“Not my concern.”

“Girls’ restrooms are more busy.”

“*Busier.*”

“Right,” she says. “More busier.” Patricia sulks to her desk. Her accomplice, Carla, passes a note. *Not so fast, girls.* I intercept the note. “I think we’ll practice some grammar,” I say.

“No,” Carla squeals. Her lips close tightly.

“You think I’ve never read something bad about me?”

“Yes sir.” I unravel the note. Patricia moves her lips as if devouring a grapefruit. I turn on the projector. Carla sits quietly. I see bright purple marker and scratch-outs. I finish unfolding the tightly-bound note. Inside I see a stream of giant letters scrawled across the torn page. I read to myself.

“Not so funny, is it sir?”

I refold the note and slip it into my back packet.

“No,” I say. I avoid Carla’s glare. Patricia draws a butterfly on her hand.

Clueless child! I’m halfway between flummox and anger. Roel follows me with his eyes.

“It’s come to my attention that the administration is right.”

“About what?” Roel asks.

“About the things we need to do to be successful.”

“Like reading?”

“Right.” I look at Jarred staring into space.

“And math?”

“Certainly.” I peek in Patricia’s direction. She continues coloring her hand with Carla’s markers.

“It appears,” I say. “I’ve been giving too much attention to the squeaky wheel.”

A hand raises in the back.

“What’s a squeaky wheel?”

“The crybaby underneath it all.”

“Crybaby.”

“The ones who need the attention.”

“Like Juan?” says Roel.

I swallow, refuse to take the bait. “This isn’t directed at anyone in particular.”

“Are you sure?” says Patricia.

I don’t want to look at the girl. “Yes,” I say to Roel in the back. “I’ll be darned if you come back to me in two years sharing all your problems. I really don’t care.”

“God, sir.”

“I don’t”

“Fine.”

“I’m just saying—”

“We got it.”

“Don’t come back all surprised how you got pregnant.” I’m offending and I don’t care. “You can’t just do anything you want.”

“I promise I won’t come back pregnant.”

“Thank you, Roel.”

“*My pleasure.*” He smiles, repeating the phrase I’d taught the kids from my days as a bartender at T.G.I. Friday’s: *those in a position of authority deserve to be respected.* Oh, how I’d forgotten.

Roel sits at his desk nursing a smug smile. “Even if you don’t mean it,” he adds, echoing the final part of my *pleasure* lecture.

“Even if you don’t mean it,” I repeat. Carla taps her boots under the table like an irritated cowgirl. Patricia raises her hand in the air. “I have to go to the bathroom,” she says.

I point at the board. “Are you blind?”

“I have to go.” Carla and I exchange glances.

“Well, you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“There are drugs in the school.”

“In the bathroom?”

“On the *way* to the bathroom. And in the halls. Stuffed inside highlighters.” I hold up a yellow highlighter. “In places you’d never expect to find them.” Someone in the back says *vagina*. I channel Ms. Ruiz’s spirit and ignore the comment. No one laughs. Carla raises her hand. *I think she should go*, Carla tells me.

“It seems you think lots of things,” I say. She lowers her hand, adopts a shoe-gazing posture. “Those of us who make poor decisions must suffer the consequences.” I stare at Patricia. She begins drawing another butterfly on the back of her other hand. *Better than a tattoo, I suppose*. Sometimes we have to hold our urges in.

I’m anxious to share the news: *Patricia’s pregnant*, I say.

“How can you tell?” asks Ms. Ruiz. She doesn’t bother to look up from her computer screen.

“I read it in a note.”

“No she’s not.”

“Well, she does always have to go to the bathroom,” says Ms. Ramos.

“Who’s the boy?”

“Who knows,” I say. “I always see her wandering around after school.”

“In the halls?”

“No, in the neighborhood. When I’m at practice at the high school.”

“With boys?”

“Apparently.” Ms. Ramos is silent. “What are you thinking, Monica?”

“She’s sad,” says Ms. Ruiz. “It’s sad, you know, for a girl this young.”

“Sorry, Monica.”

“No, it’s not that, I mean, I’m sad . . . yes, of course.” She doesn’t look sad. She seems irritated, pushing her bracelets up her arm. “I have this test after school.”

“My sister was older when she got pregnant,” I say.

“How old?” Ms. Ramos asks.

“Twenty-two,” I think.

“The one in Florida?”

“Now she’s got two.”

“Babies?”

“Two kids. I don’t see her much.”

“You never said she had kids.”

“I try not to think about her much.”

“How old are they?”

“I don’t know, like eight and two.”

“Doesn’t that make you sad?” asks Ms. Ruiz.

“Nah.”

“Like not seeing your nieces or nephew.”

“A little.”

“What about your sister?”

“She’s got all these drug problems.”

Ms. Ramos raises her shoulder and lowers then abruptly. “So why didn’t you ever tell us this?”

I don’t know what to say. *Mind your own business, nose-neighbor!*

“Don’t you want to help?” Ms. Ruiz asks.

No, Virginia, I don't want to help. I don't know how to help. I don't know what to say to my younger sister. I haven't talked to her in four years. Yes, four years. Something a Mexican can't understand. I'm a Catholic WASP in an underground hiding place.

Ms. Ramos lowers the ends of her lips. "I'm sorry," she says. "I have to go." On her way out she stares at the linoleum floors as if walking off stage. She raises her head as she approaches the door. "I'm sick of college," she says. Her fingers slide along the door, every gesture conveying a forgotten overture.

I'm right behind you, Ms. Ramos. I've got no time for others. Poetry class is littered with disparate Others. Yes, with the capital 'O.' I'm seduced by the syllabus: *The progression of thought moves in a swift and exciting manner and communicates like music.* My first poem is about a palm tree, a stately Royal Palm Tree. Later in the poem I'm in a place called Chetumel, drinking beers with my friend Leon, on our way to Belize: *I am not indigenous enough/hold no right of place and passage and home and love/white people plant palm trees/to erase what they have done.*

At workshop I'm torn to shreds. "White people should be very careful writing about race," someone says. The professor says she likes my tone. I'm learning about poems, how the thrill of imagery might change the inflection of my life. Minister Tom writes something horrible about a woman who's lost her spirit. The teacher says it should be published. *Yeah, right!*

I'm ready with my next poem. I worked for hours today refining it at school while the kids copied questions. "Yes, you must write the question," I said a thousand times.

Ordered pairs don't bother me,

only the parentheses.

Proposition Eight passed (I voted yes! emphatically)

so the gays won't have to roll the boulder up that hill—

No Sisyphus for sissies.

“Sissies isn’t an appropriate word for poetry,” I’m told. No one mentions my reference to resistance, in this case *gay*, narratives. No one says much at all. The next poem arrives—six lines about a marble rolling down a slide. We spend half-an-hour discussing the poem’s rhythm. I say it seems like it was written in ten minutes before class.

“How could I make copies that fast?” says the girl. *That’s not the point*, I say.

The teacher says I’m being too critical. I tell the girl next to me that my seventh graders could do as much. She laughs, but I notice so much writing on her paper I can barely see the *meandering sapphire orb rolling*

down

down

down . . .

the slide

Yeah, it’s hard to get in the creative mood with so many blubbering idiots taking up your time. I’m exasperated. Over the summer my tattooed South Texas Literature professor explained to me that white people have no story in the Valley. That’s standard

postmodern fare, I guess, but where does that leave me? If I've got no story, why should the kids listen to me? Nothing I write matters. I'm no anthropologist; just a rude tourist waiting to come home. Travel writing, be damned!

CHAPTER 25

Standardized tests make sense. I'm not convinced, however, that Republicans care much for the ethnic minorities left behind. "Enough rap music," they say. "No more Mexican immigrants." I can hear Sylvia from her insulated office building: no food stamps for fourteen-year-olds! *Fine, have your say.* The real goal has nothing to do with education—it's about standardizing culture. To say that whites and Asians have an unfair advantage because they read better is ludicrous. To say they have an unfair advantage because they come from more wealth, now that makes sense. They read better because they come from more wealth. Even Kozol will agree. But what about the three white kids on Team 72 this year—Angie, Danny, and Brittany? Poor as dirt and miles ahead of the indifferent Mexican-American students around them.

At least with standardized tests, I don't have to be myself. I've volunteered to shift our study to American History after the first of the year because I can rely on workbooks and worksheets not available for Texas History. The kids need to know where this country—*my* country—came from. It's not so easy, thank God, to inject personality into the Declaration of Independence or the United States Constitution. The American Revolution is what it is. No time for interpretation. Farewell subjectivity. *Poof!* Nothing I say can and will be used against me. *I'm free at last. Great God Almighty, free at last!* What a fool I'd been, administering TAKS tests as if dumping off another worksheet. Isn't anything sacred anymore? How can the children learn if we

don't know what's wrong? I glance at Roel. *Brace yourself.* Try and talk during my reign, fool. I feel sad for Jarred—he won't be able to keep up. Too bad the type of student No Child Left Behind is designed to assess, students like Jarred, is so far behind I can't even see him.

I'm told to find special seating for Miranda, a child so large she's been diagnosed with diabetes. "Near the door," says the memo. "Make sure she has adequate and appropriate snacks." She's a cute girl with green bows in her hair. I'm not sure why some parents' have no interest in their child's health. *I know, I know:* heredity, poverty, adolescent hormones. The rings around Miranda's neck are large. Oil: the alpha and omega of the Mexican diet. Circles and curves preferable to angles and bones. That might be true. But ask Miranda of the perpetually-lowered head which she prefers. I don't think she's ever been given a chance.

And then there's Marcelo, the gawky Columbian with mismatched body parts. His hearing aids pierce his ears at odd times. He walks quickly to the clinic before he falls over, grips his head like he's holding a Conch shell toward his ear. "Not this time," I say. "You need to finish your essay." He cries silently at his desk. Don't blame me—the boy needs to accustom himself to the real world, buildings without nurses. I tell him to finish his test, and then he can go to the clinic. He tosses his hearing aid on the floor and squishes his face so tight I can see his veins throbbing in his awkward body. I'd be shocked if the boy had any kind of future at all.

Ah, Christ! Another publication rejects my work. My paper for South Texas Literature fails to meet their strict criteria. Maybe I went too far:

In the ongoing dialectic between oppressive and resistance narratives, I fall emphatically—resoundingly, for sure, with a pronounced thud—in the former category. It would be difficult to find someone who fits the profile of “oppressor” more than myself: young, white, male, American, university educated, Christian; the list goes on and on. My only claim to oppositional legitimacy is when I traveled to Latin America some years ago. Not only did I kiss my first man, but Latin men, assuring what I thought would be a place of my own within the amalgam of post-coital resistance narratives: post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and post-modernism. For that moment, at least—my year-long traveling expedition in South America—I was not only poor but non-heterosexual. In a mere twelve months, I repositioned myself, or so I had thought, with the crooks, whores, fags, and infidels of the world, assuring my future ascendancy to the halls of progressive university education.

And here I am. *Ouch!* I’ve fallen and I can’t get up. I no longer want to lower myself or my standards. *No more pencils. No more books. No more teachers’ dirty looks.* I wonder how far I’ve come. I’m confronting what it means when primarily white men, like myself, produce the discourse around Otherness. What does it mean for a member of a privileged group to “interpret” the reality of members of a less powerful, exploited, and oppressed group? As bell hooks notices in the context of “blackness,” if the many “non-black people who produce images or critical narratives about blackness

and black people do not interrogate this perspective, they may simply recreate the imperialist gaze—that look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize.” Kozol is her ally.

This essay, I wrote, is an attempt to interrogate my own perspective. The stakes are higher when you do research on a population to which you feel loyalty. Am I merely repeating, as do Prescott, Dobie, and many other Anglo scholars, the “imperialist gaze?” The goal of anti-oppression education is not to limit this gaze, but to reorient the viewer, to make her aware of the discourses that address the so-called other from a perspective of power. Before there can be such a thing as anti-oppressive education, however, doesn’t *real* education have to exist? Which came first, the chicken or the egg? I don’t see how Jarred, Patricia, and Roel can benefit from the kind of anti-oppressive, resistance education I’d offered the previous fifteen months. Jarred can’t read; Patricia might be pregnant; Roel is on a rocky course toward the masculine self-destruction that doomed Rolan.

But what about me? This *is* about me, I say. When Hinojosa asks us to write the place we know, he does not mean to imply that we are limited to our place of birth, to solely those people with whom we grew up. He refers to a larger psychic space, to the places we acquire our imagination, our desires, to those individuals and characters that through time penetrate our psychic space and change the way we think about life, love, and the creative impulse. How do I make the Valley mine? How can a guy like Mika—not him, but someone *like* him—provide enough warmth to forget entirely about the children? Why don’t I engage more with the friendly college guy with the locker next to mine at the gym? I am neither the author nor the carrier of the official South Texas

history. I'm just a man teaching children. As a white man, I've felt the awkward sensation of oppression narratives; sometimes I feel like I am living my own resistance narrative—from the ranch to the farm, from jail to the river, from my apartment near campus to the second-floor jogging track overlooking the gym, from this text to my deepest desires. I just don't know what a migrant laborer emigrating from Mexico can do for me. I shouldn't expect anything; what have I done for him? What happened to my auspicious beginning? If my body hasn't changed, why am I receiving less and less attention? As for my students, I don't know anymore what I can do for them. *Take care of yourself, fool.* My professor e-mails me the names of several publications that might be interested in my paper. One, he says, would surely publish the article. *I'd sooner die!*

CHAPTER 26

Anything you do, I can do better. Today the teachers of Team 77 are meeting with Patricia's mother, a sad freckled woman with rings around her neck and a tendency to yawn. Her other four children, two of them barefooted, run around the science room reaching for anything they can reach. I see Patricia's wide face and droopy cheeks in her mother's odd countenance—a bored expression punctuated with rolling eyes, elbow-scratching, and only occasionally does she check the status of her other children. Ms. Ramos politely asks the woman's age—"you look so young, ma'am"—the answer to which, twenty-seven, nearly drops me off the chair. I watch Ms. Ramos do the math in her head. *She had Patricia at fourteen and never stopped!*

I don't know if Patricia is pregnant. Now I know that's not the point. But at least her parents are still together, even if her dad's not here. Hardly any of our students have the same last name as their parents. When I scour the computer searching for contact information, I find that the mother, who'd I'd memorized as, say, Ms. Cervantes, now calls herself Mrs. Lorenzo. The child, David, is still a Cantú. Few are married. Few divorced. Everyone shacks up, and mothers care more about new baby boyfriends than older children navigating pubescence. Patricia's father is ten years older than her mother.

The woman, like Patricia, is loud and easily irritated. She raises her hands in the air as if none of this was her fault. "We have trouble with her," she says. This time Ms. Ramos does not gaze sympathetically. Mrs. Masterson leaves the table to play with the

children. How's a fourteen year old expected to raise *one* child, much less a family? This twenty-seven-year-old woman can barely handle herself. A woman like that has no idea how to keep her legs closed. I make no judgments about the man.

The acorn doesn't fall far from the tree. The academic-types don't understand there's a whole world out there. Easy to spout postmodern theories when you're sitting at a desk. The anti-foundationalist assault on truth doesn't work in a classroom full of kids. Or a room full of surprisingly cute toddlers. There's nothing serene about the rise of ethno-nationalist discourse. Screw South Texas Literature. The quaint is dysfunctional. If young, Hispanic women are supposedly our last bastion of female sexual integrity, as the culturalists assert, why does data show that so many of them become pregnant so young? Without husbands. I've heard enough about the male patriarchy, the faceless white bureaucrats like me propagating a system that disenfranchises our minority youth, as Kozol argues, and robs their authentic self-expression in an attempt to work them into the system. Is this what we're after? Is validating our so-called ethnic youth a perpetuation of Hispanic male disregard for personal ethics or educational advancement? Are we neutering young Hispanic men simply by asking them to sit quietly, read, explore their burgeoning male identity in safe, monitored sporting events, for example, or a cerebral exploration of the place of man in the historical universe? *I think not*. Do we blame tests, like the TAKS? When can we blame parents, like Patricia's mother—too stupid or occupied or young or indifferent toward their child's education. Do minority children really reason differently? Poor Asian immigrants excel. Poor white children still

outperform most economically-advantaged black and Hispanic youth. Have I become the enemy of resistance education?

Okay, I'm angry. It takes work to write a poem. It took me weeks to write that paper for my South Texas Literature class. My classmates are happy turning in mediocre work. *Good for them!* It must be difficult to write with three screaming children in the background. I couldn't do it. But let's not call it an academic success. There's nothing successful about a seventh grader reading. That's the same as awarding a medal for taking a breath. I'm not impressed because three of my classmates can work the idiomatic expression, *pa'que*, into a poem. For a voice to matter, it must have something to say. Most of these kids, *nah*, they got nothing. I'll see them selling lumber and having babies before they write poems, even mediocre ones.

How about a little credit for working so hard! This morning at the gym, three college muscle heads stood eating donuts and texting God-knows-who while I waited for the dumbbell curl. I asked them, politely, if they were through. What do I get? The guy looks at me and turns around. *Looks at me and turns around!* Worse yet, he had the body and skin color of a Manchurian soldier—exquisite from every angle. I asked again, slightly louder, and his friend next to him, some Abercrombie and Fitch-looking model, told me to relax. They'll be done in a few minutes, he said. *Me! Relax?*

Apparently ethics has no place in the gym. Politeness is an outdated standard. *To the victors go the spoils!* I'm nearly twice their age. I worked out my legs instead, even jogged on the second-floor track at the end, and now, walking into school Monday

morning, my legs feel like skinny elephant trunks twisting when they should be bending at preapproved angles.

All is not lost. The custodial staff does a fine job. My room is polished and lacquered. Once I removed the rugs, and planks, and curtains hanging to the floors, Miriam the small female custodian in charge of the seventh-grade hallway mops and buffs, sweeping even the smallest of teenage angst to the corner, where it's deposited in the trash can where it belongs.

I write today's lesson on the board: *When the Texans Take Over*. I'm not expecting sweeping reviews. But it's not about the history anymore. They need to learn how to break the text into meaningful parts. Sequencing, I call it. When chunks of text coalesce into a functioning flow map. I pass out the photocopied, square maps to the empty desks. Oh the clean lines of a box inured! So beautiful, really, waiting to be filled. I add TAKS OBJECTIVE 7.02 on the board. I hear a knock at the door.

"Sorry, Mr. Girman," says Mrs. Masterson. "I know how you like to start your mornings."

"Yes, Mrs. Masterson."

"I'm looking for my advisory forms."

"For the incentive?"

"Right. I need to get the names of the kids not going."

"How many failed?"

"Ten, I think."

"Good."

"Slow little readers."

“Yes.” I walk towards my desk. “I have nearly twenty.” Clarissa puts a hand along the waistband of her skirt. “Really,” I say. I move behind my desk.

“Now, Mr. Girman,” she says, her voice rising. “You’ve never had any failures before.” I see an intensity in her cheeks.

“Things have changed.”

Clarissa giggles, her shoulders thrown back as always. “Don’t tell me that,” she says. She glances out the small window in my door. “I used to fail, I don’t know, a third.” She smiles as she says it.

“What stopped you?”

“Mr. Cerda. I was in his office like every day.” She shakes her head. I notice her freckles and fair skin, as light as Patricia’s mother. “I don’t know about the new guy,” she says. “I’m not more than five percent this year.”

“Of what?”

“However many we have.”

“No, I mean, of failures, you’re saying?”

“Just the lazy ones.”

“Yeah.”

“I pity the ones who’ll never make it. Like Jarred. The least I can do is pass them.”

“But, Clarissa.” I pause. “They can’t—”

“Yeah, I know, but the way I see it, it’s not my fault.” She taps her shoe loudly on the floor. “I’m glad you’re the new team leader. We need someone young around here.”

“Right.”

“To shake things up.”

“Well, I’m not so sure—”

“Come on, your first two years.”

“It takes time to—”

“Yeah, I can see you in administration. You’d make a fine principal. The kids respect you.” She stops and points to herself. “Not like this old lady here.” I’m flattered. *Me, a principal?* “So I’ll try to get that form in to you.”

“No problem.” She turns toward the door. “Do we have to use—”

“Right.”

“Black pen?”

“Yes.”

“Of course.”

“What kind of an operation do you think we’re running?” A giggle lifts to the surface of my throat.

“And efficient, too?”

“Where do you think we are? Somewhere in Mexico?” Clarissa laughs, peers out the door at the children lining up outside. “Another day,” she says.

“Another fifty cents.”

Jose’s the first one in. “Sir,” he says. “I found out where the largest mountain range is.” I’m intrigued. “You wouldn’t believe it.”

“We’ll see.”

“Guess, sir.”

“I don’t think—”

“No, really, guess.”

“Okay, if you say so—Asia. Huh, not bad for your teacher?”

“No!”

“What?”

“You’re wrong.”

“Impossible.” I tilt back my head as if shocked by a pungent odor.

“Underwater!”

“Really?”

“The Mariana Trench. It’s deeper than Mount Everest is high.” His eyes are large and round, like a fish. He’s nearly hopping on what foot. Eugenio puts one small hand on Jose’s shoulder.

“Technically,” I say, pulling some papers out of a folder, “that’s a ditch, a canyon. Like the Grand Canyon.” The boys grow silent. “It’s not a mountain.”

Jose regains his enthusiasm. “No, sir, the show said that there’s a mid-ocean ridge that’s way bigger than anything above land.”

“And longer,” says Eugenio, his arms spread wide like he’s showing me the size of a giant fish he’d caught in the pond behind the school.

“I’m not so sure.”

“No, it’s true.” I’m not used to seeing Jose so excited. “We were on the phone when we were watching it.”

“Yeah,” agrees Eugenio, a thin, devilish smile emerging on his lips.

“Okay . . . class, let’s get started.”

“But, sir.”

“I’ve got to start—”

“Don’t you think that’s awesome?”

“Fine, Jose. Yes, that’s fine.”

“But—”

“On the board.” My GT students write in their notebooks. We’re interrupted by a knock on the door. I see Principal Cardenas’s face outside. I leisurely walk toward the door.

“Sir, you’ve got several students outside.”

“I know. They’re late.”

“We can’t have them waiting in the halls.”

“They’re late.”

“Write them up.”

“Mrs. Martinez told me not to.”

“Write them up.” Alison twirls her hair, stares at me with a bored expression on her face.

“It’s not my job to spend all morning writing up late kids.”

Cardenas’s expression remains calm. He holds the door open from the outside.

“Let ‘em in.”

I’m standing below the door frame, directly in front of him. “I’ll be more than happy, sir, to let the kids in as soon as you figure out to get them here on time.”

“You need to—”

“No, *you* need to get your principals out clearing the halls in the morning. I don’t even see Mrs. Martinez anymore. “This girl,” I point at Alison, “is late every day.”

“Well it’s not our fau—”

“She’s talking to friends in the hallways because you refuse to give passes to kids that leave breakfast late.”

“Write her up.” We’re nearly face to face. I’m livid; he’s calm.

“I just told you. Martinez told me not to.”

“Busses are late, kids wake up—”

“I had no intention of leaving them here all morning.” I retreat slowly into my room. “I’ve e-mailed you twice this week.”

“Write ‘em up.” I can see this is going nowhere.

“So you do want me to write them up on level I’s?”

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Martinez—”

“Yes. I’ll talk to her.”

Alison enters and smiles at the rest of the class. Brian meanders in ten minutes after the bell. This new idea of breakfast in the cafeteria is a disaster. No one cares.

Hey, I’m team leader, dammit—they’ll care

At the Site-Based Decision Making, or SBDM, meeting, I explain why we should eat in our classrooms again. “The kids have no excuse to be late.”

“But, sir,” complains Mrs. Vasquez, spiky gray hair waiving like coral. “The busses are late sometimes.” Mr. Lopez nods his head in agreement.

“I’m not talking about busses.”

“Some of these kids can’t afford breakfast.”

“It’s free.”

“No, at home.” Mr. Lopez nods. “We have to make sure they *eat*.”

“I’m not talking about starving them, just getting them to class.”

“They get there, don’t they?”

“About ten minutes late.”

“I’m tired of rushing the kids,” says Mrs. Vasquez. “Maybe I’m old, but they should be able to relax and eat.”

“Advisory is for tutoring,” I say. “And I’m still waiting on the mathematics packet.” I toss my hands in the air. “First, the kids are not on time, and when they are, I don’t have what I need to get things done.”

“Make something up,” says Mrs. Vasquez.

“I’m not a math teacher.”

“Look, all I’m saying” she says, taking off her glasses, “is that some of us have been around for a long time.” She stops and looks at Mr. Cardenas. “You can’t push the kids too far.”

“I wasn’t aware we were pushing them.”

Mr. Cardenas’s beeper rings. He excuses himself to use the phone. “All I’m saying,” whispers Mrs. Vasquez, “is that they don’t listen to us anyway. Just smile and do what you’re told.” She grits her teeth and smiles like a homecoming queen. “I thought you learned that last year,” she says, her hand waving mechanically in the air. She stops talking and an eerie silence takes over the room.

Just *smile and do what you're told*. If only the kids saw the wisdom in that. I admit I've been wrapped up in another article for class, this time about the manner and method to teach basic writing. I don't know if I'm cut out to teach college freshman, but I think the author's on to something here, about the connections between the changes teachers undergo and the progress of the students. Well, I'd say so! I'm in what she calls the "Guarding the Tower" and "Converting the Natives" stage.

I recognize myself immediately. I'm shocked at students so alarmingly and incredibly behind. Of course, I can't fail an entire class. Jarred can't read and I've been ignoring him all year. I'm not about to adjust my pedagogy for the needs of struggling students—that's *cheating*! But Patricia's not all that dumb; in fact, her rudimentary errors, the product of almost no exposure to literature and journal-writing, belie a certain individuality and—dare I say—native intelligence. She's a product of where she came from and considering that, she's not doing all that badly.

So you see, *fool*, it's not all me. I'm performing a service here. So where does that leave me? I don't think I've appreciated the changes I've made, both personally and professionally. I expect more out of life. Spontaneity only works for so long. Every team needs a leader—even Team 77. No more well-intentioned, inconsistent white liberal. *Nuh-uh!*

So here I am, *converting the natives*. It's good to be an anthropologist again. It's like dissertation fieldwork. This time, though, I'm filling in the gaps: I'm not appreciating a tribe, but integrating them into the middle-class way of life. Empty vessels waiting to be filled. Perhaps that's why Jose appeals to me so much. And all the GT girls, even talkative Gabby. I'm the steady flow of truth, and I appreciate how, this year, they listen.

I don't need to connect what I'm teaching to what my students already know. Prior knowledge is a scam! We're trying to get what you know *out* of your head.

"Isn't that right, Alison?"

"What, sir?"

"How the spoken word isn't appropriate for a written context."

"Yes, sir."

"And the things we're thinking aren't always appropriate for text."

"Yep."

"Because the speaker doesn't care about formal learning."

"Uh-huh."

"And those to whom the English language is still a mystery, including most of you, you must learn to see the compelling rhetoric of formal written English as it has developed, *historically*, through the years." I hope I haven't lost them. Jose watches me, mesmerized, as upright in his seat as a German headmistress checking roll. I understand the Spanish missionaries' narcissistic self-importance, how the one who dominates compels the other's recognition of him. Am I boiling over with religious fervor? Is my identity becoming dependent on my own position as master? Converting the Natives. As far as I'm concerned, no other stage exists. *It's for their own good, fool! Honest.*

Later that week I find a picture in my suggestion box. The drawing depicts a man in a green shirt, his hands resting in his conservative khaki pants. He looks annoyed. I look carefully at the picture—I recognize myself immediately. A name is drawn across the top of the man’s shirt: D-Generation X. Smaller lettering in the middle of the shirt displays an odd message—“We’ve got two words for ya: suck it.” My name appears at the bottom of the page, along with a small arrow pointing toward the man in the picture.

Now I’m sad. How had they come to despise me in six short months? I turn over the drawing and slam it on a small student desk next to me. I slide my legs inside and sit. I turn the picture over. The man in the picture looks angry to me, as if he carries his hands in his pocket so he doesn’t strike someone. Is that what they think of me?



Well, hell—what do I care? No more suggestion box; they haven’t used it this year anyway. These kids aren’t any better than the lazy slugs in my college classes. I’m through with half-wit artisans. But just because my university classmates are tied too much to their busy lives, doesn’t mean I’ve dropped my interest in poetry—the vivid world of dust-mops and strutting women, gnawed fruit cores and fragrant apples. There’s

a lot to say between the lines. I read something yesterday in a book-length poem by Jimmy Santiago Baca, *Healing Earthquakes*:

*Imagine if you existed with half a heart,
 a half-heart kid at fourteen
 never having been touched in a caring manner
 wondering about it as he might wonder about
 nuclear physics,
 wondering
 about love in the same manner he wondered
 how the moon held itself up so high,
 so far away,
 unable to touch it
 though he wanted to with all his heart.*

I cry for the first time since that Baptist church. I imagine Jose sitting in class, how far off his eyes wander, the way his mind disconnects from the world around him and realigns to the intricate, the intellectual core. “Jose,” I shout.

His head jolts up from his book. “Yes, sir.”

Your lifeline,” I say. “Where is it?” He pulls out a ragged piece of paper from his notebook.

“Thank you.” Tears well up in his eyes like an underground stream. I glance at his lifeline. His father raped his mother when the boy was four years old. Two years later

the man went to jail and doesn't appear again in his lifeline. In 2007, he went to live with his grandmother. Last week, his puppies died. How does a boy write about his mother's beating and rape in a tiny little box? What happens to a boy who's fallen so far from home? Every teacher finds a boy or girl who reminds them of themselves at that age. It's difficult to turn back, impossible sometimes. The youths I'd admired my first two years are nothing like me—Rolan, Daniel, Michael. They are, instead, what I'd wished to become. I'd been living their contented lives for nine months out of the year: connected, curious, carefree. I'd neglected myself—the Jose lingering deep inside. I'd take him to the moon, hold him high with all my heart so he can touch it, at last, like I've always wanted to. Boys like me listen and do what they're told. *Don't get too close.* Got it! Not another Rolan. I fold Jose's lifeline and return to my desk.

CHAPTER 27

I'd do anything to get out of school for a day. Ashley asked me to chaperon the art club's trip to San Antonio. "We need a male," she said.

The next day I tell the class. "But you can't draw," Juan says.

I ignore his comment. "You'll have a substitute." Juan puts something in his backpack. "Does that mean—"

"Yes," I say. "Anyone not finishing their homework automatically receives a zero." Juan turns to Jarred. "The substitute is in charge."

I used to love extracurricular activities. What student doesn't? Nothing thrilled us more than a substitute. In previous years, however, the children viewed my absence as a desertion. Instead of welcoming the break, they greeted my return with palpable resistance—a passive-aggressive silence. The resistance faded after a few days, but only after I felt like a divorced dad trying to win back his children's affection.

Not so this year. *Who cares!* I'm excited about the trip. Experienced teachers know that their most exasperating students are the same ones they wouldn't mind having a beer with at a high school graduation party. The key to enjoying extracurricular activities is doing it because you want to, not because you *have* to. It's the difference between voluntarily washing the dishes because you love your spouse, and being *told* to do it or you're never getting a home-cooked meal again. It helps if you're getting paid for your time, which leads to less resentment that you've missed another episode of

American Idol. Likewise, becoming involved in extracurricular activities is a great way to experience things you wouldn't ordinarily do, such as coach tennis or assist in last year's Halloween play for two dozen first graders at our elementary after-school program. I have since mastered a variety of formally nebulous theatrical concepts, such as up-stage, down-stage, blocking, and blackouts. I even saw a play last weekend.

As I expected, the art students are a diverse group. Sixty percent female, half of whom prefer dark clothing, dark eyeliner, and an even darker disposition. The other half is nerdy girls glad to have the company of other nerdy girls. Good God, there's Thelma! The boys divide themselves into two groups: future gangbangers interested in the finer elements of prison tattooing and a group of boys obsessed with Japanese animation. Both groups of boys get along well despite their diverse interests, a fact that I attribute to their young age: the thugs haven't hardened yet into full-scale criminals and the nerdy boys keep to themselves. "How much time do we get at Six Flags?" a bony boy asks from the bus seat next to me.

Ashley tells me I'll be the unofficial tour guide for our stop at the Alamo. Then it's off to the McNay Art Museum and, finally, Six flags over Texas. "You know it's named that way," I tell Ashley, "for the flags of the six nations that at one time controlled Texas soil." She returns her gaze to the flat-screen television in the front of the bus. Our parent chaperone, Mrs. Gutierrez, leans on her elbow feigning interest.

Ah, we're here! First time in four years. Few places conjure up more images of American sacrifice than the Alamo: Davey Crocket in his coonskin hat battling dozens of barbaric Mexicans in hand to hand combat; Jim Bowie stabbing soldiers from his deathbed, refusing to surrender despite his pulmonary pneumonia; William Travis, the

young lawyer, preparing to die for his belief in freedom. I don't believe any of it. I'd spent my first two years refuting the supposed "truths" of the Alamo. True to my postmodern academic upbringing, I focused on the other side of the story: how the Texan settlers had been stealing the Mexicans' land for years; how they intended to defy Mexican law and extend slavery into Texas; how Santa Anna had a constitutional right to defend his country's territorial integrity. I hoped to teach my students, all of whom are of Mexican ancestry, to look beyond the "official" history in their textbook. I even showed them Disney's version of the Alamo, starring Fess Parker as Davey Crockett, in an irreverent attempt to mock the one-sided historical outlook. In an elaborate outdoor ceremony, I cut up the official state TAKS objectives into little pieces. "This history is dead," I told the class, half-expecting them to pump their fists over their hearts.

"It's so hot," Cheryl says, interrupting my internal monologue. "Can we go inside?" My attitude changes once I step foot on the sacred ground. Luis, the notorious tagger, notices the architectural structure. "Damn, those walls are thick," he says, his eyes rising as if he's stumbled upon the Holy Land. "Don't even think about it," I warn, careful to keep one eye glued to Luis's hands.

"Look, kids." I notice most of the kids had entered the gift shop. "Only part of the walls remain." I knock on the wall. "The rest were destroyed by Mexican cannon fire."

"So this is, like, 300 years old?" asks Thelma. She rubs her fingers along the wall next to her. I compute the math in my head. *Very good, girl.* "That's old." She wipes her finger on the back of a girl's pink jacket in front of her. She props herself on the top of the wall. "It hasn't lost its integrity." She says the word *integrity* like she's used it

every day of her life. We approach the main courtyard, where most of the death had taken place, and I'm stunned at the beautiful array of oak trees, cabbage palms, and colorful pansies outlining the thick grass.

"At the time, this was dirt," I say. "See how history is partly myth?" An image of my dead grandfather enters my head. He wears beige pants and a white undershirt, his typical summer clothing, and he has taken off his shoes. He's playing horseshoes in the thick, leafy backyard of my grandparent's house in Indiana. My grandmother tends the garden in back of the garage. She picks tomatoes and sits down to check on the green beans. I feel the texture of the green beans, like a peach, and smell cooked bacon. My grandmother pours the bacon into the chopped beans. Their skin is smooth, pale, a tribute to their Russian and Polish roots. For the first time in a while, I think about my own roots. Could this have been what my professor meant?

Eventually we arrive at the chapel. The original mission didn't have the famous hump, I explain to the students. The impressive carvings of the church's wooden doors maintain a high place in American folklore. Four columns flank the giant, curved door, a testament to the Spanish crown's belief in eternal permanence. The stone is massive. "It feels like a cave," I tell the children.

"It's cool," says Thelma. She curls her hair with her finger. "The temperature, I mean."

"Yes."

"It's like a breeze without the breeze," she says.

“Look,” says Edward, pointing at several giant plaques affixed to one of the chapel’s walls. “Are those the names of the people who died here?” I join him next to the wall. We scan the names together.

Thomas Jackson

John Harrison

Samuel Burns

Edwin Mitchell

“Can I touch them?” Edward asks. I point at a sign warning tourists not to touch the chapel. “Please,” he says.

I scan the room. “I guess so.” Mrs. Gutierrez shakes her head disapprovingly. She herds her daughter, one hand on her back, to another part of the museum. Edward rubs his small hands over the names.

“You said 189, right Sir?”

“Yes, 189 men died defending the Alamo.” I look at his nutmeg-colored eyes. “On the *Texan* side,” I emphasize. “We really don’t know how many Mexican soldiers died.”

“These places,” he asks, guiding his finger along the letters. “Is that where they were from?” I looked closer at the wall. The names are followed by a place of origin. I recognize many of the last names. They feel familiar. I’m surprised at the number of European Alamo defenders: Germany, England, Ireland, Denmark, Scotland. No Russians or Poles. For the first time, I feel a kinship with the European settlers of North America. I touch a name with my fingers—*William Ward, Ireland*—and I’m overcome with pride. My stomach tingles. Imagine his audacity. His self-reliance. His defiance.

Exactly what I've been trying to preach for the past six months. How difficult it must have been for my grandfathers, Theodore Maynor and Elmer Girman, to settle in a new country. Their story is essentially the same: the search for a better life.

"Hey, look," Edward says. He points to another spot on the wall. "A Mexican." The name, Toribio Losoya, is indeed Mexican. "So he fought for Texas?" he says.

The boy's brown eyes meet my green eyes in a soft embrace, and I've never felt so much camaraderie and trust between the Anglos and *Tejanos* until now. I hope he feels the same about me. Perhaps I've been too hard on my students this year.

"One hundred eighty-nine," Edward says a few minutes later. He's brought a picture of William Travis from the gift shop. "Look, sir, he looks like you." I bring the picture toward my face. Travis's eyes are opaque, aqua, so close to the color of my grandfather Maynor's eyes that I nearly cry. "Oh," says Edward. "I better bring back the picture before they think I stole it." He laughs on his way back to the gift shop.

Half-an-hour later we roll into the art museum. Matisse or Monet? I have no idea. But I do appreciate the mix of colors and techniques even if I can't express it in artistic lexicon. I'm not expecting Edward's precise explanation of pointillism, the artistic technique undergirding the expressionist movement. Is it possible—*oh no, never*—that these children know more than me—not just in art, but in *anything*. Fine, they draw better than me. But critique? That's where I draw the line. I hear Ashley say "pedagogy." Several students nod, including Edward and Thelma, and turn toward another painting. I stand back, unfold my arms, and observe. Not monitor, but watch. Is it possible I don't know everything?

I watch the children discover Picasso and Van Gogh, even an Andy Warhol print. They approach the paintings as if some secret remains buried within the strokes of burgundy and blue. Our tour guide appears nervous, hunching over and pinching her left earring, as the children inch closer and closer to the paintings. How have they survived the previous thirteen years unaware of Vincent Van Gogh's *Women Crossing the Fields*? How have I?

Each child had his or her own idea of what constitutes worthy art. They are not static windmills—they have minds of their own. Rafael tugs on my shirt sleeve, pointing at a large Italian sculpture. “I can do that,” he says.

“Really?” I look at the sculpture.

“Maybe not now,” he says, misconstruing my pithy response for disagreement.

“But real soon.”

I smile. “I bet.” We leave the museum in perfect stride.

We board the bus for Six Flags. Thirty minutes later, we arrive.

“You know,” I say.

“We know. We know.” A group of girls rise from their bus seats. “Spain, France. Mexico. Texas. South. America.”

“South America?”

“The confederacy,” Norma answers. “And then the United States.” The giggle together and stare at the swirling roller coaster in the distance.”

“Okay,” says Ashley. “Three groups.” Two girls had already had their faces painted. They looked like village whores.

“We’re princesses,” they say in unison, crimson lipstick smearing across their faces. *Cute!*

“This group,” says Ashley, pointing at a group of girls, “will go with me. We’re the shoppers.”

“Yes,” says a girl. She thrusts her fist in the air.

“This group will go with Mrs. Gutierrez.” A mixed group of boys and girls follows Mrs. G, as she’s asked me to call her. “Who are the daredevils?” asks Ashley. The remaining boys raise their hands, along with a girl. “Good,” she continues. “You guys will go on all the roller coasters.”

“Even the Screamer?” asks a boy in a San Antonio Spurs jersey.

“Even the Screamer,” she says, “You’ll be with Mr. Girman.”

I’m flabbergasted. I take my hands out of my pockets. “I’m not, um . . . really a ride person.” I avoid Ashley’s eyes. “I don’t know—”

“Ah, come on sir,” says the boy in the Spurs jersey. “Don’t be scared.”

“It’s not that I’m scared.” I look first at Ashley, who ignores me, then at Mrs. G, who has started to walk in the opposite direction. “I’ve been, you know, kind of sick.” I cough into my hands.

“We’ll start with an easy one,” says Edward. He wipes his nose with the back of his hand.

“Sick,” I repeat. Edward hands me a map of the park. *What choice do I have?* We walk toward the rides. Juan, a small, sixth-grade boy who defected from Mrs. Gutierrez’s group, follows closely behind. He holds one hand on the small of my back. I turn around. “Don’t worry,” I tell him.

A cautious child, I never climbed trees beyond the first limb, walked my bike across the street, and unplugged the toaster after making my daily bologna sandwich. Once, when I was nine years old, I took off Barbie's pink shoes so my little sister wouldn't choke. My mother never understood my point. So, imagine if you will, the screaming little sissy I'm about to become. Have already been. I stare at the Screamer, an absurd structure of twisting steel painted Crayola crazy. My first reaction is exactly what the ride had promised: to run away screaming. "I'll wait here," I say.

Juan, still by my side, looks up at me like an eclipse, his eyes somehow lowering toward me. "I'll wait here, too," he says. *Ah shit, kid. Why'd you have to do that?* I look at the boys next to me. Edward bounces on one foot. It's *their* day, isn't it? Enough of the big bully. Weary Bore. "Come on," I say. I wrap my arm around Juan's shoulder. "We're both going."

Little cart. Deathbed. Metal bar over our waists and off to races. Prayer. Juan leans on my shoulder. "I'm sorry," I tell him. "Too young to die." Gloria in the cart behind us carries a calm demeanor. She buttons her camera in her jacket pocket.

Juan places his small hand atop mine. "Don't worry, sit. I'll protect you." He turns his head and screams, "Whoaaaaa...."

If you pretend something long enough, you eventually believe it. The story of my school year, perhaps. Juan giggles, wants to ride again. This time I sit next to Edward. "You can see downtown," he says, moments before the propitious drop.

"Nice."

"Fuuuuuuuuuck," he screams. His hands wave in the air. By the time we arrive in the station, he's uttered "Fuck me" at last ten times.

Oh shit—teachable moment. I rally my response in my head. I pull the metal bar from our laps. I look Edward in the eyes. “That was *fucking* great.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Man, I feel great.” If it weren’t for these kids, I’d still be at the carnival games throwing balls through tiny hoops.

Overcome with this new spirit of adventure, I join the children on the Wacky Wild Rapids. We ride the rapids six consecutive times, each time marveling at how Gloria manages to turn the raft so she’s under the wettest waterfall. We’re wet; we’re cold; we resemble a pack of shivering puppies. Not even the wet chill of my body can erase the warm feelings in my chest.

A few hours later, all of us drenched, we board the bus for our last stop, the Riverwalk Mall. *I know! I’ll buy some cheap warm clothes.*

I ask Mrs. G to watch the kids. “I’m going to step in here for a minute.” She lifts her chin. “I need some new clothes.”

“Are you going to buy clothes for *everyone*?”

“Well, no, it’s just that, I’m, uh. . . wet, and—”

“Uh-huh,” she says. She looks around at the kids. “And they’re not?”

I pull wet fabric off my skin. “Cold,” I say. I turn toward Footlocker. “Wet.”

I look down at my striped t-shirt, which has faded to a mess of brown and maroon smudges, and pull the heavy wet fabric off my skin. “Wet,” I say. “So wet.”

The man at the store asks me my size.

“Thirty-four,” I say. “Something simple.” He disappears and I’m left there thinking about Mrs. G’s comments. What does she know? Besides, she’s dry. *The*

teacher's got to be the boss. In control. "The pack leader deserves dry clothes," I mumble.

"Sir?" says the attendant. He pulls up brown baggy pants over his jalapeño green boxer shorts.

"Actually," I say, "I won't be needing any clothes." I leave the store with wet hair still dripping on the floor. The young man shakes his head.

I walk past the Gap and Banana Republic. *Oh, the shiny dry clothes!* I drip water on an old woman and her husband sharing a banana split. Reminds me of my grandparents again. Juan sees me and wipes off the seat next to him with a tiny napkin. "I saved it for you," he says. He eats a piece of pizza as large as his head. As I sit down, I see—for the first time all day—a smile on Mrs. G's lips. I steal a few fries from Juan and return her gesture.

CHAPTER 28

Oral learners are scam artists. Jarred stares at the text and looks up at me. He's been absent the past four days. *Oh why can't the school day be one giant field trip?*

"I'm not sure about that word," he says.

I lean over his shoulder. "Which one?" He leans his body out of the way.

"Right there?" I point.

"Uh-huh."

"Together."

"Together," he repeats.

I frown. "Together they defended the Alamo." I close the book on top of his fingers. "You should have a fine career at Wal-mart." He looks up with wide, open eyes. Holds a hand over his forehead. I'm mean because I'm frustrated. Slow readers slow the class down. No time for the Alamo movie this year. Just a bunch of battles anyway. Mexicans ignoring their own land. No roads. No schools. No one in charge. Thank God the southerners got here when they did. Property taxes; public education; trails that lead to somewhere. Too bad they made it down here to the Rio Grande Valley so late. I mean what I say. Beware the revisionist historian.

"Nuevo Santander," I tell the children. "We weren't part of Texas." They dutifully copy notes. Jarred holds his pencil like a crayon. I'm not sure what he's doing. "We were never part of *Tejas*." Rebecca's eyes rise from her paper.

“Never,”

“So we’re not in Texas?” Rebecca asks. I wait for the other children to laugh—not this year. “We’re not?” she repeats.

I emerge from behind the podium. “We’ll get to that.” I look up at the notes on the screen. “Later.”

Jarred asks me to move out of the way. “I can’t see.” Nothing written on his paper. I move in front of the screen. “Why bother.” I look at Jarred and shrug my shoulders.

The next morning I ask the lead special education instructor what I should do.

“He receives extra time,” Christina says. “See, here?” She moves her finger down a list of special accommodations. I politely follow her stabbing finger.

“Oh, yes.”

“Verbal reminders. Shorter quizzes. Positive feedback.”

“Positive feedback?”

“Praise,” she says. She stops fidgeting with her blouse. Her hair folds over her forehead like cresting brown waves. “You do offer praise, right?”

“Tell me you’re kidding.”

“These kids need extra support.”

“We read and write responses every day.”

“Emotional support.”

“Emotional?”

She pokes at my chest. “In here,” she says. “Their self-confidence is eroded.” *Is she serious?*

“I don’t offer emotional support,” I say. “I’m a teacher.” I watch Jose enter class.
“Or have you forgotten?”

“If you want to look at it that way,” she says, “fine.” Make sure there are dictionaries nearby. Offer mnemonic devices.” She stands with her hands high on her hips. “You do remember those, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Checklists. Graphic organizers. Movies.”

“I’m not showing the Alamo this year.”

“Why not?” she says. Her lips curl into a smile. “My kids love that movie.”

“Your *kids*?”

“You know what I mean.”

“We don’t have ti—”

“Perfect for kids like Jarred.” *Here we go.* “Oral learners.” *Right.* “So they feel like they’re getting as much as the regular kids.” She nearly veers into a cheerleading pose. *Go team!*

“Did it ever occur to you,” I say, leaning toward my classroom door to listen for noise, “that the reason the kids can follow movies is that they lie around and watch movies all day at home.”

“That’s not—”

“Instead of doing homework.”

“Research suggests—”

“Or reading,” I say. She waves her finger in the air. “Why don’t we just teach math using video games?”

Christina takes a step back and stares at her red shoes. “We have a legal obligation to help these students succeed.” She fingers her left eyebrow.

“I’m a lawyer, Christina.”

“I know”

“The kid can’t read.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“You should have seen him last year,” she says

“I’ll pass.” I turn towards my door. “If it’s so goddamn legally important, stick him with the other dumb kids so they don’t slow everyone else down.”

“Sir, you’re not suggesting—”

I soften my voice. “Hell, I don’t know what I’m suggesting.” I place a foot in my classroom. The students dutifully copy the objectives off the board. “All I know is that a boy who can’t do what he’s told, either because he can’t or he won’t, does not move me in any way.” I stop and stare at Christina. “No way.” She stares at me carefully, her nose pinching upwards. She shakes her head and turns around. I’ve won.

That field trip rejuvenates me. Three more days and I’m off to Mexico for Spring Break to work on my fiction portfolio for class. *Can’t let these kids slow me down!* Tennis practice drains me. Fiction class is filled with fools.

“Two laps,” I holler at J.P.

He drops his racket to the side leans the opposite knee. “What’d I do?”

“Didn’t follow through,” I say. “That serve’s a sitting duck.”

“It was in, right?”

“A serve like that won’t beat East,” I say. “Only two more weeks.”

“One and a half,” he says.

“The laps, J.P.” I take his racket. “Run the laps.”

I see Laura and Sarai sitting on the sidelines. “Get up, ladies.” The girls ignore me. “Twenty push-ups for slackers.” I hear something snarky, but shift my attention back to the seventh-grade boys serving for their lives. “You can’t improve by lowering the standards,” I say. “Your opponents will serve it right by you.” I smack a hard serve down the line. “See how much I’ve improved?”

Eddie bounces the ball off his racket. “Can *we* go?” he says.

I move out of the way. “You’re done for the day.” The boys look around. “You, Eddie.”

“Me?” The boy holds a tennis ball against his chest. “What for?”

I back up toward the service line in front of us. “You don’t talk to a coach that way.” J.P. rolls his eyes. Eddie slams the ball with his racket and walks off the court. I’m so sick of tennis I could scream. One more day.

On Friday I bring my luggage to the classroom. “Ms. Ramos is driving me to the border,” I say. My sister describes San Miguel de Allende as a magical place. Climbing hillside verandas; winding alleys; artist studios. Another traveling gig—a teacher from the Rio Grande Valley explores a historic Mexican village. *Ha-Ha, I’m Anglo*. Who knows what kind of misadventures a lone white traveler will stumble upon in a community of fellow expatriates. Okay, none. But at least I can relax.

During third period I show a documentary on the Alamo so I can research cheap hostels for my stay. I reserve a bed for four nights in San Miguel, followed by another three nights in Guanajuato. I'll spend my final day at a nearby artist's compound to write the newspaper article. *Maybe have a drink!* Jarred asks me if they must answer all twenty-five questions.

"Of course."

"During the movie?" Rebecca asks. She slaps something off her face.

"The documentary."

"Oh, right," she says. "The documentary." She looks at Patricia. "So, um, yeah?"

"A documentary is about truth." I pause the disc. "We're not here to be entertained." Juan taps his pencil on the table. "We're here to learn." The room is quiet. Patricia is not pregnant.

"So, um . . . we answer them all?"

"Yes, Rebecca. You have to answer all the questions." Several students, including Jarred, begin to write. I continue the documentary and return to my desk. Halfway though—after the fourth professor's instructive monologue—I realize the program is meant for high school students. Perhaps older. I scan the DVD case on my desk; the program appeared on The History Channel last year. I'd made copies of the worksheet that came with the program. *Ah, no matter.* At least I'll get some peace and quiet. I notice Jarred writing furiously as the documentary ends.

"One more," he says.

I'm shocked that half his answers are correct; the ones I can read, anyway. I remind myself to give him a silver star on his paper when we return from Spring Break. No time now. I need to finish my travel plans before lunch. My plane returns at midnight the Sunday before classes begin, and I plan on showing the second half of the documentary on Monday. *The prudent planner!* That Tuesday is our district championship match against East Middle School. Finally, the season's over.

My timing sucks. The student-teacher charity basketball game starts eighth and ninth period. I need more time! I'm nervous, yes, particularly playing the coaches who've ignored me for three years. Perhaps I'm smitten. Another chance, I guess, to show them what they've been missing. Ignore the kids and get a life of my own.

I pull my blue and yellow Panther socks up to my knees. The eighth-grade boys are no match. A tall guy like me owns the court. I grab nearly every rebound and score. Coach Osorio tells me to give the boys a chance. "I played in junior college," he tells me. "Three years ago." *Well, now, isn't that nice?* I block a ball in Michael's face. Yes, *that* Michael. Rolan's right-hand man. He raises his hands in disbelief. He doesn't look at me the remainder of the first half.

Principal Cardenas changes in front of me in the boy's locker room. I'm sitting on a wobbly bench, making sure not to breathe in the lingering odor of prepubescent hormones, when he passes by in a pair of tight black underwear, his pants draped around his knees. He stops in front of me and pulls on a striped black and white jersey. He looks like a convict. He's the surprise referee. "I'm ready," he says. He takes his time tucking his white t-shirt into his underwear. I bend over to adjust my socks.

“Take your time,” says Coach Osorio. I look up from my socks. “You won’t be starting this half.” He and Mr. Cardenas chuckle like girls from my second-period class. I’m breathing heavy, anxious to go.

After the game I pull Jose out of the stands to help me bring my bags to Monica’s car. “Ms. Ramos,” I correct myself.

“I didn’t know you were so good,” Jose says. “At basketball.” He takes the shoulder bag from my arm and lightly places it in Monica’s front seat.

“Thank you, Jose.” He surprises me with a hug and turns around toward the school building. I lean against Monica’s car and watch him walk to the door fifty yards away. Hard to believe I’m still in school. One more year. Graduation beckons! I see a lone ball on the tennis courts, left over from yesterday’s practice. I imagine the fuzz of a wet tennis ball; tantalizing *amuse-bouch* beside a quiet artists’ studio; tiled walls and twisting Spanish melodies. Colonial architecture and Anglo anesthetics. The writer is back. *Watch out!* I wait in the teacher’s parking lot for Monica, anxious to leave this holding pen, cover my muscular body in paint, and walk on hands and feet over a blank canvas in the middle of Central Mexico. *Olé!*

PART V

MARCH 2009

CHAPTER 29

Sheets hang from silver knobs on the ceiling. I lie flat, formless. A woman in white covers my eyes with a green cloth. I touch my face. Hair accumulates around my mouth and jaw; I pick it like coral. A deep throbbing accumulates in the back of my head like dirt in a wheelbarrow. I pull a piece of hair from behind my right ear and peek through the cloth. No blood. I peer beside me. I don't know where I am.

I was brown, once. Piney brown. As brown as the inside of a caramel. The woman in white asks me if I'm from Honduras. Despite my pain, I'm flattered. She waits for my answer. I speak in a Spanish that sounds unfamiliar to me. I mimic the nurse's voice. She tells me I haven't spoken for three days. "*Que bueno que hablas,*" she says. "*Que suerte que no fue peor.*" I'm lucky it isn't worse. Her brown eyes travel the length of my body. I'm startled at the thinness of my ankles. "*Solito,*" says the nurse to someone in the hallway on her way out the door. *Alone.*

"We're going to wash your hair." A young man with mustache and wide chest lowers my hospital gown around my waist as if it were a fishing net and walks me, his arms supporting my waist, to the bathroom down the narrow corridor. He leads first with his index finger, sprinkles powered soap on my hair. He pours a measuring cup of warm water over my head, then removes his plastic gloves and smiles. I feel the softness of his large hands against my scalp. "You don't remember?" he asks.

“I remember eating dinner.” He rubs my neck. “Going to the bathroom.” The man frowns. He finishes washing my hair as if dressing me for a wedding.

Later, nurse Catarina brings in a thin boy holding a dinosaur between his arms. “He’s the boy who brought you home.” Her mouth hangs open waiting for recognition. I look at the boy. I’ve never seen him before. The nurse walks him to my bed, sits him on the edge. His smile reminds me of Brian, my first friend at the middle school. The boy tells me he’d found me wandering like *un pollo muerto* in front of his house. “You looked so lost,” he says, breaking off a piece of cookie from his pocket. “Like a crippled dog.” He called his mother, who called her sister, Catarina. I see another woman peering inside the partially-closed door. “Your eyes,” he says, “*como uvas*.” Catarina says her sister bandaged my head with one of her son’s shirts. I feel the boy’s tiny hands against my arm.

The doctor says I should heal in a few weeks. I’m relieved he speaks English. “A shame,” he says. “One tiny bump can open so much.”

“Open?” I ask.

“Yes. How you say, *desordenar*?”

“Mess up?”

“Yes.” He replaces the cap on his pen. “Controlar.”

“Control?”

“Your temporal bone,” he says, wrinkles marking his dark skin like rivulets, “is broken.” I’m not sure what to say.

My sister Shannon flies 2,000 miles to pick me up. Catarina giggles when she compliments my Spanish. “Where he from?” she says to Shannon every few hours. My sister folds her arms and grimaces out the door, tired of the same old question.

The next day Shannon dumps my wallet, passport, and laptop computer on the table next to my bed. My new passport shines beneath the florescent light.

“Where did you get—”

“Miguel brought them.”

“Who’s Miguel?”

“The little boy.”

Apparently I’d been carrying them when Miguel found me. *Had I not been robbed?*

Chatter follows: I’ve lost nearly twenty-five pounds in two weeks; Nurse Miranda had extracted hair from the back of my head in clumps; the first hospital did not know what to do with me. *First hospital?* “They thought you were mad,” Shannon told me. “Cussing everywhere.”

“Mad?”

“Like crazy.”

I imagined some psychiatric ward in an Alfred Hitchcock thriller. How could anyone understand English obscenities, I asked Shannon.

“Movies,” she says.

“Oh.”

The nurses give me a plastic flower in a pot I can take on the plane. The male nurse shakes my hand and pulls me closer to give me a hug. He squeezes hard. I don't want him to let go.

* * *

My health insurance has given up—or perhaps in. “We reimbursed you at today’s exchange rate,” says Kim at *HealthSmart*’s Houston office. “We don’t usually cover medical expenses this far outside our coverage area,” she says. “Never,” she whispers. “But there’s only so much a black lady can do in the middle of Mexico.” Her animated voice cheers me up. Until now I’ve been waiting to hear what the guava remembered moments before it fell from its wheelbarrow and smashed my temple; or the *what, how* and *where* discussed by the white-starched staff nurses I’ve never met at Hospital Number One; or the tone of Spanish invectives from two wandering types who may have bonked my head with a beer bottle. Agent Kim can’t figure it out either, but she says nice things to me: “We’ve been praying for you around here.” *We?* And why would anyone pray for *me*? Her voice dips when she mentions my CT scans from Hospital Two—*Católica de la Fe*. My heart opens like an artichoke when I close my phone: perhaps she’s seen my most recent set of CT scans—from Houston’s Sugarland Hospital—the ones from the previous day: the type of image, I imagine, that makes her bones rattle and eyes sink.

Things are worse than I’d thought. *Well, no shit.* Maybe that’s why I’m dizzy night and day. The doctors in Houston tell me the truth.

It's called the temporal bone, in the back of your head, and when it cracks—or fractures in my case—you can kiss your hearing good-bye, especially the rare transverse fracture (mine) which leads to a sensorineural hearing loss that cannot be restored. The cochlea of my right ear is a stalled snail. My loss is classified as “severe” and “total”; *profound* according to some scientific scale. Now I understand Agent Kim: my chances of partial-facial paralysis hover somewhere near fifty percent. But so far, I'm lucky. The blood from my ear has dried. At least I no longer look like a homeless man.

My family doesn't believe me. They insist on stories. My father says I lost a rabid fight at the cantina; my sister heard things from the doctor, but can't understand Spanish; my mother swears acupuncture will heal me and lead me towards my most famous novel. *No, my hearing will not return.* “You never know,” says my mother over the phone. Shannon insists tinnitus is not a real problem. “You'll get used to the ringing,” she says. My sister from Florida sends me valium. It helps.

Mr. Cardenas says I look terrible. “Quite an accident,” he says. I explain that I should be back by the first of May. He taps on his desk.

“To finish off the year.”

He stretches his hands behind his desk. “The rest of the year,” he says. He touches a small mole on his cheek. “You should wait until August.”

“But—”

“I'll make sure the Sick Bank covers for you.”

“But that's only thirty—”

“Other teachers can donate.”

“I’m not sure . . . ”

Mr. Cardenas scans my face. “You’re quite likable,” he says. I can’t halt the tears from running down my face. He hands me a manila envelope and a smaller blue card. “The teachers took a collection.” Money and personal checks fall out like I’ve won a game show. Inside the manila envelope are dozens of cards from my students. I see lace and hearts, and soldiers and guns, and Mexican flags and *caramelos* flying through the air. “We Miss You,” writes Patricia. “We told you not to go to Mexico,” Jose writes. I look at Mr. Cardenas’s perfect goatee. His expression does not change. I vow to finish my final four weeks of fiction class before I go home for the summer to a special Hearing Loss Institute—The Silverstein Clinic—about an hour from my mother’s home in Ft. Myers, Florida. The most common temporal bone injury: elderly falls. I should have known I’d be back in Florida one day.

CHAPTER 30

The police in Louisiana are swamp patrolmen. I drive the speed limit. They wait for you along bridges. On dry land they stoop in patrol cars like they're planting flowers along the road. I listen to satellite radio—the Martha Stewart station. Music hurts my ears. I learn that avocados hoard potassium. Overcooked barbeque blackens. Southerners prefer iced tea; northerners vote for lemonade. Listeners are instructed to vote for their favorite cupcake among a list of Sirius radio entries. A woman with a satiny voice asks callers to vote for her cupcake, a tiny model of the earth. Someone bakes a meatloaf cupcake with mashed potato icing. My mother used to bake meatloaf with white cheese in the middle, slabs of soft bacon coating the outside; it looked like a tiny piglet. By evening, a woman says that an obese announcer on another station has eaten a cupcake and submitted the empty crumb wrapper. He's surged into first place. I glance at my phone in the seat next to me. *Good work deserves to be rewarded!* Instead, I vote for the fat man and his incredibly disappearing cupcake.

In the morning I learn that Martha's book comes out today. Overnight the meatloaf cupcake had overtaken the half-empty wrapper. I listen cautiously; plenty of time to go. By eight-thirty, however, my right ear throbs so badly I can barely hear the velvet voices. I don't know who wins.

I reach Central Florida a few hours later. I spot an exit for Lakeland, the home of my high school baseball tournaments. I stay clear of Orlando. Disney's Magic

Kingdom: our overnight High School trip. Soon I'm bombarded by antique stores and anti-abortion billboards. *Four thousand and eighty-one: the number of abortions performed in Hill County last year.* Two overturned teddy bears decorate the billboard. *Appalling! Amusing!* I'm exhausted. A black truck tailgates me for several miles. I align myself with a neighboring sedan and make the truck's driver wait. Finally I move to the right. The truck whizzes past, forty-something soccer mom with both hands on the wheel and a stern expression on her face. She does not bother to sneak me a dirty look, or to turn around. I am jealous of her composure.

I pick up the phone to sign up for Everyday Living's Fruit and Vegetable Challenge. I'm not sure what this means. Outside of Tampa, I fill up my tank and buy two protein bars. I'll eat vegetables when I get home. I still call it home. On the way back, I'll stop at one of these lovely antique stores. I will not stay here. *This too, shall pass.* Four hours later I arrive home.

Approximately one-third of patients with damaged temporal bones suffer short-term memory loss. *Lucky me!* It's not until my mother asks me to taste a bowl of cabbage soup that I realize something else is wrong.

"Pungent," she says. "Like rotten eggs."

"I don't know, Mom, it tastes pretty good."

"Well, you always liked cabbage."

My stepfather enters the kitchen. "Good God! What is that smell?"

Good God? I hold my head over the pot. I inhale the steam.

Nothing. The next day the doctor tells me that ten percent of accident victims never smell again. It took me three months to figure this out?

Dr. Wazan explains that I've lost my vestibular functions. "When your head turns to the left," he says, "your body still thinks you're staring straight ahead." He jerks my head to the side. "See that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Like when you stand up too quickly from the store or something."

Exactly!

"Everything keeps spinning around for a few seconds, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Only when you're moving."

Presto!

My steps shrink to hunchback length. I call it limbic disobedience: I'm about to topple over like an overweight sunflower. I do not know how women do it, walk quietly and serenely. Or sullenly. They take fewer strides—longer, more gracefully—than us men. Here I am walking up the street, holding my thumb in front of me with outstretched arms, moving my head from side to side without moving my thumb. Then up and down. Next, my thumb moves but my head is still; only my eyes follow my thumb. Side to side. Up to down. The doctors have started me on progressive balance exercises. I progress to "Gait with Head Movement." I like this one. My target is a wide-trunked Royal Palm in the neighbor's yard. I stare at her ample physique in the distance. I move my head to the

right, then return my eyes to the big Tree as my head moves toward the center. I turn around and return in the opposite direction toward my house, staring at a pole with green square arms, street names printed in capital letters across both arms. On my return I look left this time, turn back to the palm tree. A neighbor pulls into his driveway in a nice taupe Acura. I avert my eyes toward the tree. The tree lacks curves, I notice, and has too tall a trunk for a woman. The tree is a man, and so am I clunking ill-timed step over ill-timed step until I reach my mailbox. I skip the last two exercises and turn the other way down the road. I've decided that squats will help my balance—as long as I stare at something in the distance. I count one hundred lunges on my nightly walk. Along the way I see a handsome Hispanic man about my age. Seeing him makes me walk faster.

As I reach my neighbor's grey mailbox, I turn my thumb sideways and begin to move my head up and down. Across the street, a young man with black wavy hair and impressive physical physique gets out from a tan Land Rover. He wears a black tank-top, white shorts and flip-flops. So relaxed. So comfortable. I wait to start my squats. I look at my mother's blue, five pound weights I carry in each hand. I stop doing arm curls and walk more respectfully. More masculine.

“Hey there,” he says.

“Hi.” I try to wave while lifting the weights. “This humidity is killing me.”

He laughs. I notice his beige flip-flops. He closes the car door. “No shit,” he says. “That's why I'm going to grab a beer inside.” His skin is cinnamon brown.

“Yeah, sounds nice.”

“Sure is.” He offers me a half-smile and returns toward the house to grab his beer. I remember that I cannot drink alcohol for at least another six months. A full year

to be safe, a doctor told me. I go from not caring about alcohol to suddenly craving it. I nod in the man's direction and continue my exercises. I wish I were him right now. *I used to be!* I can't fully remember. I begin lunges. Seeing that stranger only makes me feel worse about myself.

Today is my fifth week. The house is an inferno. I do not remember the sweat this way. Heat rising from the inside out, a tea kettle, my selfish craving for air. We eat cantaloupe. This morning I cannot decide if the cantaloupe rinds belong on the placemat beside me or the rim of my plate. I am accustomed to eating breakfast alone in my car, between the gym and school, mixing strawberries and breakfast bars between sips of a chocolate protein shake. Then I put the trash in a plastic grocery bag and discard it on my way into school. Here, I take sixty-seven steps between my bedroom door and the downstairs kitchen. I want to ask my mother how she can bear to live here. Instead I place the cantaloupe rind beside my egg yolk on the plate. Yesterday my stepfather Brian told me the kitchen countertops can only be cleaned with water. The day before he asked that I squeegee the marble shower after bathing. Otherwise, he says, the marble rusts. I did not know marble could rust. In the grand depths of sickness, this giant house ameliorates nothing.

Two rectangular skylights allow patches of wide light to enter the room. I am here, in a yellow house abutting a wildlife refuge, my mother's dream home, a giant pelican painting perched above a fireplace, twin lamps with solid black frames on either side. A twelve foot high étagère looms against the pumpkin-colored walls. Thick mangroves crowd outside the large bay window. My mother calls it a *Florida* bay

window. “Because of the mangroves,” she says. The fabric on the window seat is British and blue: two cherubs play with a wolf, all three stitched into a small pillow. This is not my home. I should not have come.

CHAPTER 31

I'm back, baby! No one ever told you life was easy. Move on; step it up. No one likes a complainer. I'm in the library twirling like a debutante. I'm shaking hands and reading lips, *Thank You, Hilda. Oh yes, yes. Better now. Nothing really. The harder they fall, ha-ha. Marcos, yes, can't thank you enough. Florida, yes. With my parents. Extremely fortunate. Lucky, really. A little conk on the head. Doing!!! Good to be back. Missed y'all. God Bless.*

Security! Make-up! Where's the teleprompter? Security!!!

Okay, so I don't know the proper protocol—I'm no American Idol.

Room 208 has never looked worse; I wish Betsy were alive today. The metal mini-blinds are coated with dirt. Scraps of fabric hang at odd angles like a cabana after a windstorm. Desks are backward, overturned, shoved futilely in a corner as if that would make a difference. I've nothing to do but stare—hapless, feckless, crackly-skinned, a bitter cherry flavor creeping on my tongue. I'm a boy, and the system's stacked against me. My desk faces backwards in the back of the room. I nearly trip on a broken globe resting on the ground like a basketball. Textbooks I've never seen before litter the floors. I feel like I've walked into someone else's domestic squabble.

Well, fine. Enough crying. Time to lace up the boots and get to work. No use blathering to someone who isn't here. I'll start with all the purple folders, yes, walk around the room and collect purple folders. Independence era, I think, or was that for the

unit on famous statesmen? Where's my laminated Thomas Jefferson? Anyone seen Benjamin Franklin's glasses? No matter; time for that later. I see a shadow to my left.

"How's it going, Chris?"

"Oh, fine, Ms. Ramos." I knock some papers off my desk. "For an explosion."

She looks around the room. "Yeah, your substitute wasn't all that organized. We tried to help her, but—"

"Oh, no worries. I'm just, you know, cleaning up." Monica hands me a broken frame with no picture. *Where's my niece?* Half a dolphin hangs precariously off the edge. "Sea World," I say.

"Just came to tell you," Monica giggles. "We're going to lunch. Café 107, if you're interested."

I assess the room. *Oh, hell.* Why bother? I'll be just another old man staring at his ragged self in the mirror. "No, thanks, I'll skip the pity party."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, got too much to do."

"Let me know if you want some help, later."

"I'll be okay."

"You sure?" She stands there with folded arms staring at the messiest corner.

"I'm good." She stares, but doesn't move. "Really, I am."

"Maybe later."

"Maybe."

I miss my plate of *tacos de estilo Reynosa*, soft *bistec* wrapped in corn tortillas, black beans nestled in a bowl, two spoonfuls of Ms. Ruiz's Caldo Tlalpeño, pinch of

cilantro—*oh the smell of fresh cilantro!* I stop myself, survey my classroom. Best to prepare for the worst.

Two hours later the new English/Language Arts teacher walks into my room. He talks so much I can count the number of silver fillings. *Where's Mrs. Bermuda?* The new man is young with medium skin like chicken stock and freckles a dash darker. His hair is short, but frizzy, matted like his mom and dad are from different worlds. He's probably bi-racial, but down here I presume he's Mexican. Another misdiagnosis, perhaps. All I know for sure is that he won't stop talking. *Talking talking talking . . .*

I look around the room.

Babbling fool . . .

Where's my projector?

“And that's why I came here.”

I need my document camera.

“So, I guess you have work to do.”

Really!?!

“I'll let you go.”

How kind.

“Jim.”

Fantastic, Jim.

“Nice to meet you.”

Another snot-nosed, pussy-ass fumbling with my time.

“Bye.”

And he walks like a girl.

Yeah, I know, why the big scene? The pot shouldn't call the kettle black, but the last thing I need is another Teach for America reject treading on my space. Why'd the Virgen Mary Bermuda take off so fast?

I open a cabinet and find my most cherished possessions wrapped neatly in a box: my Peruvian artifacts, tightly-folded serapes, Tibetan shawl from an old traveling friend. I'd put them there the beginning of last year. I won't be needing those anymore! I move the box to the bottom shelf. Ah, who knows!

For three days I'm in and out of meetings, passing time in the library doodling, getting used to my own voice. We teachers like to rest our voice when we're not in the classroom. By Friday I can barely move. I've jammed files wherever they fit and turned the desks into some workable arrangement. My glue sticks have been stolen. The walls are bare. I touch my forehead like a fainting housewife. What I wouldn't do for a ticket to suburbia, a way out of this mess. On my way down the seventh-grade hallway, I practice my exercises. I turn my head from left to right. Bob it up and down. Hold my thumb an arm's length in front of my nose, move it laterally at chin level and follow it with my eyes. I make sure no one is looking. By the time I reach the seventh-grade office, I nearly fall down. Dreadful, incoherent twaddle. I'm exhausted. Whatever emotional stamina I possess had better rise to the surface. I've no time for tweedy intellectualism.

I stay up late Sunday night making seating charts. I'll be at the door, perfected and ready. No team planning again. That means a forty-six minute advisory period and seven classes a day. They sit. I'll teach. Everything will be fine.

The first morning a boy barges in carrying a dripping carton of milk. “Breakfast stays in the cafeteria,” I say.

“I’m not done.”

I grab the carton from his hands. “You are now.” I throw the carton in the trash. “Have a seat, sir.” He ignores me, looks toward the front of the room. “What’s your name?”

“Billy,” he says. His feet don’t move but his torso sways like a tall building in Manhattan. His eyes dart from the door to his friends sitting down around him. His head moves like a rocket ship.

I motion for the first seat in front of my podium. “Here.”

“But, sir—”

“Have a seat, Mr. Sanchez.”

He drags himself the few feet toward Rolan’s old desk. The boys look nothing alike, but I can feel’s Rolan’s old spirit in the room. *Huh!* Haven’t thought of him in nearly a year. Like it’s supposed to be.

Billy has admirers. The first week’s a battle to quarantine the virus. David and Albert have managed to close in around him during first period advisory while I’m matching student faces and names.

Baaaaaahhhh. Baaaaaahhhh. Baaaaaahhhh.

David makes sheep noises.

“Bleat,” I say. “A sheep bleats.”

The next morning David switches to goats. “*Chivas,*” he says.

“I’m familiar.”

“No me digas.”

He’s mocking me—a stupid boy of thirteen years, probably twelve, is mocking me.

“They do that at AEP,” says Billy. “That’s alternative school.”

“I’m familiar.”

“I went there last year.”

“Brilliant.”

“The sir says I’m one of the smartest.”

“Like being the best cucumber on the farm.” The class laughs; perhaps I shouldn’t have said cucumber.

“The smartest cucumber, sir?”

“You should be so lucky.”

“Yeah, what do you know?”

“Sit down.” He walks to the trashcan. “Sit.”

“I’m throwing something, Mr. G-man.”

I should toss him the toilet. Let him swim his way out. A rotten one in every bunch. Albert and David make shrieking farm sounds. Three bad apples.

I’m interrupted by a knock at the door. I see Jose waiting at the other end.

“Come in.” He hesitates, then opens the door and enters. The children stare. Martin, Jackie, and Alisa laugh. Seventh graders think they know everything.

“We missed you, sir.” He opens his mouth and lets the words fall out. He doesn’t smile. I’d like to give the boy a hug. The loudmouths are watching. David tilts

his head, waits for my answer. I come a few feet closer, put an arm on the boy's shoulder. "You lost a lot of weight, sir." He brings me back to seventh grade.

"I have, Jose." He stands and stares. "It's good to see you."

"Yeah, sir." He looks around the room. Martin pretends like he's playing a trumpet in tune with the music on Channel One morning news. David looks up at the television. "I can come back later." I don't like the children staring at us. *That'd be great, Jose. How's the family?* "Well, sir, good to . . . like I said, good to see you—"

"Bye, Jose."

"Uh-huh." He stares at the class on his way out the door. Students like that deserve more of my time. I'd better hurry—university starts in three weeks! Why do I put myself through so much?

I feel like Sergeant Boner. That's right, a *great big dick!* Today's dosage of anti-gang rhetoric: *Do you think, Billy, the police are really here to terrorize you?*

"They did my dad," Billy says.

"The police *did* your dad?"

"Took him away because he hit my stepmom."

"Exactly."

"Yep," Billy says.

"You learned it from him," I say.

"Learn what?"

"Nonsense, boy."

"I ain't your boy."

“Full of nonsense.”

“I hate cops,” he says.

De la misma tela. From the same cloth. I look at Brian: splendid choice for a role model. Albert makes sheep sounds in the back.

It’s going to be a long year. The girls in the back are equally annoying. *Sir, my locker. Sir, I can’t see. Channel One is boring. Did you see Hector’s haircut? I know! He looks like a little dwarf. Over here, Hector. If you can see over this stick, you get a prize.*

Ungrateful little hens. *Peck peck peck.* Yeah, I’ve got the pick of the litter this year. Yes, sir. To top it off, Junior’s got autism. The boy stares at me all period and has no idea what I’m saying. *Insert press repeat.* I’ve no idea what I’m doing anymore. I must hold on. I’m back in first year, and I don’t know how I got here. *Click click click.* I want to go home!

My doctor says I have to make time for myself. *Living life in complete harmony with your own nature.* She’s glad I’ve taken up yoga. *Any so-called mistakes or failures you may have attracted to yourself.* I’m off to Mandala Spa, like every Saturday morning. Suspend my ego and seek an attitude of gratitude. How’s that for poetry?

I’ve much to be thankful for. I’ve never lost a love or alienated an ally. No deaths have brought me home. I travel. The lost little boy is swathed in blue sea. I lie in a hammock. I see glimpses of him running through banana trees. We are lost. His eyes are dark; my eyes glow green. I don’t know how to find him.

My vehicle drives well. My neighbors drink beer on their porch after work. My friends are amiable. I fear rupture.

I can't complain: my left ear remains strong. I miss the things my mother takes for granted. I miss jogging beneath the afternoon heat. Last week I fell over during a friendly game of racquetball.

I'm sitting cross-legged in our bilingual Yoga class. *Five older women and me.* We lift our arms above our heads and clasp them tightly together. I emulate a table, my hands and knees touching the floor as table legs. I hump my back as a scared *gato*, then arch myself forward into the *vaca* position. Today the instructor speaks Spanish. I roll on my back and grab my toes: the screaming baby. The dying *cucaracha*.

I don't have it so bad. Suzzet can't reach her toes. Magdalena bends her knees during downward dog. I've never been flexible; now my nose can almost touch the floor. Maria is nearly seventy, and she stands as perfectly erect as a white heron. I can't quite balance on one foot—I'm trying.

Paty turns off the lights and we're ready for *Savasana*, the relaxation pose. I cover my eyes with a cloth. My breathing is slow and deep. Paty lifts the cloth and dabs oil on the sides of my eyes. I feel as if I'm floating in a hammock. I mouth the word *thank you* and keep my lips apart. I miss my younger self. I allow my feet to fall to the sides. I'll wait for that boy like this.

Fat chance! I'm a mess. I'm not sure how I'm going to keep those boys in my advisory class apart. I'm still no good with girls. I wish I could bring the old women to class with me. Prolong the Mexican vibe. *Be like the inexhaustible, always-full Tao—be nonjudgmental, still, tranquil.* Sure, during yoga class, what's not to spoil my mood?

But this soldier's got surveillance to run. If I let my inner core float to the surface, what's going to prevent me from drowning?

I'm in no mood by church time the next morning. I only started going to get God's help to heal me. I inspect the flowers. Flowers are phony. Interlopers chew brass tacks, spit out something bent. I don't believe stories.

If you can't prove Jesus is not here . . .

Last Tuesday I thought I'd died. Home alone, chewing smallish pieces of pork tenderloin, I choked. It's not the first time. I will die drowning or choking on a piece of meat. I'm certain. My mother choked on chicken *cordon bleu* my first week of college. "I nearly passed out," she'd told me over the phone. "My throat's still sore."

If you don't believe in God . . .

My new church has a young minister. He plays rugby. I don't know what people from New Zealand are called. He looks like a guy I used to see in spinning class. I miss spinning. The minister sweats profusely, water dripping off his face like Satan's wrath. Me, I never needed to lose weight. I worked the room as an altar boy. Why do ministers sweat so much? I'm bored. Church is for sissies.

Hate the sin, love the sinner.

I've never much cared for gay men like myself.

I read last night that coffee plants produce flowers three to four years after planting. The Ngobe Buglé Indians in Western Panamá receive two U.S. dollars for every *lata*, or basket, of handpicked ripe red coffee berries. Fifteen years ago, Jamón gave me his last quarter so I could buy an orange soda. His half-brothers gave him that nickname, *fatso*. They shared a father, but Jamon's mother was the maid. She prepared

us coffee each morning. I hope the indígena pickers make more money now. Jamón smiled through dark, twelve-year-old eyes.

“We’re not to be tempted by nice people,” says the Baptist minister.

Isn’t that something? He speaks nicely with a pleasant intonation and respectful volume. He minds his manners: doesn’t fidget, minimal histrionics, passes his hand over his blue tie. He smiles. His blue eyes radiate. I could trust this man.

His words resonate. His sermon is brief. He is bald. I’ve fallen for a bald, brief sermon. His ass rides up on his back. I suspect he’s a crusader, hardening the body and psyche.

From what?

I’m the intermeddler; I can’t trust the middleman; I can’t trust myself.

I leave the church, drive to Mexico. Eat lunch with the children at the orphanage. A boy’s scalp is severely infected, like meat left out all day. He smiles and lunges at me. His hands barely reach my waist. I rub his little head, tap his shoulders. I try. I hold him against me—he giggles. I can’t feel anything. I no longer see Jamón’s smiling face. Did I make him up, too? Am I trying too hard?

Flowers fall in baskets and I am on a horse. I am real, aren’t I? Cotton tree flowers resemble watercolor paintings. I cannot smell. Whom can I trust if I cannot trust myself? A gray horse carries me through a ravine of blown flowers. Consecration of the hinterland. The wind blows on my face. I know not what I cultivate.

CHAPTER 32

This afternoon I asked three of my professors for a letter of recommendation. No face-to-face communication required, thank God, just a forwarded e-mail: I'm applying to Ph.D. programs and would be honored *blah blah blah* summary of my work *blah blah blah* additional information to follow.

I can't write—not like this. Each day is more exhausting than the last. Wandering through aisles like supermarket security. I'm filled with adolescent voices. Some perkier than others. Some downright rude. You reap what you sow. Maybe I never intentionally planted discord, but things happen as they should. Onward to a new generation! Toward the smiling maidens and ripped abdominals of the UFC crowd. I see you, yes. I'm not blind. Can't watch a World Series game because men in underwear are *beating each other* on the big-screen television. That's okay—I don't mind. You boys look so good standing there in clusters, hoisting beers with tattooed biceps. I have nothing against Eros in the classroom. Not that I'm looking forward to another four years of academic tedium.

Fine, you got me. I don't know what I want and hardly know how to get there. It doesn't matter what path you choose if you don't know what you want. No bastard little kids will screw this up! This semester I'm taking another bland workshop and something called Postcolonial literature. My literature professor is young like me and doesn't look happy when I tell him I've read all the books over the summer.

“All nine,” I say in the most disparaging voice I can muster on the first day of class. “I just hope it’s not another ‘poor me’ land mine I’ve walked into.”

The blonde professor, a *contemporary* in black purple Converse sneakers and stylish glasses responds kindly. “We’ll be covering a broad range—”

“Yeah, I know, *women queer black diaspora Mexican* you name it, I’m just not sure I’m ready for more systemic blame.”

“Interesting viewpoint,” he says. “We’ll have to explore that further.” I’m glad the desks are arranged in rows, rather than the traditional circles for small seminar classes. I’d, personally, rather die than recount the feminist and third-world blame-game. Uh-huh, the imperialist master in blue-collar drag; exoticized Other; racially-biased legal system. Cry me a river. I’m tired of being blamed for something that’s not my fault. Name one other person who’d come back to college two weeks after nearly dying. Or something like that.

Oh, boy. After all the time and effort getting ready to *go go go* each morning, you can imagine how surprised I am when I receive an e-mail from a professor I’d had the previous semester. He says I probably shouldn’t be asking him for a letter of recommendation; he’d have to be honest, he says, in order to write the letter. *Honest about what?*

His e-mail says I returned to class slightly disruptive. *Well, who isn’t?* That my complaints became personal, redundant. *Whatever!* I came across aggressively. *Aggressive? I was practically mute.* Great! Now I must grovel at his feet. How absurd. I can’t believe I ever thought a teacher should be a gatekeeper. I probably sneezed too

loudly when he was making a point. *Sucking up ain't easy, kid.* I should thank some of my former students.

I meet Cindy, a fellow May-graduater, at CoffeeSpice that Friday evening. “Can you believe it?” She twirls a large strand of red hair. “I don’t remember saying anything,” I continue. She looks at our friend Samantha beside me. “Did I, Samantha?”

“It’s kind of . . .” She looks again at Cindy. “It’s kind of a thing, um, yeah, uh-huh, you were kind of—”

“Kind of *what?*”

“Disagreeable, I guess.”

“Me?”

“Seriously.”

“It’s not that we hadn’t heard it before.”

“Yeah, nothing you hadn’t told us.”

“Uh-huh, Cindy, but never in class before.”

Cindy rolls her napkin like a flute. “Right.” She plays her napkin silently.

“Anything specific?”

Samantha sips from a frozen cookie-crumb concoction with a giant orbit-like lid.

“I’d like to know.”

“This one time you told Jack you’d be embarrassed to come to class if you were as unprepared as him.” She raises her tone at the end like an eager adolescent.

“No, I—”

“Twice. You did that twice.”

Twice?

Cindy takes a more somber tone. “You said Sinbad’s work was juvenile.”

“Sinbad.”

“Something like that.”

“Asinine,” corrects Samantha.

“But you don’t have that class,” I remind her.

“He told me.”

“He did?”

“Me, too,” says Cindy.

“He told *you* too? Why didn’t he tell *me*?” The girls fumble papers between them, anything to look busy. “You forget I teach adolescents,” I say. I look directly at Samantha. “Spill it.” Samantha adjusts the pink and white bandana through her hair.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Here’s the thing. We didn’t know what was wrong with—”

“Yeah, you missed, like only two weeks of class.”

“Three.”

“One was Spring Break, and, well, you looked the same except your weight and, I mean, your face was all craggy.”

“Yeah, your face looked like a mariner. We were all, like, ‘gone fishing lately’?” The girls laugh. “No one knew what happened.”

“We didn’t have any information.”

“Exactly.” Samantha bends the back of her hand toward the table.

“You didn’t say anything. Most of the time you were quiet and then, *bam*, out of nowhere you’d go off on how bad the program is.”

“Which is fine,” Cindy interjects.

“But the way you did it was so—”

“Angry,” says Cindy.

“Defiant.”

“Like you’d been waiting to say it all semester.”

“Uh-huh,” agrees Samantha.

“And now you did.”

“And it wouldn’t stop.”

“Nope.”

“All the time?” I ask.

“Thirty seconds and *ya*.”

“*Nada más*”

“That’s all folks.” Samantha bucks out her teeth like a rabbit.

Shocked. Appalled. Dismayed.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say something.”

“Yeah, when you’re quiet, we know something’s brewing.”

“Like in class, Samantha?”

“To be honest,” she says, adjusting her seat, “I’d seen signs of it before.”

“You look tired.”

“I’m still recovering.”

“No, before.”

“Oh.”

“Like you’d rather be doing something else.”

I do my best to look interested. I’m so tired I could faint. “Thank you, ladies.”

“Don’t mention it,” says Samantha. “Now, about that thesis.”

The last four years jumble together like a recipe. I sip my coffee and stare at a three-dimensional nutmeg shaker on the wall beyond Samantha’s head. *Angry. Defiant. It wouldn’t stop.* I’m not sure, now, where one timeline halts and the other begins. And here I’d thought I just needed a few more months of rest. *Nincompoop!* I guess I should have seen it coming. The girls were right: I was an unhappy mariner. Here I am clicking my heels on a hardwood floor. My damn dad’s only legacy: an endless reserve of humor. Maybe I’m trying too hard to cover things up. It’s time to face the possibility that I’m not okay.

Oh, grand. I’m in fine shape, now! My committee chairwoman calls me to her office. *I know, I know, I’m so far behind. I’m working on it, trust me. I’ll have a rough draft by next week.* It’s the same professor who introduced me to archaeological description my first class at the university.

“It’s fine, yes. No, no, the rough draft is fine.” I’m relieved. She backs up in her chair and clasps her hands around the back of her head. Her hair is shorter than I remember. Such a nice professor. “The thing is . . . and this is a bit awkward.” She rolls forward with a half smile. I’m having some trouble with your letters of recommendation.” *Here we go again. The great gatekeepers have returned. What am I expected to say this time?*

“I’m not sure I—”

“I had reports, say, from last year . . .”

“After my injury.”

“Yes, the injury.”

I’m embarrassed, didn’t realize professors talk so much. I’m not sure she’d understand the enormity of the situation. *Truth hurts. Terrible class. Lazy students. How is any of this my fault? Cue the violins.* “Yes, I wasn’t at my best.”

Her face remains motionless. “Understandable.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure if I’d be professionally honest if I failed to mention any of this to the school.”

“About Paday’s class?”

“Well, yes in a way, but as far as I’m concerned that’s mere speculation.”

“Speculation?”

“Yes, I had several students in my office.” She speaks quietly, half-heartedly, scratches her neck. “They had some complaints.”

“About me.”

“Well, yes.” I’m flabbergasted. “Nothing urgent.”

“How did—”

“That’d you’d been disruptive.”

“Yes.”

“A couple of times.”

“I think I came back too early.”

“Yes, perhaps. In any case, I reminded them I had you as a student before and nothing they said rang true to me.”

I feel tears submerged in the back of my eyes. It's been a long road. "I'm surprised no one said something."

"Yes, that's what I mean about not being of such importance. I suppose if it was that bad something would have said something to you."

"I'm quiet now."

"You always were, Chris." I can feel the tears.

"Just standoffish, I gathered."

"I'm exceptionally shy," I say.

"Yes."

"And busy, you know?"

"Yes."

"I think if I had more contact, you know, with other students, someone might have told me."

She looks at me firmly in the eyes. "Probably so."

"Right," I say. "Maybe pulled me aside and asked what's wrong. Told me I might want to go home for a few weeks."

"Uh-huh."

"Something like that." I feel my eyes like small pieces of crystals splitting inside.

Damn Mexico! I don't know how to fix this.

"Needless to say, I know you do good work."

"Thank you."

"Ph.D. programs require a lot of self-motivation. There's politics involved. That type of thing."

As I'm listening to her talk, a piece of the adolescent girl inside me starts to rupture. I've been alone for too long. Where's the boy inside me to calm this angst? To make everything simple again? Take away the noise. Squash the silence. Stop the dizziness. Bring back the scent of pungent garlic. Bring me back to life.

"It's been a struggle, ma'am. Yes, the fatigue."

"It must be tough."

"It is." I'm scared. No, terrified. I look at Professor Farmour, wondering why everything is so hard. *Always so hard.* The loneliness is palpable. "I'm not sure, sometimes, if I'm going to finish."

"You will," she says. "I have no doubt."

"Thanks."

"Take it easy. Slow it down. I'll send you the relevant part of the letter soon." She smiles awkwardly, lifting her face toward me as she rises, and I wonder why I haven't taken any more classes with her. Just some crumbling artifacts and I left as quickly as I had come.

CHAPTER 33

This week I'm hanging on for dear life. Billy, who's just returned from his second stint in the alternative school, has come back madder than hell. *This sucks, sir.* I've placed him in a corner facing the wall. Of course his buddy David is also in third period, in addition to sharing advisory with me, so keeping them apart is something like a reverse Tango. They communicate in code. *We be pimpin'!* Another student, Jose, is up from Mexico for what seems like a weekend—he can't speak except in Spanish. When he does, it's disfigured and grating—*páque tenemos que hacer esto?*—so I'm sure he's never crossed the threshold of an educational institution before now.

I wish he'd get the hell out now. "You have to learn, Jose."

"*Es estúpido.*"

"Do your work."

"*Páque no lo haces tú?*"

What's left to do but supervise, terrorize, make them into good little bureaucrats and eager consumers? But it takes work. It almost seems foolish spending my time preparing kids like this for state exams. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that different economic classes, and class periods, are brought up to follow different rules about how to think, talk, and behave. So maybe I am a role model. But where's the time? Advisory's taken up by inane math tutoring now that character education's been eliminated. Responsibility? Perseverance? Teamwork? *Blah!* Imperialist legacies of a

frightened middle class, says Professor Converse. He doesn't seem to notice how his own manners, self-control, and personal responsibility resulted in his own success. How could he? That's a part of how we both grew up. But now I'm just haranguing. I'd rather be done with this. It's hard work teaching data, rules, and regulations all day. I'm pooped.

This morning Billy's particularly feisty. I've sat him at the front table, where I usually conduct class with my laptop. He's intrigued in a way I haven't seen before. More importantly, he's quiet and settled. I begin passing out the day's worksheet when I'm interrupted by Mrs. Martinez.

"Mr. Girman. We need your attendance. This is the fourth time it's been late this week. *Apúrate.*"

"I'm sorry, miss, but—"

"*Ya.*"

"I'm busy."

"We're all busy, sir." She leans out the doorway. I need you to do attendance." She turns and struts toward the door. We're all watching her, even Billy, and I'm thinking I should go over to the computer and do what I've been asked, but then I can't move or don't want to move and my body freezes behind the podium and Billy's *staring waiting wanting* for something to happen."

"Has she lost weight?" I say. The children stare at one another, shocked at their emboldened teacher, the same man who'd told them nothing about himself—his loves, lives, tastes, desires—and made them, by most accounts, fall asleep with a slew of worksheets and verbatim note-taking the entire month.

“Yeah, sir,” says David. Even Junior tenses his lips in a smile. Jesse looks around excitedly, so even if he doesn’t understand a word, he senses something.

“I mean, Jenny Craig or what?” The children clap.

“She looks hot!” Near pandemonium erupts. “Well, okay.” I walk toward Billy. “Watch out, I have to do attendance.” He leans to the side while I lean over the computer. I feel him looking at me.

“But you never do attendance,” he says. The boy smiles, a well-arranged set of pristine pearly-whites, well before the stain and rupture and want gradually impair God’s magnificent creation, and I, for once, smile back. I smile wide and I’m so close to Billy’s face I can nearly feel the warmth of his cheeks, and I realize I haven’t been that close to a man or anyone else in nearly two years. He’s a boy, I know. *I’m not stupid!* So what if I’ve only been hurt for eight months; nothing romantic going on even before my injury. That’s my point: the skeptic’s cop-out rears its ugly head. I’ve opted out of what really matters in life. I haven’t seen Mika since I moved out of my old apartment. All for the sake of some immaculate self-construction. All that brought me was a bonk on the head. Instead of guarding the tower, perhaps I should be diving in again.

“Why can’t I do the attendance?” Billy asks. Simple question.

“The state, yes, funding for each pupil. Accuracy is the most important policy. Right, we have to be perfect to . . . you know . . . get the money. Need money to move on. Keep moving on. Straight and narrow. Yes, yes.” And then I stop, look around, inspect the eyes of bored children. “You know what, yes.”

“I can?”

“Sure.”

“How?”

“Why not?”

Billy squints at me with his chestnut-colored eyes, and I can see there’s something happening behind them. He’s fidgeting and fumbling and staring at my face and I’m nervous, fool; all the kids are watching. I want to do this right.

“Top left, favorites,” I say. “Go to attendance log-in.” He has trouble with the sensor on my laptop. “Here, it’s like a mouse.” I place my hand over his and reach three of my fingers atop his index finger. I slowly move his finger near his knuckle, sliding it across the sensor. He softens his hand, even his shoulder—I’ve put my other hand over his right shoulder—and I feel the trust in the way he allows me to move his hand. I write my codes on an orange Post-it.

“You should tape it to the computer.”

“Yes.”

“So I don’t forget.” It hadn’t occurred to me that he might want to do attendance every day. “That way it won’t get lost.”

“Good idea, Billy.”

He points the cursor at Amanda’s and Zarah’s name. “Like this?” he asks.

“Exactly. Just point and shoot.”

“Press here?”

“So to speak.”

He folds his arms and looks up at me. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” I quickly massage his shoulders. “You’re done.”

He rotates his squirrely face up toward me. “If that’s it, why haven’t you been doing it, sir?” *If I knew that, Billy . . .*

From that day forward, Billy’s attitude changes. Before long, all the classes want to do their own attendance. The door cracks open ever so slightly. To make things easier, one student each period relocates herself to the table in front of the laptop. Soon the herd follows, and each class has three (sometimes four) students seated at the front table looking like they’re waiting for a kettle and some biscuits. Once the students realize that grades are imputed in the computer in much the same way, volunteers line up to assist me in that process.

“It’s not proper,” I say. “To see other kids’ grades.”

“We see it all the time,” Alisa says. “In math we grade each other’s papers.”

“Really?” I say it like I’d never done it before. *Yeah right!* I guess the real question is why I’d stopped.

“It’s no big deal.”

“You don’t think the GT would get mad?”

Alisa turns around and addressed the class: “Does anyone care if we grade each other’s papers.”

“NOOOOOOOO.”

“See, it’s settled.”

“Well, I’m not sure—”

“We’re not as tense as you.” She smiles. “Relax, sir.”

I try. Every Friday, I give two students in each class a stack of papers to input the grades in the computer. Sometimes a large stack, especially fifth period GT, which

warms to the challenge as if it were a competition. Jackie brings stickers from home to decorate the best papers. In advisory and third period, Billy convinces his playmates that it's not that big a deal to staple student work to the display board. "Be proud," he says. Students stop erasing my dry erase message board outside my classroom.

The shift toward self-reliance and enterprise is not without its squabbles. They say the workbook is boring.

"Facts are a part of history," I say. After four years, I believe my own rhetoric.

"My sister says in high school they get all these pages and they can use them on the exams."

"Data-based question."

"Why can't we do that?"

"DBQ"

"Uh-huh."

"That's for AP classes," I say. Advanced placement."

"We're GT."

"That's for college credit."

"Next year we get high school credit."

"Yes, but—"

"Let's do it, sir."

"Yeah."

"Come on."

"Yeah, history's boring."

"It sucks," says Fernando.

My heart nearly falls out. Social Studies is the most mind-altering, techno-loving, pimp-ass subject there is. *Boring?* Why, Fernando, I ought to . . .

“Can’t we move more?” asks Jackie

“Move?”

“Around.”

“Like migration?”

“Yeah, migration,” Gustavo shouts.

“Make it like a landscape.”

“Landscape?”

“Yeah, you know, mountains, plateaus, the big bowl thing.”

“Basins?”

“Yeah, basins. Dig a hole.” Mitchell stands next to his desk and pretends to be digging. Two weeks ago, he’d never have risen from his seat. “Something besides sit here and take notes.” He pretends to wipe sweat off his brow.

“So you want to know about the earth?”

“Different stuff,” says Alisa.

“Different places.”

“People.”

“Yeah, all kinds of people.”

“Like in here,” I say, looking around.

“Exactly,” answers Jackie. “We’re like a mini-world.” She looks at the globe in the back of the room. Oh, they’re playing with me. A mini-world? All types of people? *Having their fun, are they?*

“You’d be surprised, sir, the things we know.” The boy who says it, Alfie, has barely said a word all year. He hasn’t turned in a homework assignment in three weeks.

Alright buddy, put your money where your mouth is.

“Name a kind of person you don’t like.”

“A what.”

“Some type of person that you don’t know or that you don’t understand.” Alfie doesn’t say anything. “Maybe someone you’ve known that you just don’t get.”

“I’ve never known a black person.”

“Fine choice.”

“Alisa, how about you?”

“My cousin’s gay.” A few squawks emerge from the back of the class.

“Excellent.”

“He’s just like one of us,” she says. Alisa whispers something to Edgar.

“Who in here doesn’t think gays are okay?” A few students eagerly raise their hands. Someone says the name of our new ELA teacher. “Edgar, you’ll be supporting the gays.”

“But I didn’t raise—”

“That’s the point.”

“Sir?”

“You should probably wear something tight tomorrow.”

Everything feels right. “On Friday you and your ordered pair will be debating in front of the class.”

“Debating what?”

“Black versus white.”

“Gay versus straight,” Alisa says. She smiles at Edgar.

“Good, some of you get it. And whatever else you want to debate.” Once the words come out, I want to retract the statement.

“How about the Emos?”

“The Mexicans,” says Gustavo. Edgar looks at Gustavo and rolls his eyes.

“What?” says Gustavo.

“We’re all Mexican,” Edgar says.

“The *Mexicanos*,” says Gustavo. “Like the Nuevo Leon kids.”

“I’ll do that one,” says Fernando.

“Good, but you’ll be taking the other side.” Fernando lowers his hand. “Tell us about the music, the graffiti, and why the *Mexicanos* always miss school on Monday.”

“But sir, I don’t—”

“Just kidding,” I say. “But I think it might be good for you to look at the other side.”

“Ha-ha,” Gustavo laughs.

“I’m glad you like it,” I say. “Because you’re an honorary *Mexicano*—a real *chingón*—for the week.”

“But sir!” He rises out of his chair. “I don’t know any Spanish.”

“It’s not in Spanish,” says Fernando. “Don’t be so *pendejo*.”

“Any more ideas?”

“Pregnant teenagers.”

“Skanks.”

“Hey, my sister’s pregnant.” The class quiets.

“Good Aaron. You’ll be the pregnant teenager.”

“Yes!”

“How about handicapped people?”

“*Viejos!*”

“Something about fat girls.”

“Ewww.”

“Mean girls.”

“Ahhhh.”

“The point is, class, to open up to evidence outside yourself.” I grip the podium.

I sound like my advisor.

“Like from other people?” says Alisa.

“Exactly.”

“So that other side of ourselves is like a multiple personality.”

“I guess you can say—”

“So *that’s* why I have to be gay?” says Edgar. He lifts his glasses to his forehead.

The class can’t stop laughing. “To know the other side.”

“Nice choice of words,” I say. Edgar and I smile at each other. Edgar Parra understands me! *By golly, they’ve learned something on their own.*

The next week Billy asks why I’d been absent so much.

“In Houston a lot.”

“Is that where your family is?”

“My doctor.”

“Doctor what?”

“Of medicine.”

“I know that, sir. I mean, why?”

“Why do I go to the doctor?” I’m stalling, of course, not sure I’m ready to spill my guts to Big David and Albert. If I haven’t cried yet, why should I start now? *Really, kids can be so—*

“Is it because of last year?” Needless to say, I’m surprised. Word travels fast among the hormonally-imbalanced. I remain quiet. “I used to see you at tennis last year.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“You don’t remember me? You used to kick me out.”

“I’d never kick you out, Billy.”

“Yeah, I used to cut through the courts to go home and you’d always yell at me: ‘sixth grader get out of here.’ Man, it was funny.”

“Me, yell?”

“But then you stopped coming and I was like, ‘where’s the mean man.’”

“Mean.”

“You were always yelling.” I blink several times. He’s probably right. Too many college classes and coaching and running off to Mexico.

“I was there for a project.”

“In tennis.”

“No, in Mexico. Then I got hurt.”

“How you hurt,” asks Jesse.

Damned if I know. I think quickly. “On a tour of this big cathedral, I slipped and hit my head.”

“For reals?”

“Doink! And down I went.” I pretend to fall to the floor. “I don’t remember much.”

The class stays quiet, looks contemplative. “So that’s why you missed?” Billy says.

“Yep. That’s why I’m in H-town so much.” David smiles after I say H-town. That’s why I can’t hear so good.”

“You can’t?”

I stand with folded-arms and shake my head up and down. “Look familiar?” The students laugh. “Definitely.” I take a step backwards. “Definitely,” I repeat. “When I say that, I have no idea what you’re saying.”

“And *really* sir. When you say *really*,” says Zarah, “you’re not paying any attention.” Several of her classmates agree.

“Why do you think I have to sit down sometimes?”

“You do?”

“But you’re always watching us, sir.”

“Yes, but up and down those skinny aisles so much.”

“You get tired?”

“I lost the vestibular functions on the side of my head. I lift my hair above my right ear. It’s what keeps us balanced.”

“So you’re going to fall right now?” says Billy.

“No, more like when you get up too fast. When everything is unsettled in your head.”

“I’ve had that,” says David.

“Me, too.”

“*También*”

“Like when my dad’s drunk,” says Billy. He stands. “He’s got his arms out and walking all like Frankenstein.” He stretches his arms in front of him.

“Is it true Dracula got stabbed with a Bowie knife?” asks David.

“We’ll get to that later, David. He rests his back against the seat, satisfied. “Very good.”

“Anything else?” asks Billy. I’m not sure if he’s talking to me or David. “Like anything else?”

“Don’t take candy from strangers.”

“No, I mean, about you?”

“Don’t take candy from me.”

“You don’t give us any!” *Good point.*

“You know I can’t smell, right?”

Abby gasps in horror. “Sir, that’s awful.”

“Nope. Turns out a bonk in the head messes up a lot of stuff.”

“Can’t smell nothing?”

“Nope.”

“Locker room.”

“No.”

“Toilet seat?”

“Nah.”

“David’s smelly feet?”

“Thank God.”

“I don’t know what’d it be like not to smell,” says Billy.

“Yeah, all the cologne you put on,” Abby says. “Sometimes maybe I don’t want to smell either.” Billy sticks out his tongue at Abby.

“See that, I can’t even smell you, Billy.” He smiles in an easy way that makes me feel sad. It never occurred to me that he’d have a beautiful scent. Raspberries and herbs. Spice and burnt-orange flavors. All I’d thought was, *smelly little boy*.

I’ve been wrong before. The joke of the day has become a festive treat, and it has since mutated into the random fact of the day and This Day in History billboard in the back of the class complete with pictures and strange tidbits of information. *Thirty was considered old for an ancient Egyptian*. Who knew? What I’m realizing, slowly, is that I wasn’t so far off base my first few years of teaching. I see my students gaining self-confidence and independence. Maybe Daniel and Rolan and Billy aren’t predisposed to overconfidence, but merely following the maturation process. It’s my fault I let them get out of hand. Just because they liked me, didn’t mean I was educating them to the best of my ability. I made mistakes, though. I’d confused laziness with justified questioning; prejudice with conviction; chaos with meaningful interaction.

I believe the language of real human experience can take us where we want to go. I’m cautious, though, if I have the energy to get there. I’ve got surgery in two days. I’ve

still got a long hard road. Funny thing is, for the moment I don't feel so alone, at least for now.

CHAPTER 34

As titanium screws go, I guess it's alright. There's nothing to see, children. Carry on. Move along. Behind the bandage. Well, yes there's a screw in my head. The external abutment makes me look like Frankenstein. If I were you, I'd watch out: I drink my morning coffee with lots o' pills. Something to stop the screaming pain.

"Dolor," Jesse says.

Zarah asks if I'm okay.

"Nothing, really."

"Yeah, but the bandage is huge."

"Gi-normous," says Billy.

"Just a little procedure."

"Procedure?"

"Back to work."

"We just want to make sure you're okay."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Zarah looks across at Billy. "I'm fine," I say. "Really."

Billy turns his head around the room.

"There's blood," someone says. I instinctively look at my elbow. "No, on your bandage."

"Yeah," says Billy. He stands up and inspects the outside of the bandage. "It looks dried." The students maintain their composure. I back away from the podium and

inspect my bandage in the glass of the door. It's hard to see with the bandage over the right side of the back of my head. It appears as though I'm staring at my backside.

"It's fine."

"I can change it," offers Billy.

"Nice of you."

"I'm good at that."

"I'll be fine."

"Okay, sir." *Back off, kid. No one's dying here.* Billy continues watching me.

"What?" I ask him.

He looks sullenly toward the floor. "Geez, sir, I just want to know if anybody's absent." *I'm a mean, thirty-something old fart.*

Just because I've made it back into the gym doesn't mean I'm anything close to well-seared. I'm lifting half of what I used to, although progress slides along in measurable little bits. First, the balance, then the bench press.

Now, this. I can't go back to the gym in at least a month because of the bandages on my head. I need the hormonal rush. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to get better changing bandages all day. Yoga's fine but I want my muscles back. No yoga, either? Crap, I'd forgotten. Beneath my bandages, my head is shaved in a cross between a Mohawk and a mullet. I'm Native American, finally.

No one mentions my new hairdo during my college postcolonial literature class. We plod along in our thick books. Keep your head down. Read. Read. Read. Head down. Mouth Shut. That's the way a good student does his work. It's hard to keep hearing about the injustice of the developed world when somewhere deep in Mexico my

life changed for the worse. There's just no sympathy for a white guy with a job and most of his senses. Good God, I'm still standing.

Then there's Joey from a colonization book called *Dogeaters*. He's a half-Asian, half-black *mestizo* turning tricks as a disc jockey at the CocoRico night club in the Philippines. Classic fairytale, I guess. Except, *he's* the one with the power. "I learned early that men go for me. I make them love me even when I break their hearts . . . Ha-ha. Maybe it's my Negro blood." I can almost see Billy mouthing the lines, planning how he'll pounce. Seduce the stranger into the mysterious of his dark skin. Both Daniel and Rolan come to mind.

"Europe is a sick civilization," says Professor Converse. He looks at me when he says it. "The colonizers are bourgeois usurpers of power. They stripped the Chinese, Muslim, Negro, Indian, you name it, of their talented inventors, artisans, administrators."

"Everything," says a girl behind me.

"Good, Wendy."

"So the only way the colonizer could feel good about himself was to link his identity to his position as master. It's a narcissistic self-recognition." We make eye contact. *You don't even know me, buddy*. I remember my conquest mentality from the previous year. Divide and rule. Manipulate. Sure the kids were quiet, but at what cost?

And what about the D JJoey? He's a failure of the postmodern narrative's denial of reference. "You can't live life as a kaleidoscopic narrative," I tell the professor. I'm surprised I've spoken.

"Continue," he says.

“Frenetic and fragmented works for only so long,” I say. The class looks at me. “My first couple of years teaching, I mean, I was like Joey, just doing whatever . . . whatever feels right. But then I’m like, ‘hey, I’m spinning records at the CocoLoco all dancing around like some twisted vortex.’”

“Interesting choice of words.”

“I’m saying there has to be something *real* there.”

“Your students are real.” *No shit, Sherlock.*

“Yes.”

“Did you ever stop and think about their voices?”

“Yes, I—”

“The things they might be feeling?”

“Uh-huh, this one time—”

“Aren’t they, really, like Joey? In a way, I mean.”

“I guess,” I say. I certainly never thought of it that way. I think of Jesse-the Spanish-speaker.

“To have meaningful social interaction,” he says, “you have to dig in a little bit.”

A girl behind me chants *yes yes* to herself. “Get juicy.”

“Right on,” says the girl.

I’ve misspoken. “But how does one address positive action on the social level?” I ask the class. I nod at the professor. “Without becoming so controlling?” The professor takes off his glasses. “Without becoming the colonizer, you know, like ‘my way’s always right?’” *The fifty-million dollar question, at last.* I think I’ve steered off course.

My bandage is leaking again. Everyone stares. Why'd I have to open my big mouth again? *You think I'd learn by now.*

"Joey's got an identity," says the professor. "It's just veiled."

"Hidden?"

"Some of us like to escape," he says. "When Joey goes into the cool, mountain air, he's leaving the postmodern behind." I'm confused. My eyes roll around like marbles. "He's going for something. Every traveler's searching for something." He stares at the class, then back at me. "A collective identity. We all need some collective identity to survive."

"But what about anti-heroes?" I ask.

"That foreign tourist doesn't let Joey get away with his shit."

"Rainer?"

"Exactly. He sees through all of Joey's games."

"I never thought of it like that."

"Joey's taught something," says Professor Converse. "He's capable of learning and creating and inhabiting selfhood." Now he's losing me. "Not just another mock-up of colonial expectations." *My students are not just another mock-up.*

"So he starts to understand himself?"

"So to speak," he says, turning his gaze to the class. "We're all hybrids and we'll never be entirely separate from our pasts, but we don't totally inhabit those pasts the same way. Mimicry can only take us so far." I return to my second year of teaching: I'm relaxed, pleased to have done something right. "Sure, it's fun, right? Joey's having a good time at the club, but unless you start to accept yourself and your feelings, and

challenge your old prejudices, and make an effort to go outside yourself and experience the world . . .” *I never did this!* “Unless Joey learns how to take what he learns and inhabit his world, he’ll forever be spinning around in that club.” He pauses, rubs his left eye beneath his glasses. “Strategic identity formation is far different than mimicry.”

I’m *writing writing writing*. I don’t want to look up. A small drop of blood lands on my notebook. I wipe my bandage with the side of my hand. I’d been relying too much on mimicry all these years. Even my successful second year. I’d never stepped into the collective narrative.

“It’s not some romantic Bildungsroman narrative. The old coming-of-age narrative. It’s the opposite.”

“The anti-?”

“Counter-*bildungsroman*.” I’m lost. “You take a reparative reading of history and go from there.”

“A *resistance*,” says the girl next to me.

“A queer nomadic resistance, yes.” The professor looks at me directly. “Until you start to put your body and vulnerabilities and confessions out there, you’ll forever be trapped in this colonial cycle.” *Dear God . . . lighten up.* “Your students have to know there’s a way out of chaos.” *Now he’s got me.* The Counter-Bildungsroman hero eventually finds himself. The colonized can thrive. That’s why he or she’s a hero.” *Billy, a hero?* “Stop reading from a paranoid position of distrust.”

Start to trust? I’ve got a titanium screw in my head, and now he tells me to start trusting?

Okay, I get it. Maybe that's what graduate school tries to teach us: doing your own thing within parameters of established paradigms, rules of the game, standards to be followed, broken only for justifiable reasons. But what's a good reason? When's the right time to veer from the status quo? And can I overlay this model atop the middle school concept?

All this week I can't stop thinking about classroom vulnerability. I remember bell hooks writing that the purpose of education is to help students to define themselves "authentically and spontaneously" in relation to the world. I think that's what my professor was trying to tell me. We've got to be present in mind, body and spirit. *Experience matters, fool.* Don't allow my students to do whatever they want, as I'd done in my second year, but guide them to a place somewhere deep within their souls. Allow them to feel a love of learning somewhere deep inside. Hooks calls it "privatized passion." She says when Eros is in the classroom, love is bound to flourish. Teachers who love students and are loved by students are still suspect in the academy. Maybe that's why I backed off so much. Maybe that's why I rarely touch students anymore, both physically and emotionally.

But, hey, what's dialogue without touch? Am I going to live forever as a foreign tourist, accused in my own head of romanticizing or exoticizing the other, or will I expand and embrace everyone the way it was meant to be? How long can I hide behind these bandages on my head?

CHAPTER 35

I'm shuffling along my third loop, nothing to see but open space and two painted white soccer goals. The girls' cross-country team passes to my right in short shorts and canary yellow tank tops. I haven't seen the boys outside. Cute Daisy passes by, tan and motivated, looks back and quietly waves hello. Her spider legs take up nearly two-thirds of her body and she steps gracefully as if diving over a puddle of water on each step. Next to her I'm a hobbling old fool collecting sticks of hickory root in a woven wicker basket.

Today's a dusty afternoon and brown dirt swirls around my face and tiny rocks have gathered at the bottom of my left shoe. I'm imagining a caged *yuyum*'s sugary lullaby like I used to hear on foggy mornings around Lake Atitlán. Around my final lap I hear myself wheezing, and a girl with a deep pockmarked face yells quick encouragement and I open up for once, transfer my weight like Daisy's wide strides, and I feel my body elongate. I'm covering more ground. Alisa passes; her breasts remain still like two firm kiwis, and I imagine the skin on my face rebounding off itself like my grandmother chewing a tuna sandwich. The sky casts a canopy over the afternoon sun, and the earth is *rumbling rumbling rumbling* on each step. I am dizzy. I focus on a point in the distance and stare, a tall Cabbage Palm with a long trunk the color of cinnamon splotted with gray, and fronds at the top hanging desperately. It all reminds me of Florida, the palm trees bundled in clear plastic film for the Thanksgiving Turkey Trot and

me in my tiny little boy steps *trotting trotting trotting* toward the finish line. Really, I shouldn't be jogging if I've lost so much weight.

But hey, it's not six miles anymore, and for the first time I run four fences, or for quarter-mile loops adding up to a mile—*my first mile in nine months!*—and I feel like a blue-breasted Manakin floating up through the sky. I walk another lap and see the menacing tennis courts to my right. I'm not sure how my faulty balance will adjust to the constant head motions. Quick turns like following a blue racquetball off the four walls. Ah, hell, I don't even know if they'll ask me to coach again. I'm just glad to be outside. That's the truth.

The next day my hearing's shot. The morning noise outside in the hallway, always a nuisance, now sounds like a stadium of movie critics *gaping yapping bitching* every which way and I'm trying to explain to David why you can't always get what you want. He's not interested. He still wants to use the bathroom. Sounds come from all direction. Billy keeps asking me about the bathroom and Alisa talks and talks, but I can't see her lips moving. Finally I focus my attention on her at the table in front of me and I stare and stare and I can't see how Alisa's talking so fast and so much and I'm interrupted by a loud "Sir!" like a drumbeat and there's Daisy nice and quiet in front of like a little elf. I want to know who's screaming, and my head's swiveling like a bumble bee and, well wouldn't you know, Alisa hasn't said a word—it's Martin going on about a Sudoku puzzle and Jackie's voice, I swear, is in the middle of the boy's throat, but she's on the other side of the room, in the back, so I'd have more luck differentiating between the animals on Albert's farm than the voices right here—*right here, dammit!*—in front of me.

I need something sweet! During my conference period I make my way down to the teacher's lounge. I'm paranoid about losing more weight and I've heard someone brought goodies today—the holidays are fast approaching.

Hallelujah! Teachers crave snacks more than ordinary people. *Oh the sweets!* The joy, the relief—comfort in the midst of chaos. This morning, *blah*, I'm worn out. The teacher's lounge is full of goodies. Mrs. Martinez carries a plateful of gingerbread cookies shaped like pigs. Erica saunters in wearing a warm green sweater dangling miniature Christmas balls. "I'm all decked out for the holidays," she says, popping a pig in her mouth and dumping a coffee filter in the trash. "The *marranitos* smell so good." She stands still, heaving her chest toward the ceiling and taking a deep breath. I nod my head and smile. Next to the *marranitos* is a large basket of assorted *pan dulce*. "I love the *molletes*," I tell Erica. She politely looks in the basket. "Especially the pink ones."

"I'm a *semitas* girl. All ears."

I pull out a sticky *semita*. Flicks of sugar crumble in my fingers. I look in the basket for a pumpkin empanada. *Oh the intoxicating scent!* A bottle of cinnamon rests politely near the wicker basket. My mother used to sprinkle cinnamon over steaming hot chocolate. The smell of chocolate reminds me of home. Cinnamon-sugary flakes tumble beneath my collar as I take a big bite. "There's chocolate in the sixth-grade lounge," Erica says. "*Mexican* hot chocolate." She emphasizes Mexican because it's true: Mexican hot chocolate is the best. The *right* side of the Colombian Exchange. I miss scent.

In times like these, cocoa beans sustain me. I walk toward the sixth grade lounge. Mrs. Vasquez bows gallantly in a Santa Claus hat. "Reading Renaissance

party,” she says. “Oh, I just love Christmas. Don’t you?” I arrive in the lounge with no further interruptions. Erica was right. I dip my *semita* in a small Styrofoam cup of *chocolate caliente*. Nothing brings me home like hot chocolate. Down here they melt solid pieces of dark hard chocolate. Mix it with milk. I hold the tiny cup below my nostrils. If this doesn’t bring it back, nothing will. I inhale deeply; my cheekbones are high as a Mayan warrior. *Nothing*. I bite my *semita*. Not even an ache. How much longer will I have to wait? If hot chocolate can’t do it, nothing will.

The next period I assign an essay. I write the topic on the board: *if you had to lose one of your senses, which one would it be?*

“The bad one,” someone says in the back. Fernando looks pensively straight ahead. He holds his thoughts in his puffy chipmunk cheeks. “I didn’t know you could lose your sense,” he says. Alisa turns around and stares, all slanted and mean like an Asian empresses. Even Alfie rolls his eyes. Alisa flips her head toward me, like a quick tilt, and looks back at Fernando. “Oh,” he says, an embarrassed smile so wide across his lips I want to tickle him until his eyes fill with water.

5 senses, by Fernando

If I had to loose one of my senses it won't be vision, taste, touch, or hearing. I wont loose vision because I need to see. I need to see what happens around the world. What if something bad happens to me. Like my food getting poisining on it or something.

Now let me tell you why I don't want to give up taste. I didn't give up taste because I want to taste something that I want. Like candy,

drinks, and food. I like to taste the flavors of candy like apple and watermelon. So if your food is bad you can taste it.

Also I won't lose touch because I want to feel things. Like when my mom gives me a hug. Also when I drive I want to feel how fast I'm going.

Now hearing is bad to lose because my friends say things I want to hear. Like how the day is or what happened at lunch sometimes. Maybe I can't hear the sir in class too. Video games sound good all the noise and shooting and killing stuff. That's fun to hear. Well I am done with my senses essay.

1

5 Senses

If I had to lose one of my five senses it won't be vision, taste, touch, or hearing. I won't lose vision because I need to see. I need to see what happens around the world. What if something bad happens to me. Like my food getting poisoning on it or something.

Now let me tell you why I didn't want to give up taste. I didn't give up taste because I want to taste something that I want. Like candy, drinks, and food. I like to taste the flavors of candy like apple and watermelon. So if your food is bad you could taste it.

Also I won't lose touch because I would want to feel things. Like when my mom gives me a hug. Also when I drive I want to feel how fast I'm going.

Fernando gives me a tiny *Lucas* powdery Mexican candy on his way out of class. The spicy powder leaves an indelible mark on the tongue. “You can taste, right?” *Lucas* are Fernando’s favorite. He looks at me with innocent eyes. He doesn’t know I’ve read his essay. “Yes,” I answer. I understand now why I’m always running out of apple Jolly Ranchers. They’re my favorite, too. Most of the other kids like cherry, grape, and something called, Blue Raspberry. *Like raspberries can be blue!* But Fernando’s an old soul, like me. We rely on the finer senses to get us through. I’m thinking about buying a juicer I’ve seen on a weekend infomercial.

Another essay mentions that losing your hair isn’t so bad. “Bald can be beautiful,” Edgar writes. “I like my hair short, too.” He’s right. My hair is part of who I am. I’ve lost myself, piece by piece. “Besides, it’ll grow back,” he writes in the last sentence. Things aren’t all that bad—I should be happy my ears are big enough to hide the screw. Losing the weight, though, makes my ears look even bigger. I could use fifteen pounds of first-year fat. I envision Rolan’s baby-fat face. That’s what happens when you resist temptation for so long. I’d do anything to smell a gingerbread man or breathe the aroma of molasses from a basketful of fresh *marranitos*.

I’m bitter sometimes, yes I admit it, but you’d be, too, if halfway through the day you turned one way but your brain couldn’t get the message for a second later so you’re seeing Billy even though you’re staring out the door. *Whah whah whah!* Yeah, I get it. I couldn’t imagine a better time for Marcelo the Colombian to wander in.

“Sir, sir, I wanted to see you.”

Well, where do I begin? The boy looks like he's gotten a face life, tummy tuck, toothbrush, and personal shopper. His blue, eighth-grade shirt is clean and looks like he hasn't slept in it. "Good to see you, Marcelo." He's smiling, too, in full-on silver braces. He's not galloping, but striding toward me, an outstretched hand and *what's this* no smell. Well, of course, no smell, but he looks like he actually doesn't smell like food. Where's the higgledy-piggledy boy I'd forgotten all about?

"You're back," he says. "We missed you." He sits down at his old desk.

"Good to be back."

He leans his head forward and pulls back his hair like he's parting his hair from the back. "Look, sir, I got it over the summer." A little brown box, russet colored like his hair, sticks out from the back of his head behind the left ear.

"Is that a *Baha*?" I say, careful to speak loudly and accentuate each word.

"Sure is."

"I'm getting—"

"I know sir." He's not screaming. "I wanted to show you." I inspect the small device, no bigger than four grapes. Suddenly he pulls it off. "See how easy?"

Is this the same boy in the same seat, moving his arms confidently, leading discussion like a high school boy? He continues smiling, moving the device in out of my fingers like marbles. The boy has changed.

"Remember my hearing aids?"

"Of course."

"And they'd start going off and I'd have to turn them off and I couldn't hear. Remember?" I nod my head. "You'd yell at me all the time." I'd discriminated, refused

to differentiate, didn't much care about his hearing loss; embarrassed him, even, because of it.

"You get used to it," he says. "It's like hearing in stereo." He laughs his old misaligned, raucous laugh, yes, some saliva still trickles out, but he's as happy as I've ever seen a boy of fourteen. You have to wonder, sometimes, if you've done the right thing. He moves to the door a few moments later, shakes my hand, and heads off to lunch. I watch his movements down the hall. *Sometimes you just have to be patient.*

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. . . I've been patient long enough. This morning I'm late for school because I didn't hear my alarm. During the night my body turns sideways to lie flat on my good ear. When the alarm rings, I'm somewhere in the jungle speaking Chontal or running after some wily kittens or, most likely, wiping suntan lotion from Tom Brady's shoulders. *I won't wake up from that!*

It's the third time this month and, with all my doctor's appointments, I can't afford to lose any sick time because my mind would rather be somewhere else.

"I'm sorry, sir," I say to Principal Cardenas.

"Late night?"

Good Lord, fool, I haven't had a drink in months. "Something like that."

The principal inspects my brown suede pants. I think I'm violating the dress code. "I see you're getting your body back," he says.

Well, I'm flattered. I know he's fifty but damn the man looks good. The way I'd like to age: pampered goatee, deep set eyes, forearms flexing all day. "Yes, I'm trying."

"Saw you out there."

“Oh yes, the alarm—”

“Running.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Last week.” I smile but I really have to get to class. “Getting ready for tennis,” I see. He looks at my pants again. I hoist my backpack over my shoulder. “Yes, yes, won’t keep you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Remember to set that alarm.”

“Yes, sir.”

“If you need anything,” he says, *intently passionately daringly*, “let me know.”

He looks at me with his deep brown eyes like he’s praying for something. I blink. Blink again. He’s still staring. I’d like to think he’s praying for me.

CHAPTER 36

A nurse named Vivian, not the white stocking type, but a hardy-looking woman in a business suit, tells me my attitude will have to change if I'm to survive. Take your time. Get used to things. Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. The good news is my device is in the back of my head. Clip on. Clip off. *Snap crackle pop.* Marcelo was right—I feel like I'm talking into the sound amplification system on stage.

“Why so loud, sir?”

“Didn't think I was talking so loud.”

“Yeah, like my mom,” says Billy. “Get your butt over here, Billy Ray.”

“Billy Ray?”

“What?”

“I didn't know—”

“You don't know a lot of things, sir.”

“For instance.”

“You can't wear a brown belt,” says Alisa. “With black shoes.” She sitting so high on her chair I think her head might knock out a sprinkler on the roof. “Where's your fashion sense, sir?” The little whirlwinds steal glances at wrinkled khakis and a back pocket hanging foolishly behind me.

your breath smells like kaka

shoes are untied

hair's different today

how can I be me in this hideous banana shirt?

socks don't match

scratch on your face

eyes all blue when you wear that sweater

a teacher like you needs a girlfriend

the one with the big collar

I can't respond because I'm taking it all in. I hear inflection, rhythm, heavy accents accepting the grace of a new language.

"I bet you're cool in jeans," Billy says.

"Back at you, boy."

"Why can't we wear jeans?" says David.

"Same reason I can't."

"No ass," Billy says. I hide a snarky smile. *That boy . . .*

"I don't think—"

"Sir, yeah, I know . . . I'm just saying I don't have no butt either." He stands and turns his bottom to the class, than in front towards me. "See, flat like a pancake," my mom says.

Jackie laughs loudly from the back. "Then I've got a cinnamon roll." She stands and walks down the aisle toward the front table. I make room. "See what I mean, sir?"

David claps three times. "Back it up, girl." He races behind Jackie and starts walking like a girl. The skinny boy stands tall with jutted-out, naturally pink lips. He

combs his bangs back softly with his fingers. He resembles a heron. Hands on hips, he exaggerates his sway as if auditioning for one of the modeling shows on television.

“Here, here,” says Rodrigo, a dollar in hand. Jackie starts dancing, or hopping on one foot to the other like she’s walking on fire and then a few other students get up and walk around the room.

“Look, sir,” says Alex, “I’m hula-hooping.” The big sturdy boy spins his hips more elegantly than I could have imagined.

Johnnie strokes an imaginary guitar, belts out low and palpitating notes from deep within his throat. I hear a bird singing outside. Billy twists himself backwards to stare at his own behind. “Oh come on, Billy,” I say, approaching him, “it’s not so bad.” I stand beside him. “Which is better, Jackie?” The class bellows, hysterics spiraling through the walls; I’ve never felt so at ease in my classroom. The first year chaos. Next year-and-a-half letting the inmates run the prison. Losing Rolan. Daniel’s in the juvenile facility. Postmodern lack of reference. Poetic license. Convert the natives! Guard the tower! Anything you do, I can do better. I’m no Mayan girl. Why bother? I’ll be damned if anyone will tell me what to do! I’m not a twelve-year boy, either. Am I Professor Converse? I can *wiggle wiggle wiggle* just like Billy. I can hear and jog and watch adolescent movies and write my thesis and apply to Ph.D. programs and coach tennis and dance like a fool without bothering anyone else. “Titanium is the only metal the body won’t reject,” Vivian told me. I spin Alisa from a professional distance away and move on over to Johnnie’s guitar. Only later in the day do I realize I’d forgotten to turn on my hearing device.

Independent study is a lonely thing. I nearly slit my wrists during an *Editing for Editors* course in law school. If editing someone else's work is so boring, I'd realized, why would I ever want to be a writer? Times have changed. I get a kick out of editing student work. If it weren't for me, Fernando would never know there's only one 'o' in lose. Alisa might write 'cuz' for the rest of her life.

At the moment I'm sifting through articles for my Freshman Composition course, the object of which, I gather, is to learn how to *teach* a freshman composition course. *One step closer to my goal!* I'm not the teary-eyed type, that's for sure, but it's hard not to get choked up at the academic savants adding a little emotion into their usually dull prose. Have they, dare I suggest, been touched by a student or child?

"There is potential even in the most unlikely student," writes Donald Murray. "And it may take a teacher all of ten minutes to tap it." *Even in Jose? Come on!* I sit and wonder. Junior has autism!

"To what age does this apply?" I ask the teacher one day.

She leans comfortably back in her chair, flecks of gray exposed in her spiky coiffed hair, predominantly blue palette set off by a fringed, soft-looking scarf wrapped loosely around her neck. She comes down for air and sits up straight, smiling. "That all depends on how you use it," she says.

"I teach seventh grade." She continues smiling, the white of her eyes large and predominant. We evolved that way, I learned in graduate anthropology class, so we can easily see where our companions were looking. She's looking at some books behind me. I turn around. "The thing is," she says, approaching the book shelf, "you might not be able to see the potential of the language on the page."

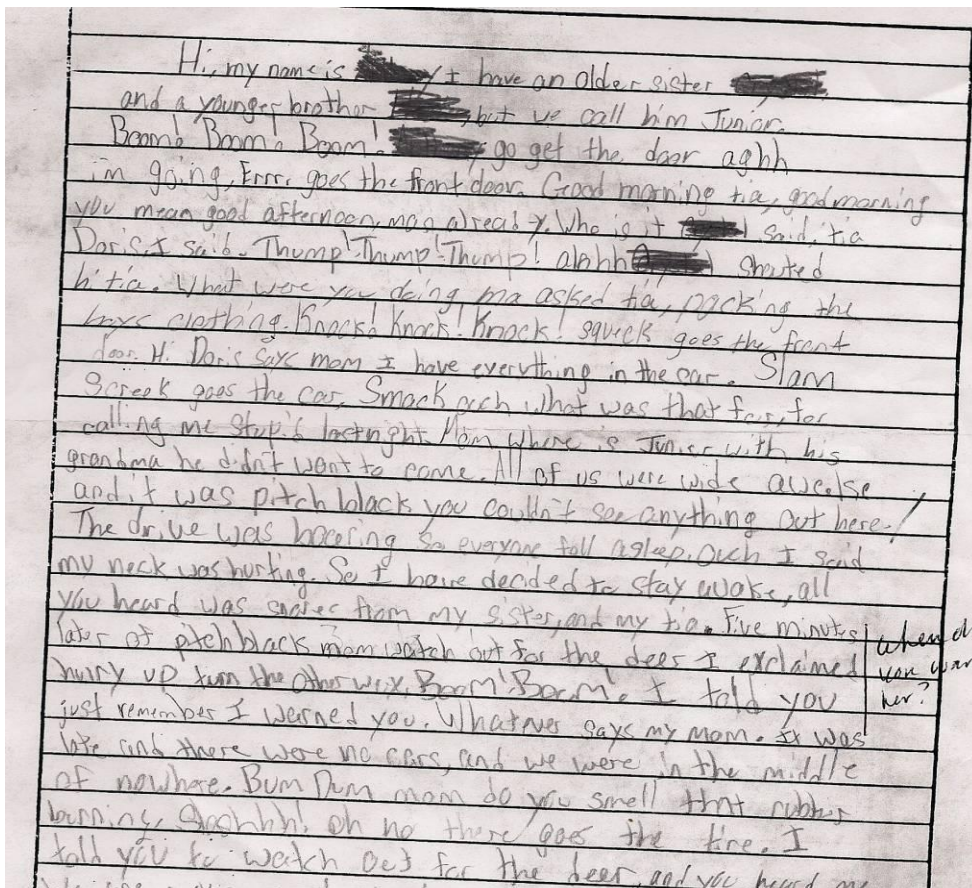
“Exactly.” I nod vigorously.

“Now, just a minute,” she says, rummaging through the books on her stuffed mahogany bookshelf. “You can feel a tone.” She stops, empty-handed, returns to her desk. “Or a sense of humor.” She sits. “Tap into that sense of rage,” she says, staring at me, “and they can find an authority they didn’t know they had.”

I nod my head and write down what she’s saying. “Even in middle school?”

“You’d be surprised,” she says, brushing a piece of hair crawling down her forehead like a spider. “It’s the ones you wouldn’t expect.” I immediately picture Anthony’s dark, round head. “They’re the ones that may surprise you.” I scribble more notes. “You might even surprise yourself.”

I’m not sure what she means but I circle the words *take a good look at student writing* largely in green marker. I have a folder of TAKS writing samples sitting at my



desk that
I've been
meaning to
give the
new
English
teacher.
I'll start
with
Anthony's
essay:

Who knew? In real life Anthony can be a loudmouth, but in class he hardly speaks. There's a tenderness there I'd hardly noticed. He wants to stay awake. His family helps tell the story. My professor's right: locate the potential in the language. Sound words. Onomatopoeia, the kids tell me. *Smack boom sit down!* Direct quotation. Give voice to the forgotten ones in the back of the car. What I'd tried to do years earlier. Crystal Junior Anthony. Tia Doris packs a suitcase. The kindness of strangers. Vagaries of life. Nothing's rational to a kid. They resist order. There's no unity, coherence, or elegance. Ambiguity. Rejection. Fluidity. Now, that's more like it. Place-based identity, expansion of ethno-nationalism. *Oh, enough philosophizing!* All I know is when I read this piece, my heart goes soft for a young boy not interested in rules or writing exercises. Free from constraint, he can say what he wants to. And how he wants to say it.

Can I help you, yes please, give me 25 minutes. Aghh! Man! Oh boy! How can we punish a child for relying on his own language? Refinement, yes. But do we kill his spirit in the process? Is he quiet in class because his spirit's wandered elsewhere? "The point of writing," I read, "is the striving for what is only dimly perceived." How do we explain that reason and rules, semantics and diction, are gendered, ethnocentric, and historical? By refusing to be disembodied and neutral, Anthony shifts the discourse back to the teacher. Dialogical unity within a thirteen-year-old boy? *I must be mad!* Then why does it feel so good inside, like I've had my faith restored?

At night I search through my old stories. What about *my* writing? Can I get at the potential of what I'm trying to say? Can I remember something I didn't know I knew? *Oh, cripes, another wild chase.* The definition of insanity is doing the same

thing twice and expecting a different result. I find my paper about a little Mayan girl I'd written for my fiction class just before I was injured. The professor said it sounded forced and inauthentic. I'm nervous about turning the page. The story begins . . .

Little Indian girls talk a lot. We're supposed to be hopping through mother's woven skirt, hushed-mouth and sullen, channeling domestic trifle to memory, lying flat-kneed on the floor, chunking crab tips into tin cans awed to some spiritual epiphany by abuela's tale of a boy who traded his beautiful mushroom-stone eyes for a caged yuyum's sugary lullaby.

Hmmm, not bad . . .

My new teacher sometimes lets me speak to Viti in Kekchí so that all morning I feel like that Manakin floating through the white sky.

Touching.

I smelled potatoes frying in sweet grease, and as I turned around—almost instinctually, I think, to honor such goodness—I witnessed a view so spectacular, so unexpected, so utterly ineffable, I nearly crossed my legs and squeezed my ears like a woman on her wedding night. I'll simply say that the sky cast a canopy over the lake as seductive as an afternoon nap, and I stood there like stone wondering why I hadn't climbed the hill in so long.

The truth is, I was writing about my first trip to Guatemala, when I was nineteen. Along the shores of Lake Atitlán I fell in love for the first time, with a German named Estéban. It's hard to tell where truth and story merge. Like Anthony's essay. The most difficult part of travel writing, my professor warned, is remembering, telling the truth, and figuring out what the story is. My story of the Guatemalan girl emerged from my own journal entries. I found the tattered old diaries in an old chest and began reading, paying particularly close attention to my tone and humor and searching desperately for my old sense of wonder. It's important that I revisit my truth.

A little girl in a traditional violet huipil smiled at us like a mouse and scampered down the street. She looked behind her every now and then to see if we were following. She stopped in front of a gate surrounding a small structure of cement blocks and a beautiful, sprawling lemon tree.

I can't believe I only brought shorts. We're in the damn mountains for Christ's sake. I'm going to peel those damn jeans off of Estéban.

Pedro took us a few hundred yards down the street to the family's other house. The house was nothing more than two rooms of cement blocks. His father, Andres, shook my hand like a long-lost relative and offered me a drink, which I declined. Estéban, naturally, drank up. I saw a mattress on the floor and realized that's where we'd be sleeping.

Halfway through a delicious bowl of eggs, beans, and tortillas, Estéban and I realized that we might be taking food from the children. We sat there eating in the dark of the house while they stared at us. We gave the remainder of our beans to Pedro and the others, pretending that we couldn't eat anymore.

Estéban and I slept close together last night, back to back, as close as I've ever come. The least he could have done is wrapped his warm sweatpants around my exposed legs. Damn Germans . . .

We spent the evening at the pueblo's only movie theater watching a Chinese karate flick on a twenty-six inch television complete with VCR, surrounded by two rows of benches that looked like old pews. I sat on the floor. . . . Pedro rested his leg against my back the entire movie. It felt nice.

Our game of "rock, paper, scissors" nearly erupted into a brawl between Victoria and Graciela. Each one wanted to play with me, and they constantly shoved each other's hands out of the way. They just laughed, and laughed, and laughed, repeating "lo mismo," "lo mismo," when we all had the same sign.

So what does this have to do with kids? I think the Quechan girl says it best. *It's the first time he'd said my name, and it sounded from his lips like running water.* I'm waiting for someone to say my name. That might be what this is all about, after all. I'm tired of tourists like myself: *I'm no fool. You wear this thing and the whole world comes running. A girl like me knows how to make a buck or two. "Look at the cute little Indian girl," they say, "in her traditional purple huipile."* They jut out their small lips like lizards on the first syllable: *huuii-pile.* Sounds worse than the old bird callers. *I dress meticulously because I know it works. Nothing's sadder than a beautiful apricot blouse bunched up and cinched with less care than a grandmother hanging up a pan above the stove.*

It's *my* story. I'm retrieving the history of an idea as it develops in my mind. It's my history. My journal entries are just as important as anyone else's. Anthony's essay matters. Our voices deserve to be heard.

Well, of course that takes me to the end of my Quechan essay, and I don't want to read the professor's hideous comments again, so I reread the last paragraph, the protagonist playing with her mother, and the mother speaks—*rub until the ants roll out his ears; rub until soil embraces corn; rub stream into river. I'd rub him into me like me into you.* And I remember the sweet tone of that woman's voice. *Then my mother took my head in the crook of her elbow like in the lucha libre movies, my hair dangling close to the pot. I played along and screamed. Mother smiled all caldo-colored and Licha jumped on my back. I thought about her and Cristóbal in the church. What the priest said about love: rapture for rapture.*

Well, really, I'm not sure what all the fuss is about, so you can imagine my surprise when I read my professor's comments again. He told me, simply, to clarify myself. "Make the voice credible." Don't speak so directly to the reader. All this worrying over a positive review. *Impressionistic. Risk-taking. Warm.* When had I stopped taking risks? Where had the passion gone? We have beautiful voices, Anthony and I; the question is, to which service will they be used? How do you dive in without hitting your head on the bottom? Is it time, I wonder, to expose myself?

More Fajita Tacos! Yes, the suggestion box is back. I scavenge a square metal tissue holder from the closet. *Poof!* The kids place a plastic Tupperware container underneath and, *bam*, we're back in business.

"This book," I say. "From the 1960s."

"Huh?" Jackie says.

"Up the Down Staircase."

Ugh!

"It's boring, sir."

"Just a model."

"Model what?"

"No names."

No names?

"Pictures."

Pictures?

"Personality."

Us?

“No rules”

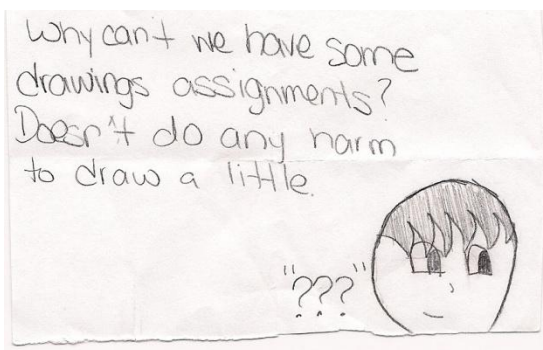
No rules?

“Say what’s on your mind.”

Our minds?

“Seriously.”

R u *serious?*



More burgers instead of chicken strips —
Commando Burger

Blackbird=More candy!!! Please ☹

We should be allowed to wear

Hollister + Abercrombie & Fitch

—Preppy Girl

Yes, yes, teenagers after all. I’m surprised by the number of students demanding quality social studies time. Yes, more time for history.

~~A~~ this sucks I hate
 being in the back, but
 don't move me cuz i fall
 asleep.
 Padres # 4^{3rd}
 basama

*More talking in subjects
 or about facts—part nobody*

If someone doesn't bring there homework
 send them outside to do it.
 Band nerd!

Thanks for making class time
 go by fast but we should
 discuss the history lesson
 more than usual. We should
 also do more group activities. lol
 Laugh a lot

Hmmm, appears as though I've forgotten *my* history. Fernando helps me tally the numbers.

“How many word scrambles?”

“Seventeen, sir.”

“Group projects?”

“Seven.”

“Powerpoints?”

“Three.” He checks his notebook. “No, four.”

“Anything else?”

“Stories about history.” He hands me the folded paper: *I checked out this book about a little slave girl. It was good.* I refold the note.

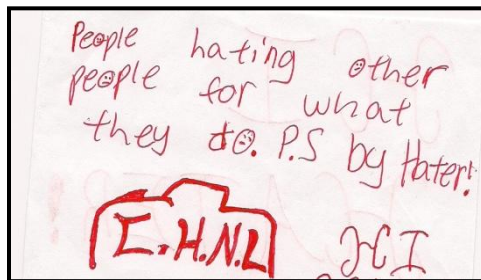
“Something in Spanish,” says Fernando.

“Like what?”

He drops his head toward the desk. “*No sé.*”

“Fine.”

“Can you guess which one’s mine?” he says. I pull out the only card with a Nuevo León reference. “No fair, sir.”



He giggles and returns to his seat. “*Viva Nuevo Leon,*” he shouts. Edgar thrusts his hand in the air.

“Get ready,” I say. “For the return of Wednesday Word Scramble.”

“Hey,” says Daisy. “Today is Wednesday.”

Well, yes. Yes it is! Papers ready. Go! Furious writing. “Each ‘k’ gets an extra twenty-five points.”

“Aw, sir.”

“Okay. Thirty.”

The big change is that I won’t be typing words this year. “Select a secretary,” I say. They look around the room. “I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

“Sir?” asks Edgar.

“Good luck.”

I stand outside the door and wait for the noise to subside. It sounds like they’re redecorating. A couch slides across the room. Now table lamps. Then an eerie quiet, and I know it’s safe to leave.

I come back. On the projector are fifty-eight words: racket, rocket, toad, track, dock. Jackie sits in front of the lap top computer. “It was him.” She points at Edgar. “There’s no ‘k’ in toad.” I’m so impressed I continue Word Scramble the remainder of the day. Only Billy’s class fails to type in any words.

“Baby steps,” says Billy.

“Yeah,” Anthony agrees. “We’re babies.” He balls his fists under his eyes. *Whah!*

CHAPTER 37

“Good to be back, sir.”

“It is.”

“Hit us some.” Laura holds her racket over her shoulder like a fishing pole. “My forehand’s better.”

“Maybe later when—”

“You never hit with the girls, coach.” She stands, auburn hair parting in the breeze, entrenched in her counter-narrative.

“Sí, coach,” says Sarai. Her legs bow inward like a broken pencil. “Always with the boys.”

I see Eddie and J.P. swinging racquets in the distance. I hang on to the net. Eddie hits a ball at the girls and me. “Come on, coach.” I smile. “We’ve been waiting for, like, a year.”

“Yeah,” says J.P.

Laura tilts her head to the ground and drops her shoulders. “That’s okay, coach.” Sarai smiles.

“Sorry, boys.” I look at the girls. “I’m taken.” Laura and Sarai high-five each other, then extend their hands to me over the net. *It’s on!*

Perhaps since I can jog again, I’d assumed tennis is a similar impulse. Put one foot before the other and adjust my upper body to the task at hand. Unfortunately I’d

underestimated the profound head movements. Not even my laborious exercises could have prepared me for the profound inadequacies of vestibular malfunction. I watch the ball and shuffle my feet. Look across the net then extend my vision to the grip of my hands. Laura's forehand has improved mightily. She chases the ball and stops. Smooths her skirt and talks with Sarai.

“Serve it to me, Venus.”

“For reals, coach?” I bend at the waist and wait behind the service line. Sarai bounces two tennis balls toward Laura.

The first serve hits the back fence. I kick the ball from under me so I don't fall down. Laura screams something across the court. On the next court, I see the seventh graders. Gustavo and Steven inspect the racquets, waiting for Coach Rivas and me. The sun shines a stained-glass blue. Laura serves another ball. I shuffle to my right, move forward. My right toe catches the ground and I stumble. I reach out toward the ball and block it across the net. I run to my left. Laura misses the next shot. I stop. The court moves like a shifting horizon. I taste cumin on the bottom of my lips. Potent distillation of movement. I'm standing in the middle of the court—I have nothing to hold on to.

“Ready, coach?” Laura waits in a service pose, elbow extended at eye's length. I balance my racket head on the court and lean against the butt of the racket. I've never been this vulnerable, particularly not with my body. I wipe sweat from the back of my head, prepare for the next serve. I strike a pose like an accidental tourist, bent at the waist and scanning the distance. Laura tosses the ball. My private anxiety becomes public. Sarai joins me on the right side of the court. Her tiny smile—those miniscule

teeth—lighten my anxiety. The worst enemy of kinetic evolution is self-doubt. Sarai slaps my hand. “Come on, sir.” She opens her eyes wide and eyeballs Laura. “Let’s beat her.”

I have to leave early, I tell my ninth period. “I’m meeting my professor.”

“The thesis?” says Daisy.

“When can we read it?”

“Yeah, you told us—”

“When I’m done,” I said.”

“Aren’t you close?” asks Jackie. I stuff blue folders into my backpack and scan the room for my water bottle.

“Over there,” Alisa says. “The shelf next to the door.”

I’m tired and tense, and nothing organized enough to turn into my committee chairwoman. “I’ve spent so much time on you guys, I’ve forgotten to do my work.”

“But isn’t that the point?” asks Alisa.

She’s right. A thesis about teaching pedagogy should focus on the kids. But I’ve no time to squabble. “Maybe later I’ll show you.” I rub my finger along the side of my *Baja* hearing device to make sure it’s on. On busy days like these—brown box against my ear or not—I can barely hear myself talk. “Wait until the bell rings,” I say, “before you leave.” I reel in my rough countenance and offer a rushed smile. Ms. Ramos blocks the door.

“Mr. Girman, um, I’m not sure—”

“Kind of in a hurry, Monica.”

“My room.” She looks toward her door. “There’s someone I want to—”

“Class,” I say.

Her serious expression emits an element of style. Beneath stillness, I sense something turning. A man walks toward the two of us. He’s handsome: close-cropped hair, maroon t-shirt, and blue jeans paired with tennis shoes. I see a visitor’s sticker on his chest. *Not now, Monica—I’ve no time for a parent conference.* She stares at me. I return her expression. Then a dormant smile surfaces, and the man behind her follows with a smile of his own, and I see he’s younger than I’d noticed. An older brother perhaps.

“Hello, Mr. Girman.” The boy holds out his right hand. I pause to look at his face, terra-cotta colored and smooth. His eyes stay focused on mine. “Do you remember me?” he says.

I allow my hand to move up his arm. I blink nervously and inhale. The class inside watches. “Of course,” I say. Rolan hugs me tight like the nurse in the San Miguel. Ms. Ramos places a hand on my back. The three of us stand still for a moment.

“What’s going on?” says Jackie. She stands at the edge of the door. Rolan and I separate our bodies. I’ve missed this boy.

“Back inside,” says Ms. Ramos. “Wait for the bell.”

Rolan says he’s back in town. He received his GED last week.

“We always knew you were smart,” says Monica. “Aren’t you seventeen, already?” Rolan lowers his head, embarrassed. He’s always had a crush on Monica.

I never imagined Rolan would grow up so cleanly, ample and well-proportioned. The dimples on his cheeks are his own form of literary expression. I’m aware of my

partially-shaved head as he talks. I turn to the side so the *Baja* is less visible. I'm aware, ludicrously, how my arms have withered. I want him to remember me strong and capable. Not like this. He and Ms. Ramos continue talking. Rolan has his driver's license now. He tells us Michael impregnated a girl so he could join a gang. Rolan doesn't answer when we ask him about his own gang affiliation. I've become numb. My own body betrays me. The flirtatious affair has flown.

"I have to go," I say. I glimpse his face. "I've missed you." Then he focuses so intensely on my eyes, my face, my feet, I consider turning to stone.

"Me, too," he says. We clasp hands and I walk down the long hallway toward academic suicide. Along the way I envision Estéban and Pedro and Chinese martial arts movies and I know what I have to do.

CHAPTER 38

I bring in a book of poetry to my second-period class:

This is how you clean a wound:

Clean the flesh.

Sew the skin.

Pray for the soul.

Wait.

How can there be

a little war?

Are some deaths

smaller than others,

leaving mothers

who weep

a little less?

I'm the fool for leaving poetry behind. *Words like music in the mind.* "The Poet Slave of Cuba," I tell the kids. "A biography of Juan Francisco Manzano."

"Biography," Anthony says. "So no one wrote it?"

"Fool." Billy turns around and laughs. "It means *he* didn't write it."

"Duh," says Sydnee.

"Shh! Read more," Billy says.

“I’ve got a better idea.

“Sir?”

“How about *you* read it?”

Sydnee stretches her legs. “Yeah, right.” Anthony passes out the poems and highlighters.

Billy begins:

*Poetry cools me, syllables calm me
I read the verses of others
the free men
and know
that I’m never alone*

“What’s it mean, *free men*?” Billy asks.

“He’s a *slave*,” says Jose. He sits with his backpack latched around his back. He’s no longer high in the mornings. “A slave,” Jose repeats. “From Cuba, fool.”

Sydnee backs her body away from her seat. She looks at David next to her. Billy turns several pages and continues reading:

*My father is winged, like my mother
oh, I envy them
what will happen
to me
little bird*

“Is he really a bird, sir?”

“No, Billy.”

“Then why—”

“It’s poetry.”

“Right.”

“Poetry.”

“Like tagging.”

“Uh-huh.”

“With better words.”

Syndee picks her favorite passage:

*I take him in my coach and he sits beside me
calling me Mamá
he barely knows his other mother anymore
now I am the real one
if only he weren't quite
so dark*

“Racist,” Anthony says.

“No,” says Syndee. “Nuh-uh.”

“How is that not racist?” Anthony holds up his packet. *If only he weren't quite so dark.*

Syndee swings her ponytail in front of her mouth. “She’s a mother.”

“So.” Billy tenses his face. His forehead is too young for wrinkles.

“You wouldn’t get it.” Syndee sticks out her tongue at Billy.

“What’d I do?”

“No,” says Syndee. “That’s for Billy, not you, Anthony.”

David raises his hand.

“Yes, David.”

“I think she’s sad because she knows if he’s dark, he’s not going to have his freedom.” He stops, his teeth tapping together, barely touching. “She’s a rich lady.”

“Why do you say that, David?”

“The coach.”

Ah, yes.

“I don’t get it,” says Mireya.

“A poor person can’t afford a fancy car.”

“They had cars.”

“Like the horse thing.”

“Buggy, David.”

“Yeah, that.”

“Read on, Jesse.”

*Only Juanito, I said very clearly,
to make sure no one had misunderstood,
only this genius of my old age,
do I keep for myself
as my own
mine until the day of my death
when he will also
know mercy*

The boy struggles with each word, but eventually finishes. I don't think he understands a thing he's read.

"But, sir," Sydnee says. "I thought Mexico didn't allow slavery."

"*Es Cuba,*" Jesse says. The class stares at Jesse, including me. We're shocked at the defiant tone in his voice.

"What about America?" asks Billy.

I move closer to my lap top at the table in the center of the room. Billy scoots over. *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*, I type. Billy's hips are tiny. Google saves the day!

I project the image in the screen: *Buy, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!*

Spontaneity, dammit!

"What's desolate, sir?"

"Look it up, Sydnee." We wait.

"Alone," she says. "Isolated." I remain still.

Mireya wants to read. "Go back to the table of contents," she says. Billy scrolls to the beginning. "That's what I thought," says Mireya. "It's an autobiography." Billy pushes his face closer to the computer screen.

"It's on the board," Anthony says. "What are you blind?"

"Chapter twenty-two," Mireya says. "Christmas Festivities."

CHRISTMAS was approaching. Grandmother brought me materials, and I busied myself making some new garments and little playthings for my children. Were it not that hiring day is near at hand, and many families are fearfully looking forward to the probability of separation in a few days, Christmas might be a happy season for the poor slaves. Even slave mothers try to gladden the hearts of their little ones on that occasion.

“That’s nice,” Mireya says.

“I can see all the little kids running around.”

“Nice, Anthony.”

“I’m just saying.”

Jesse stares ahead, his eyes a light shade of brown.

“So they might be sold?” asks Sydnee.

“I’m afraid so.”

Jesse’s skin is white as a napkin.

“Mothers and daughters?”

“And sons?” ask Billy.

“All of it,” I say.

Jesse grips his fingers tightly. This time I allow him to use the bathroom.

* * *

Two notes arrive in my suggestion box the same day:

I say Mr. I mean Ms Thompson

I hope my ELA teacher gets fired

hate me cuz I’m a raver and also

I hate him.

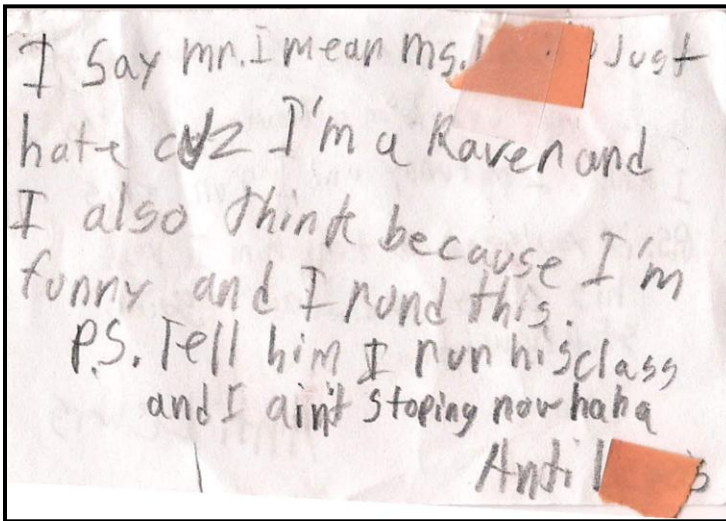
I think I'm funny and I run this.

I hope that fag goes to hell—Hater #1

P.S. if you see him tell him I run

his class and I ain't going to stop

now hahah—Anti Thompson



The kids mean no harm. I arrive the next day armed with Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

"Now this," I say, passing out the papers, "is more difficult than you're used to."

"Nah, we can handle it," says Edgar.

A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he. .

Growing among black folks as among white,

Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I

receive them the same.

I look at Edgar. “What does he mean?” I ask.

“That we’re all one.”

“One what?” He returns his eyes to the poem. He rereads the last line. “The Indians and stuff.”

“Black people, too,” says Jackie. She raises her hand. “Can I read?”

*Brave, brave were the soldiers (high named to-day) who lived through
the fight;*

But the bravest press'd to the front and fell, unnamed, unknown.

I toss my copy on the podium. “Who remembers the war?” I say.

“The Civil War.”

“Abraham Lincoln.”

“Five-dollar bill.”

“Penny.”

Impressive. “The author of this poem,” I say, moving behind Edgar, “helped the wounded soldiers.”

“She was a nurse?” asks Jackie.

“Sort of,” I say. “The narrator’s not a woman.”

“A male nurse?”

“Right.”

I ask Fernando to finish the last few lines.

*Centre of equal daughters, equal sons,
 All, all alike endear'd, grown, ungrown, young or old,
 Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich,
 Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love,
 A grand, sane, towering, seated Mother*

“The words are too big,” he says. “I liked the poems better.” He smiles from the back of the room. “It sounds like the Pledge of Allegiance.” He points at the flag. “The American one.”

*With husky-haughty lips, O sea!
 The tale of cosmic elemental passion*

“It’s too hard,” Fernando says.

“It’s beautiful,” Daisy says.

Alisa turns toward Daisy. “Me, too.”

“I wish there were more guns,” says Edgar.

“He wasn’t a soldier, remember?”

“Why not?”

“Too old.” I look at Edgar’s confused stare. I remember the notes in the suggestion box. Maybe it *wasn’t* his handwriting. Am I wrong, again?”

“He’s gay, you know.”

Fernando laughs from the back. I can't believe what I've said. "Walt Whitman. American's greatest poet."

"Who?"

"Not too bad, is it?"

A few girls nod their heads. Fernando raises his hand. "I think it's pretty."

"Me, too," says Edgar. "But I want some guns." He separates his arms like he's shooting an automatic rifle.

That's it? I waited four years for that?

I walk along the narrow row beneath the windows. "What do we think his point is?" The class remains silent. "Why would he write such things?"

Ilse raises her hand slowly as if brushing makeup on her face.

"Yes, Ilse?"

The class turns around to face the girl. "I think he wants to remind people back then that we're all people. Like, no one is better than anyone else." Daisy smiles. "It's not fair to treat people badly."

I'm too moved to smile. Hector slaps something off his hand. Even Gloria shuts up for once. By the time the bell rings, Fernando has picked up all the highlighters.

"Here," he says, handing me the bag. "I don't think we should read anymore gay people." I place a hand on his flat head. He looks up at me and smiles. "I'm not going to be a hater anymore."

And serpent hiss and savage peals of laughter? Well, shit, Walt. He's just a little boy. Just your average little boy. I flick the back of his head on his way out the door.

CHAPTER 39

I've never had this much fun. J.P and Eddie chase down tennis balls like cheetahs, twisting backs, barreling into the back fence, emerging alive with sweet smiles, bruises, pesky complaints, and savage thirst.

"Come on, sir." Eddie points at the line. "That was in." I pretend to look. I wipe the line with my foot.

"It's not clay," J.P. says. "We're not at the French Open." My doubles partner, Joey, lies down on the court like he's been shot.

"Too hot," says Joey. He extends his arms and legs like he's making snow angels. A gust of wind blows off my visor. Samantha runs behind me and picks it up.

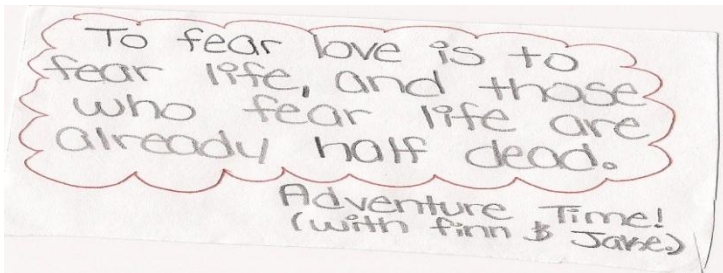
"Thanks, Muñoz."

"You got it." She hands me the squeeze bottle. I dip my head upside down and press a column of water into my mouth. On the way to the net, I squirt Joey.

"Sir!" he screams. He stands, giggling like a younger child, his pressed cheeks round and enraptured. He bounces the racket off his head. "Let's go, old man."

For the first time in four years, Chavez Middle School will not be district champions. We've lost two matches this year. I no longer drill the kids with oppressive forehand movements and racket exercises designed to strengthen their wrists for the challenging one-handed backhand. *Use two hands, for God's sake.* We play games, challenge each other, and share our time between different activities. This year we

allowed the kids to participate in band concerts, choral arrangements, track practice, Wednesday church services, whatever. Give them whatever time they need. So when they're here, we spin circles in our matching shorts and see who can return my hardest serves. We like each other. I'm no longer training kids for Junior Wimbledon, or trying to give them something I never had. Their joyous physicality is bringing my body back as well. Miranda, the girl with diabetes from last year's fifth-period class, now finishes two laps around the court. I'm not as dizzy now when I dive my head down for a low forehand volley. Joey and I might even enter a city tournament next month. I don't know what they've done to me, but I'm dancing around the court like a lyrical essay. Autobiography comes naturally to me, as Billy might have been suggesting. I should take him up on his offer—I'm qualified to tell my own story. *Finally, I believe it!*



Since seeing Rolan I've been

thinking about my appearance. That might be why tennis matters so much. *Go Panthers!* I've spent the last two months working out longer and harder. I'm lifting nearly seventy-five percent of my old workout regime. I curl twenty-five pounds again. I don't see the change on my body yet, though. I'll have to get over it. *Be patient. Work it out.* I'm happy. No more worrying about how much fat I consume or what time of night is too late to eat. I call Mika after eight months and invite him to a late-night

breakfast at Denny's.

We hug in the lobby. "Good to see you, Chris."

"Yeah, buddy. I was working late on my thesis and—"

"Still?"

"Uh-huh."

"The Guatemalan thing?"

It's been a while since we've spoken. "No, I changed it to—"

"School, right?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"I figured."

"Yeah?"

"Yup." The waiter brings us two cups of coffee.

"Still seeing Teresa?"

He holds up a ring. "Engaged," he says. His smile opens, envelops me like a shoreline.

"You have to come."

"The wedding?"

"It's next year."

"You mean she's not pregnant?"

Mika turns his plastic cup of cream upside down over my hand, shakes drops over me and the table. "I love her," he says. His smile hasn't faded. His crooked white teeth jumble exquisitely inside his mouth. "I really do."

I know. I wrap his hands in mine and smile. I sip my coffee and look for the waiter. I'm starved. I lean my head to the side and peer into the kitchen area. Men in white scramble eggs, rest toast abruptly on oval plates. I see Rolan. In a second he's gone behind the counter. I want to tell Mika he's here. I run a checklist over Mika's face. Eyes deep as brown M&Ms; lips the red of satin gloves; hair so short it pricks. He contains his smile. I wonder if I look any better than the last time I saw Rolan. Mika glances at our waiter. He smiles. Rolan has disappeared. Am I still living in the past?

Mika says they'll have the wedding at some big Mexican ranch. "I hope you'll come," he says. His top lip elevates. "I know you haven't been back since, you know—"

"All the more reason, fool." He shakes his head. I like Mika. He's genuine and thoughtful. "I'd be honored." He laughs heartily. I should see him more often, the way it used to be. No more idealized object of affection that exists only in the past. No more Rolan plating burgers in the back. Blurred vision. Faulty judgment. Disorder; blunder; regret; expiation. Redemption. I care as much about Rolan as the pepper grinder on the woman's table next to us. Mika pours another creamer in his coffee with so much ease his face does not move.

In the parking lot a man with big shoulders approaches my car. His strides are long and anxious. *Help! I'm being robbed!* I don't recognize Rolan until he is standing next to me. "Mr. Girman," he says. "Like my new job?" He takes off his black cap. It occurs to me now that gang members do not normally work in restaurants.

"Yes." I release the door handle, turn around. "Yes. Yes, I do, Rolan." We shake hands. I cannot determine his expression—hopeful, determined, melancholic, gentle. He slides a firm hand down the outside of my shirt. We clasp hands in the air,

shift our weight. In nineteenth-century Buenos Aires, male immigrants far outnumbered females so that men in darkly-lit brothels danced tango with other men while waiting for their escorts. The steps are easy. It's the embrace that matters.

Rolan pulls me close to him with masculine intensity, soft and deliberate. His fingertips press hard on the arch of my upper back, our pelvises close like dancers. Headlights from a nearby car illuminate the outside wall of the restaurant. We stand this way for several seconds. A shadow rests over his face. I want to kiss him. *To fear love is to fear life*. I will withstand the embrace. The leader must respect his responsibility to the follower. *Who's who?* Don't fear the embrace. This is not the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, Fernando's favorite book. I lean backwards, lift my arms to his shoulders. The rebellious child looks at me; I detect sadness in his eyes. I hold tightly below his shoulders. I imagine rows of nickel studs dotting the length of his arms. I am a turtle retreating in its shell. I want to puff out my chest like I've swallowed air. This is not the man I want, but the boy I wanted to be. *Bring me back to life*. I never wanted to be tall and lithe with combed dirty blonde hair, as I am. This boy, plain and simple, likes me. His mouth glides over the long, deep scar below my ear along the side of my head and neck. He leans over. Can love ever send the wrong signal?

I met Rolan before my injury, in times of confusion and chaos; how many lawyers out there teach middle school? What was it about him? No, it was me. I knew heartbreak and poverty and misplaced anger and overzealous cooperation. I fear the embrace because I've never felt one before. I don't fear him because he is young; I trust him for challenging me.

I turn my head toward his roving lips. His hands are shaking. I place my lips atop his; I taste the vague scraping of paint along a wall. My dulled senses come alive. Insecurity and self-doubt threaten to interrupt us. His long eyelashes tickle my face. I hang on to this grey figure, his supple lips resting atop mine. The kiss is short. Nothing in this single moment can impale my fragile artist's psyche. What are we, after all, but human?

The kiss is inadequate, a short table-cloth over a wide table. But it will do. I've had it right all along: *domesticity and coziness combined with the grand manner*. What is meant to be, will be. We part so quickly I do not have time to thank him. He picks up his hat from the top my car and walks toward the restaurant with a quick gait. He turns around just as he reaches for the door and I know that all is right. You can't kiss a windmill. It's two in the morning—I am the moon and he is the sky.

CHAPTER 40

Yellow butcher paper hangs from my walls like a setting sun. Pieces of brown paper curl on the floor. “The tape is falling off,” Edgar tells me. He stands on a desk and presses his hand over a laminated, two-dimensional pencil reminding students to write with purpose.

“How is this supposed to help us with math?” Alisa asks. I stare at the five reasons to write

“I’m not convinced,” I say.

“About the Math TAKS?” says Daisy.

“How writing will help you.”

“Answer questions.”

“Exactly.”

Edgar covers the eraser of the upside-down pencil anyway. “Just in case,” he says.

Yesterday my plane ticket arrived in a long white envelope. I’m too young for regrets; I’m going back to Guatemala. I place my plane ticket beneath the document camera.

“Guata-*frekin*’-mala,” I tell the ki.ds. I tell myself. “Swing me a hammock, Martin.” The boy dances his fingers in the air like rain. “Pass me a beer.” My heart belongs to Estéban, the German. I’m no fool; I know he’s gone. His name sounds like

running water off my lips. Daisy smiles. Why hadn't I looked for him in so long? Jackie wants to know why we can't watch movies after the TAKS. "Why does it even matter?" she says. She's right—it doesn't. She bites her plastic necklace in her mouth. Her eyes, the color of cantaloupe rind, filter light. I can almost see through her. The child sits in stifled awe. I pat Jackie's shoulder. My sense of wonder has awoken. I peel my own mouth open in awe. Out of pain comes creation. Abby asks if she can cover my boxes with the Guatemalan rug. "Yes," says Jackie. "I can help." Together they rip the rug beneath Edgar's feet and drag it to the back of the room.

Vestibular disorders are tricky. Because the brain must interpret so many false messages, chronic fatigue and illness envelop the patient. I'm still learning to adjust the standards I set for myself. Abby returns to her seat. *Ask for help and accept it.* While my health is improving, my insides need rest. Abby raises her hand and points at a poster on the back of the door. A dog plays in a field of daisies.

"Should I cover it, sir?" asks Abby. Hector laughs. I turn towards the poster. The dog's pink tongue hangs to the side of its mouth like ham falling off a sandwich. *Accept your limitations. Strive for a positive attitude.* "The dog's right," Abby says. I tell her not to touch a thing. Hector agrees.

"I'm moving to Chicago," I tell the kids.

"The Windy City," Edward shouts. His brother turns around and tosses a highlighter at his head. I'm glad the boys are happy.

"Will you miss us?" Jennifer asks.

It's hard to say. "I'll be teaching college," I tell the children. "Freshman Composition."

“Like our composition books?”

“Sort of.” I unfold my arms. “I’ll be taking classes.”

“Your Ph.D., sir?” *Good old Jennifer.* “I remember you telling us about it.”

I explain that I’ve found a roommate on-line. “But he wants us to get to know each other,” I say. “On Facebook.”

“Cool.”

“I don’t know how to use Facebook.”

“We can show you,” Edward says.

“But the computers—”

“Yeah, we know—blocked.”

“Bring your laptop.”

“From home.”

“Yeah, sir.” Jennifer raises her hand high like a salute.

I’m no longer in the market for unrequited love. The emotional torture nearly killed me. But Rolan’s kiss may have brought me back to life. My first love might be out there. In Guatemala. In Chicago. In the number of places I’ll go.

Luis, Roxy, Pigtails, Oscar, Rolan, Daniel, Michael! The children have taught me how to make friends with strangers, and how to become more intimate with those I already know. *Alisa; Jackie; Daisy; Hector; Edward; Junior; Billy.* I need not fear. Rolan and I did nothing wrong in that parking lot. I am not the architect of my own misfortune. Jackie and Fernando play footsies beneath the table. They’re beyond strict beauty—these children are magic. These aren’t windmills I’m fighting, no. The child in me has returned. I look around. Ineptitude and ignorance are part of life. I possess an

abundance of both. But so are passion and bougainvillea, prickly pear and forgiveness. No one understands this dichotomy better than the children in Room 208. Like *Raising Cain* says: fathers and sons are a legacy of desire and distance. I'm no father, fool, but these kids are the next best thing.

“Way to go, sir.”

“I hate the Bears.”

“Cowboys, rule.”

“*Cállete* David.”

“Play tennis.”

“Face Book rocks.”

“Whatever, Jackie.”

“Twitter.”

“Nuevo Leon.”

“Is Ms. Ramos going with you?”

“Boys, boys, boys.”

“Girls, girls, girls.”

“Or Mr. Thompson? Right, sir?”

“A kiss is sometimes just a kiss.”

“Watch your language.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“Watch this.”

“We'll miss you, sir.”

“Texas History kicks ass.”

“Don’t forget about our band concert.”

“And the athletics banquet.”

“Chorus.”

“Field trip.”

“Davy Crockett.”

“You’re going on the field trip, right?”

“The tape is slipping.”

“TAKS stinks.”

“Why do we have to—”

“That’s the bell.”

“Bye, sir.”

“*Hasta luego.*”

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christopher Girman is a graduate of the University of Texas School of Law and The George Washington University. He teaches Texas History in middle school and practices immigration law during the summer. He is the author of two books, *Mucho Macho* (Haworth Press) and *The Chili Papers* (Veluminous Press).