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Student Teaching*

editor's introduction:

Classroom Life and the Challenges of Being a Student Teacher. This selection, like many others in this anthology, comes from a larger case study that fills an entire book. The case study illustrates how education takes place in a fifth-grade classroom, over the course of an entire academic year. The book's chapters are organized according to the months of the school year.

The specific selection for this anthology comes from two different parts of the case study. The first part is the beginning of the book and introduces the fifth-grade teacher, several of the students, and a student teacher who has joined the class for the fall semester. The second part highlights the challenges confronting the student teacher, especially in light of a difficult student (whose behavior tests both teachers' patience). The selection illustrates how a common educational process—student teachers having their first classroom experience and learning to cope with classroom discipline, as well as the fifth-grade teacher's stress in trying not to intervene—can be expressed in highly personal and particularistic terms. As part of the scene, other students also assume lifelike proportions.

The classroom scene seems to be a common part of American public education. How teachers can cope with and be productive in this environment is the theme of the case study. The school serves an economically declining neighborhood, in a city—Holyoke, Massachusetts—that also was undergoing industrial decline at the time of the case study. The student population had become increasingly Puerto Rican, and about two-thirds of the children in the fifth-grade classroom were in the

*Kidder, Tracy. (1989). *Among Schoolchildren* (pp. 3–11 and 114–132). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

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free and reduced-price lunch program—an indicator of their families' low-income status. As with other schools in similar settings, referrals to special education classes are a common way of dealing with children with disciplinary problems.

Also, many of the children were coping with a new language environment. In the fifth-grade classroom, at least one child benefited from an inspired school psychologist. This child, described elsewhere in the original case study, could hardly read or speak English, but the psychologist had the foresight to administer a test often administered to stroke victims who have lost their language—a test calling for sophisticated pattern recognition abilities. The student scored in the near-genius range.

Relevance of Case Studies: Recreating Everyday School Life. The case study gives you a sense of what it is like to live through a school year and the daily circumstances confronted by teachers and students in many contemporary classrooms. The case study also conveys the richness and complexity of everyday life in a school, in a manner not readily emulated by other social science methods. The depth and breadth of the selection delve into the personalities of the actual participants while covering a broad range of topics, such as the teacher's relationships with the students and other adults, the challenges of maintaining order and discipline in the classroom, the teacher's own home and family life (including her grading of homework), and the broader neighborhood setting in which the teacher lives.

Overall, the case study helps you feel like an unobtrusive observer in the life of the classroom, at close proximity. Possibly reflecting what must be done to produce such a sense of intimacy, the author spent the entire school year with the fifth-grade class. At the same time, the particularism and intimacy do not lead to an idiosyncratic or unique case. In the hands of a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, the book demonstrates a core strength of the case study method: to examine an individual or an event within its real-life context, but to lay the basis for a more general understanding though only being exposed to a single case.



September

Mrs. Zajac wasn't born yesterday. She knows you didn't do your best work on this paper, Clarence. Don't you remember Mrs. Zajac saying that if you didn't do your best, she'd make you do it over? As for you, Claude, God forbid that you should ever need brain surgery. But Mrs. Zajac hopes that if you do, the doctor won't open up your head and walk off saying he's almost done, as you just said when Mrs. Zajac asked you for your penmanship, which, by the way, looks like you did it and ran. Felipe, the reason you have hiccups is, your mouth is always open and the wind rushes in. You're in fifth grade now. So, Felipe, put a lock on it. Zip it up. Then go get a drink of water. Mrs. Zajac

means business, Robert. The sooner you realize she never said everybody in the room has to do the work except for Robert, the sooner you'll get along with her. And . . . Clarence. Mrs. Zajac knows you didn't try. You don't just hand in junk to Mrs. Zajac. She's been teaching an awful lot of years. She didn't fall off the turnip cart yesterday. She told you she was an old-lady teacher.

She was thirty-four. She wore a white skirt and yellow sweater and a thin gold necklace, which she held in her fingers, as if holding her own reins, while waiting for children to answer. Her hair was black with a hint of Irish red. It was cut short to the tops of her ears, and swept back like a pair of folded wings. She had a delicately cleft chin, and she was short—the children's chairs would have fit her. Although her voice sounded conversational, it had projection. She had never acted. She had found this voice in classrooms.

Mrs. Zajac seemed to have a frightening amount of energy. She strode across the room, her arms swinging high and her hands in small fists. Taking her stand in front of the green chalkboard, discussing the rules with her new class, she repeated sentences, and her lips held the shapes of certain words, such as “homework,” after she had said them. Her hands kept very busy. They sliced the air and made karate chops to mark off boundaries. They extended straight out like a traffic cop's, halting illegal maneuvers yet to be perpetrated. When they rested momentarily on her hips, her hands looked as if they were in holsters. She told the children, “One thing Mrs. Zajac expects from each of you is that you do *your* best.” She said, “Mrs. Zajac gives homework. I'm sure you've all heard. The old meanie gives homework.” *Mrs. Zajac.* It was in part a role. She worked her way into it every September.

At home on late summer days like these, Chris Zajac wore shorts or blue jeans. Although there was no dress code for teachers here at Kelly School, she always went to work in skirts or dresses. She dressed as if she were applying for a job, and hoped in the back of her mind that someday, heading for job interviews, her students would remember her example. Outside school, she wept easily over small and large catastrophes and at sentimental movies, but she never cried in front of students, except once a few years ago when the news came over the intercom that the Space Shuttle had exploded and Christa McAuliffe had died—and then she saw in her students' faces that the sight of Mrs. Zajac crying had frightened them, and she made herself stop and then explained.

At home, Chris laughed at the antics of her infant daughter and egged the child on. She and her first-grade son would sneak up to the radio when her husband wasn't looking and change the station from classical to rock-and-roll music, “You're regressing, Chris,” her husband would say. But especially

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on the first few days of school, she didn't let her students get away with much. She was not amused when, for instance, on the first day, two of the boys started dueling with their rulers. On nights before the school year started, Chris used to have bad dreams: Her principal would come to observe her, and her students would choose that moment to climb up on their desks and give her the finger, or they would simply wander out the door. But a child in her classroom would never know that Mrs. Zajac had the slightest doubt that students would obey her.

The first day, after going over all the school rules, Chris spoke to them about effort. "If you put your name on a paper, you should be proud of it," she said. "You should think, This is the best I can do and I'm proud of it and I want to hand this in." Then she asked, "If it isn't your best, what's Mrs. Zajac going to do?"

Many voices, most of them female, answered softly in unison, "Make us do it over."

"*Make you do it over,*" Chris repeated. It sounded like a chant.

"Does anyone know anything about Lisette?" she asked when no one answered to that name.

Felipe—small, with glossy black hair—threw up his hand.

"Felipe?"

"She isn't here!" said Felipe. He wasn't being fresh. On those first few days of school, whenever Mrs. Zajac put the sound of a question in her voice, and sometimes before she got the question out, Felipe's hand shot up.

In contrast, there was the very chubby girl who sat nearly motionless at her desk, covering the lower half of her face with her hands. As usual, most of their voices sounded timid the first day, and came out of hiding gradually. There were twenty children. About half were Puerto Rican. Almost two-thirds of the twenty needed the forms to obtain free lunches. There was a lot of long and curly hair. Some boys wore little rattails. The eyes the children lifted up to her as she went over the rules—a few eyes were blue and many more were brown—looked so solemn and so wide that Chris felt like dropping all pretense and laughing. Their faces ranged from dark brown to gold, to pink, to pasty white, the color that Chris associated with sunless tenements and too much TV. The boys wore polo shirts and T-shirts and new white sneakers with the ends of the laces untied and tucked behind the tongues. Some girls wore lacy ribbons in their hair, and some wore pants and others skirts, a rough but not infallible indication of religion—the daughters of Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals do not wear pants. There was a lot of prettiness in the room, and all of the children looked cute to Chris.

So did the student teacher, Miss [Pam] Hunt, a very young woman in a dress with a bow at the throat who sat at a table in the back of the room.

Miss Hunt had a sweet smile, which she turned on the children, hunching her shoulders when they looked at her. At times the first days, while watching Chris in action, Miss Hunt seemed to gulp. Sometimes she looked as frightened as the children. For Chris, looking at Miss Hunt was like looking at herself fourteen years ago.

The smell of construction paper, slightly sweet and forest-like, mingled with the fading, acrid smell of roach and rodent spray. The squawk box on the wall above the closets, beside the clock with its jerky minute hand, erupted almost constantly, adult voices paging adults by their surnames and reminding staff of deadlines for the census forms, attendance calendars, and United Way contributions. Other teachers poked their heads inside the door to say hello to Chris or to ask advice about how to fill out forms or to confer with her on schedules for math and reading. In between interruptions, amid the usual commotion of the first day, Chris taught short lessons, assigned the children seat work, and attended to paperwork at her large gray metal desk over by the window.

For moments then, the room was still. From the bilingual class next door to the south came the baritone of the teacher Victor Guevara, singing to his students in Spanish. Through the small casement windows behind Chris came sounds of the city—Holyoke, Massachusetts—trailer truck brakes releasing giant sighs now and then, occasional screeches of freight trains, and, always in the background, the mechanical hum of ventilators from the school and from Dinn Bros. Trophies and Autron, from Leduc Corp. Metal Fabricators and Laminated Papers. It was so quiet inside the room during those moments that little sounds were loud: the rustle of a book's pages being turned and the tiny clanks of metal-legged chairs being shifted slightly. Bending over forms and the children's records, Chris watched the class from the corner of her eye. The first day she kept an especially close eye on the boy called Clarence.

Clarence was a small, lithe, brown-skinned boy with large eyes and deep dimples. Chris watched his journeys to the pencil sharpener. They were frequent. Clarence took the longest possible route around the room, walking heel-to-toe and brushing the back of one leg with the shin of the other at every step—a cheerful little dance across the blue carpet, around the perimeter of desks, and along the back wall, passing under the American flag, which didn't quite brush his head. Reaching the sharpener, Clarence would turn his pencil into a stunt plane, which did several loop-the-loops before plunging in the hole.

The first morning, Chris didn't catch one of the intercom announcements. She asked aloud if anyone had heard the message. Clarence, who seemed to stutter at the start of sentences when he was in a hurry to speak, piped up

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right away, “He he say to put the extra desks in the hall.” Clarence noticed things. He paid close attention to the intercom. His eyes darted to the door the moment a visitor appeared. But he paid almost no attention to her lessons and his work. It seemed as if every time that she glanced at Clarence he wasn’t working.

“Take a look at Clarence,” Chris whispered to Miss Hunt. She had called Miss Hunt up to her desk for a chat. “Is he doing anything?”

The other children were working. Clarence was just then glancing over his shoulder, checking on the clock. Miss Hunt hunched her shoulders and laughed without making a sound. “He has such huge eyes!” she said.

“And they’re looking right through me,” said Chris, who lifted her voice and called, “Clarence, the pencil’s moving, right?” Then Chris smiled at Miss Hunt, and said in a half whisper, “I can see that Clarence and I will have a little chat out in the hall, one of these days.”

Miss Hunt smiled, gulped, and nodded, all at once.

Chris had received the children’s “cumulative” records, which were stuffed inside salmon-colored folders known as “cumes.” For now she checked only addresses and phone numbers, and resisted looking into histories. It was usually better at first to let her own opinions form. But she couldn’t help noticing the thickness of some cumes. “The thicker the cume, the more trouble,” she told Miss Hunt. “If it looks like *War and Peace*. . .” Clarence’s cume was about as thick as the Boston phone book. And Chris couldn’t help having heard what some colleagues had insisted on telling her about Clarence. One teacher whom Chris trusted had described him as probably the most difficult child in all of last year’s fourth-grade classes. Chris wished she hadn’t heard that, nor the rumors about Clarence. She’d heard confident but unsubstantiated assertions that he was a beaten child. These days many people applied the word “abused” to any apparently troubled student. She had no good reason to believe the rumors, but she couldn’t help thinking, “What if they’re true?” She wished she hadn’t heard anything about Clarence’s past at this early moment. She found it hard enough after thirteen years to believe that all fifth-graders’ futures lay before them out of sight, and not in plain view behind.

She’d try to ignore what she had heard and deal with problems as they came. Clarence’s were surfacing quickly. He came to school the second morning without having done his homework. He had not done any work at all so far, except for one math assignment, and for that he’d just written down some numbers at random. She’d try to nip this in the bud. “No work, no recess,” she told Clarence late the second morning. He had quit even pretending to work about half an hour before.

Just a little later, she saw Clarence heading for the pencil sharpener again. He paused near Felipe's desk. Clarence glanced back at her. She could see that he thought she wasn't looking.

Clarence set his jaw. He made a quick, sharp kick at Felipe's leg under the desk. Then he stalked, glancing backward at Chris, to the pencil sharpener. Felipe didn't complain.

Maybe Felipe had provoked the kick. Or maybe this was Clarence's way of getting even with her for threatening to keep him in from recess. It wasn't a pleasant thought. She let the incident pass. She'd have to watch Clarence carefully, though.

The afternoon of that second day of class, Chris warned Clarence several times that she would keep him after school if he didn't get to work. Detention seemed like a masochistic exercise. Sometimes it worked. It was a tool she'd found most useful at the beginning of a year and after vacations. In her experience, most children responded well to clearly prescribed rules and consequences, and she really didn't have many other tangible weapons. The idea was to get most of the unpleasantness, the scoldings and detentions, out of the way early. And, of course, if she threatened to keep Clarence after school, she had to keep her word. Maybe he would do some work, and she could have a quiet talk with him. She didn't plan to keep him long.

The other children went home, and so did Miss Hunt. Chris sat at her desk, a warm late-summer breeze coming through the little casement window behind her. She worked on her plans for next week, and from under cover of her bowed head, she watched Clarence. The children's chairs, the plastic backs and seats of which came in primary colors, like a bag full of party balloons, were placed upside down on the tops of their desks. Clarence sat alone at his desk, surrounded by upended chairs. He had his arms folded on his chest and was glaring at her. The picture of defiance. He would show her. She felt like laughing for a moment. His stubbornness was impressive. Nearly an hour passed, and the boy did no work at all.

Chris sighed, got up, and walked over to Clarence.

He turned his face away as she approached.

Chris sat in a child's chair and, resting her chin on her hand, leaned her face close to Clarence's.

He turned his farther away.

"What's the problem?"

He didn't answer. His eyelashes began to flutter.

"Do you understand the work in fifth grade?"

He didn't answer.

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“I hear you’re a very smart boy. Don’t you want to have a good year? Don’t you want to take your work home and tell your mom, ‘Look what I did?’”

The fluorescent lights in the ceiling were pale and bright. One was flickering. Tears came rolling out of Clarence’s eyes. They streaked his brown cheeks.

Chris gazed at him, and in a while said, “Okay, I’ll make a deal with you. You go home and do your work, and come in tomorrow with all your work done, and I’ll pretend these two days never happened. We’ll have a new Clarence tomorrow. Okay?”

Clarence still had not looked at her or answered.

“A new Clarence,” Chris said. “Promise?”

Clarence made the suggestion of a nod, a slight concession to her, she figured, now that it was clear she would let him leave.

Her face was very close to his. Her eyes almost touched his tear-stained cheeks. She gazed. She knew she wasn’t going to see a new Clarence tomorrow. It would be naive to think a boy with a cume that thick was going to change overnight. But she’d heard the words in her mind anyway. She had to keep alive the little voice that says, Well, you never know. What was the alternative? To decide an eleven-year-old was going to go on failing, and there was nothing anyone could do about it, so why try? Besides, this was just the start of a campaign. She was trying to tell him, “You don’t have to have another bad year. Your life in school can begin to change.” If she could talk him into believing that, maybe by June there *would* be a new Clarence.

“We always keep our promises?” Chris said.

He seemed to make a little nod.

“I bet everyone will be surprised. We’ll have a new Clarence,” Chris said, and then she let him go. . . .

Discipline

Ancient Greek and Roman schoolmasters adopted various instruments for classroom management, such as ferrules, switches, and taws, which nineteenth-century English pedagogues found useful. In some of Germany’s nineteenth-century Latin schools, children passed by whipping posts on their way to class, and when they got in trouble had to visit the Blue Man, the official in charge of punishments—the Blue Man always wore a blue coat, under which he concealed his tools. Although the practice has been greatly reduced, formal beatings of schoolchildren still happen in America; most states still permit them, though not Massachusetts, at least in theory. Some

medieval European and some colonial American schoolmasters probably thought they were doing their students a favor by literally beating the Devil out of them. Historical records make it plain that some teachers and school administrators enjoyed having licenses for their tempers, and perhaps some still do. But a central fact in most sorts of schools has always been the fear of the Lilliputian mob. In America, corporal punishment began to wane around the time when elementary education was becoming universal and compulsory—around the time, that is, when keeping order probably became more difficult. One sociologist of teaching describes the situation as “dual captivity”: the children *have* to be there, and the teacher has to take the children sent to her.

The problem is fundamental. Put twenty or more children of roughly the same age in a little room, confine them to desks, make them wait in lines, make them behave. It is as if a secret committee, now lost to history, had made a study of children and, having figured out what the greatest number were least disposed to do, declared that all of them should do it.

Some people think it must be easy to manage a room full of children, but if that were the case, it wouldn't often be said that adults who have been behaving badly have been behaving like children. A man recently out of college came to Kelly School one day that fall to try his hand at substitute teaching. It wasn't even noon when [principal] Al [Laudato], making his third visit to restore order in that substitute's room, told the man that he might as well give up and go home. The screams of his pupils had broadcast his failure throughout the classroom wing. He left with his collar loosened, his necktie askew. He had to go down the main hallway to get out of there, and he walked as fast as a man can without running, and kept his eyes lowered, avoiding the looks from the teachers, mostly women, whom he passed.

Classroom management, as Mrs. Zajac practiced it, required an enlargement of senses. By now Chris could tell, without seeing, not only that a child was running on the stairs but also that the footfalls belonged to Clarence, and she could turn her attention to curing one child's confusion and still know that Clarence was whispering threats to Arabella. She was always scanning the room with her eyes without moving her head, seeing without being seen. Peripheral vision gave her that glimpse of Judith squinting at the board. And there had developed in Chris a sense not easily accounted for—like a hunter's knack for spotting a piece of furry ear and inferring a deer standing in a thicket—so that, for example, she could sit at the slide projector, pausing in a film strip to lecture the class on the Iroquois, and know that, behind her, Robert wasn't paying attention. In fact, Robert was playing baton with his pencil, noiselessly flipping it in the air. Chris didn't stop talking to the class or even turn around. Extending her left hand back

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toward Robert, she snapped her fingers once. Robert stopped flipping his pencil and, as usual, blushed.

Once when Chris was busy on the other side of the room, Dick, the quiet boy from the Highlands who loved social studies, leaned over to a classmate and, inclining his head toward Mrs. Zajac, said, "She knows every trick in the book."

At the end of a day in October, Pam said to Chris, "I don't know how you do it." Pam looked sad. "You just come in and they're quiet." . . .

That fall, Chris ran the class and Pam practiced on them for a while every day. For the first several weeks Chris sat in on Pam's lessons, and afterward gave her advice. Pam tried to cover too much ground; Chris showed her how to plan against the clock. Pam spoke too softly. "We need to give you a mean, horrid voice like mine," Chris told her. All in all, Chris felt pleased about Pam's teaching. She liked the way Pam enfolded her lessons in games for the children. She could tell that Pam labored over her lesson plans. Pam came from Westfield State, which was Chris's alma mater. Chris imagined her planning at night in her dormitory room, just as Chris had done in her own practice-teaching days. One time Chris told Pam, "Jimmy loves you," and Pam replied, "I think I'd rather have him hate me and do his work." Chris felt pleased. Pam had the right instincts, Chris thought.

Above all, Chris approved of the emotion that Pam brought to the job. In Chris's philosophy, a brand-new teacher needed to feel strong affection for her first students in order to sustain her. The first days of school, when Pam merely sat as an observer in the back of the room, Chris spied on her, including Pam in the searchlight sweeps she made of the room. She saw Pam gazing fondly at the children. Some, especially Clarence and Felipe, kept turning around at their desks to smile at Pam. Pam hunched her shoulders and smiled back, a smile she might have used to entertain a baby in a crib. Pam was falling in love with these children, Chris thought, and the gentle spectacle took her back to her own first class, to a time when she had felt that there never were more fetching children than the ones placed in her care, and she had indulged herself by crying a little at night, in her room at her parents' house, over her first deeply troubled student—the boy who had stolen the class's goldfish. That boy had possessed so little sense of right and wrong that when the fish had been extracted, gasping, from his pockets, he had declared indignantly, "I didn't hurt 'em. They're still breathin.'"

Chris felt confident that Pam had all the equipment to become a good teacher. She needed only to learn how to control a classroom. "The discipline part," Chris thought. "She's got all the rest of it."

At the end of her sixteen weeks of practice, Pam would have to teach the class for three entire days without Chris in the room. After the third week of

school, to start breaking Pam in, Chris left her alone for a half hour to teach spelling. The first couple of times, Pam's spelling went well. On a Friday, however, Clarence struck.

Pam was trying to administer the weekly spelling test. Robert, Felipe, Arnie, and Clarence kept telling each other to shut up. As Mrs. Zajac had advised, Pam gave them all warnings, and then she wrote the next offender's name on the board: Robert. That meant he was in for recess. Robert shrugged. Then Pam wrote Clarence's name on the board, explaining that he was not to disturb the rest of the class anymore.

"So?" said Clarence, glaring.

"If you don't care, then go out and stand in the hall," said Pam. Mrs. Zajac had said to put him out there if he was disturbing the class and wouldn't stop.

"No," said Clarence.

"Yes," said Pam. But she didn't make him go. She wasn't sure how to do so. If she laid hands on the boy, he'd make a fuss, Pam thought. So, instead, she told him, "You're not impressing anyone by having that attitude. Clarence, get up and go sit at this front desk. Clarence, right now."

He obeyed, but he banged chairs as he went.

"I feel bad for the people who want to take the test and do a good job."

"So?" said Clarence angrily.

"Don't answer me back!"

She turned her back on him and read the next spelling word. Behind her, Clarence muttered, making faces at her. She wheeled around. "Clarence, get up and go stand in the hall!"

She lowered her voice. "Please."

She stood over him and said softly, "Please move your body into the hallway."

Clarence jumped up. He made a small cry. In the doorway, he turned back and said to Pam, "I'll punch you out! I'll punch you in the face!"

"All right!" Her voice hit her upper register. "You can say that to [the principal] Mr. Laudato!"

Mrs. Zajac had said that you need to know your ultimate threat, which at Kelly was usually Mr. Laudato, but that you should never go to it right away. And as Pam explained later, "The reason I get wishy-washy, part of me wants to yell at him, and another part wants to wait until he's cooled down a little and I can talk to him." Now she obeyed the second impulse. She didn't take Clarence to Mr. Laudato.

Behind her, Robert was chortling. "He said he'd punch her!" Robert squirmed in his seat. Julio and Jimmy grinned at each other.

Pam returned to stand in front of the class. Behind her, Clarence edged himself around the doorjamb. He peeked in. Several children giggled. Pam

turned. Clarence vanished. "Clarence, I don't want to see your face!" Pam turned back to the class to read the next spelling word. Clarence's face came back around the doorjamb, mouthing silently at her back, "Fuckin' bitch. Gonna get you." The class giggled. Clarence began to grin.

Pam went to the door. Clarence's face disappeared. She closed the door and said to the class, "I hope you'll just ignore him." But in that contest of personalities, hers as a teacher still unformed and divided, she was bound to lose.

The door was closed, but Clarence's face now appeared in the small, rectangular, gun-slit window in the door, his nose and lips distended as he pressed them against the glass. Even Judith ducked her head and shook with the giggles. Others laughed openly. "I'd appreciate it if you'd ignore him and not laugh. You're making things worse," said Pam. But how could they help it? School days were long and this was something new.

Clarence was making faces in the window, bobbing up and down in it. The sound of his drumming on the door—*bang, bang, bang*—accompanied Miss Hunt's reading of the words for the remainder of the test.

The dénouement was predictable by then. Pam tried to talk to Clarence in the hall, and he wouldn't look at her. So she held his chin in her hand, to make him, and a few minutes later he got even with her by sneaking up behind Felipe—in the hallway, on the way to reading. Quickly thrusting both arms between Felipe's legs, Clarence lifted his friend up and dumped him, face down, on the hallway carpet. Felipe arose weeping. Clarence got suspended. Pam spent the afternoon worrying about his mother punishing him.

Chris stayed after school with Pam that day. They sat at the front table. Pam told Chris the whole story. Chris said, "You've got to remember there are twenty other kids, and you *are* getting to them. Clarence may be beyond us. We'll do our best, but don't let him ruin your time here. It's not your fault. He walked in like this. You've got to take your little advances and try to forget things like this."

Pam nodded and smiled. She had a confession to make. "The thing is, I almost cried, and then he'd know he'd gotten to me, and I'm thinking, 'He's only ten years old. I can't let him make me cry.'"

Chris went home worried. She told Billy the story. When she got to the end, she said, "Oh, God. If she had cried . . ."

Chris didn't want to preside over the destruction of a promising career. She worried that Pam would lose her enthusiasm if being alone with this class turned into torture. Chris wanted Pam to taste success, so from time to time Chris continued to sit in on some of her lessons. The children always behaved on those occasions. It was obvious why. They kept glancing at

Mrs. Zajac. “If I stay in the room, she won’t learn how to discipline,” Chris thought. Within months Pam would become a certified teacher. Next year, probably, she would have her own class. Then there’d be no Mrs. Zajac to intervene and help out. Pam had to learn how to control a class now. So for the most part, when it was Pam’s turn to teach, Chris gathered up her books and went out to the hall, and told herself as she left, “You have to sink a few times before you learn.”

Chris did her own practice teaching in the old West Street School, where, war stories had it, the staff wore mittens indoors in the winter and often got bruised when breaking up fights on the playground. Chris’s supervising teacher eventually left Chris alone, to teach her lessons in a dank, decrepit basement room—one day the blackboard fell off the wall. Chris found herself with a class of thirty-four children, many of whom didn’t speak much English. Chris remembered coming into that room one day and finding the class bully perched on a chair with one chair leg planted on the stomach of a writhing classmate. She didn’t do much real teaching, she thought, but in truth she always could manage, almost from the start, to get a class under control. Chris’s skills had grown. Now she could make discipline into a game, as on the day this fall when, apparently looking elsewhere, she noticed some girls passing a piece of paper down the back row during reading. “I’m not even going to ask you for that note,” Chris said ten minutes later. The girls’ mouths fell open in astonishment. Chris smiled at them. “Teachers have eyes *all around* their heads,” she said. She leaned down to get her face close to the girls’ faces and drew her fingers all the way around her head, as if encircling it with a scarf. “That’s why I don’t cut my hair shorter. I *hide* them.”

Chris knew that confidence is the first prerequisite for discipline. Children obeyed her, she knew, because she expected that they would. But that kind of confidence can’t be invented. Pam would have to find it herself. Chris tried to help. For an hour on Wednesday afternoons, during art and music, Chris and Pam would sit down on the brown vinyl sofa in the balcony corridor between Room 205 and the boys’ lavatory. Then, and also after school, the two women would sit facing each other, both dressed in clothes fit for church, the elder looking old only in comparison to the neophyte, the rookie teacher eyeing the veteran respectfully. Pam compressed her lips and nodded as Chris gave her tips:

- No college course prepares you for the Clarences and Roberts, so don’t think that you should have known how to handle them when you got here. You are doing a good job, at least as good a one as the other practice teachers in the building.

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- Don't let yourself imagine that you are a cause of a troubled student's misbehavior. If you do, you become entangled in the child's problems. You must cultivate some detachment. You have to feel for troubled children, but you can't feel too much, or else you may end up hating children who don't improve.
- When teaching a lesson, don't only call on the ones with their hands up.
- While you teach, scan the room with your eyes for signs of incipient trouble.
- Don't put a child in a situation where he, for the sake of his pride, has to defy you.
- If a child starts getting "hoopy," call on him at once. Stand beside his desk while you teach the class.
- If he acts up anyway, send him to the hall. You must not allow one child to deprive the others of their lessons.
- Before you even start a lesson, wait until all the children have taken their seats. Don't try to teach until all of them have stopped talking.

That was easy for Mrs. Zajac to say. Before starting a lesson, she would simply fold her arms and, leaning a shoulder against the front chalkboard, stare at the class. The children would scurry to their desks. They'd stop talking at once. But what if Pam did that and some of them just went on talking and wandering around the room? What should she do then?

Pam wanted the class to do some work at their desks, quietly. She was trying to get Clarence to sit down first. He was walking around the room backwards. She touched his arm. He threw her hand aside and proceeded, walking backwards. She turned to Robert, who was making choking, chuffing sounds. "Robert!"

"My motor run out of gas," Robert explained.

She turned again, and there were Felipe and Arnie wrestling on the carpet. She ordered them to stop, but while she was doing that, Courtney had gotten up from her desk and had gone over to Kimberly's to gossip.

"Courtney, go back to your desk."

"Wait a minute," said Courtney, who had never talked back before.

"No, I'm not waiting!"

Robert was babbling. "That cold. Cheat. Cheat. Cheat. Five-dollar food stamps." He stood up as Pam approached, and did a shimmy in front of her, his big belly jiggling. He was protesting that he couldn't get to work. "I don't have no book," he said.

Mrs. Zajac walked in. The sentries had failed.

"Then you go over there and get one!" thundered Mrs. Zajac.

Robert froze. His face turned pink.

Pam was trying to show a film strip about colonial days, but Clarence kept putting his hand in the beam. Then Robert put his hand in the beam. Then the usually well-behaved Julio tried it, too. Then Clarence put his hand

on the rump of the colonial maid on the screen. Felipe leaned way back in his chair, laughing and laughing.

Pam stopped the film strip. She put the names Clarence, Robert, and Felipe on the board, which meant they couldn't go outside after lunch. As the class arose for lunch, Clarence said, right in front of Pam but as though she weren't there, "Lunch! I'm goin' outside."

"I'm goin' outside," said Robert.

As for Felipe, he refused to get up and go to lunch at all. He had his arms folded. He pouted.

"Felipe, you are going to lunch," said Pam.

"No, I ain't!"

"Yes, you are!"

"Read my lips!" said Felipe. "I'm stayin' here!"

"Tsk, ts, tsk," said Robert.

"Because we were laughin', then she had to put my name down. I hate her! I'm sick of her!" yelled Felipe as Pam, twisting her mouth, decided to leave him there and get help.

One day, when sent to the hall, Clarence stood in the doorway, pointed a finger at Pam, and declared, "I ain't stayin' after school either." Then he watched Pam wrangle with Robert. He cheered Robert on, saying, "Crunch her, crunch her."

Pam said, "Okay, Robert, would you get up and go down the hall to the office?"

"No, please. I wanta stay," said Robert, smirking up at her.

"Robert, get up," she said. "Robert, get up."

"I wanta stay here."

"If you're going to stay here, you have to be good."

"See dat?" said Clarence from the doorway. "She doesn't make Robert go. She prejudice, too. See, she didn't get Robert."

"Shut up, Clarence," said Robert.

"Robert, go to the office," said Pam.

"No," said Robert, smirking.

Another time, Pam said to Clarence, "Shut your mouth!"

Clarence replied, "No. It's *my* mouth."

Pam said to Robert, "You can work on your story now."

"No, I can't," said Robert. "I don't know what to write."

"Use your brain," said Pam.

"My brain gooshed out," said Robert. Then he looked up at her and began beating on his cheeks, a popping sound. Then he gnawed on his hand. Then he slapped his own wrist.

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“I don’t want any more foolish comments!” she thundered. “Do you *under-stand?*”

Clarence watched. “She not human,” he said.

Pam turned to Clarence. “You don’t disturb twenty other people.”

“There aren’t twenty people,” said Clarence. “There’s . . .” He started counting.

“He knows how to count,” said Robert.

Chris returned to find Pam sitting at the teacher’s desk, staring out the window, with her jaw misaligned.

It wasn’t as if Pam did no teaching. The children would sidle up to her table throughout the day, bringing her pictures they’d drawn and asking for help. She tutored many individually. Some of the lessons she taught without Chris in the room went smoothly. Once in a while when Miss Hunt was teaching, Judith or Alice or Arabella spoke up and told Clarence and Robert to be quiet and stop making trouble. But usually that just egged the boys on, especially Clarence. Some of those boys’ responses to Pam’s efforts to tame them seemed surprisingly sophisticated, as if they themselves had read handbooks on classroom management. Once, for instance, Pam turned her back on Robert, and Robert called to her, “That’s right. Just ignore me.”

As for Clarence, he often wrote his name and Judith’s on the board, as if to claim her, but that didn’t give Judith any special power over him. He told her once that she needed someone “to pop her cherry.” One time, after he had been especially nasty to Pam, Judith told him, “You have the brain of a caterpillar.”

Without hesitation—the lines seemed to have been already planted—Clarence replied, “I’ll take yours out and put it in your hand and make you eat it.” Clarence made his slow, threatening nod at Judith.

Judith looked skyward. She said to Alice, “How did God make such a mistake? He had no choice but to put Clarence on earth. He didn’t want him up *there.*”

On one of those bad days that fall, on the way to lunch, Judith said softly to Pam, “Are you reconsidering your decision to become a teacher?”

“No, Judith,” said Pam, and she smiled. “*You* make it all worthwhile.”

Judith herself had begun reconsidering her embryonic plans for becoming a teacher. She wondered why Pam kept coming back, and didn’t even take a sick day. Judith believed that Pam had to be a very strong and admirable person, but even as the days of Pam’s travails wore on and Clarence’s antics lost their novelty, Judith still couldn’t help laughing when Clarence, banished to the hall, did a soft-shoe routine for the class in the doorway. As Robert indignantly pointed out—“Hey, the teacher’s laughin’, you’re not sposed to laugh”—even Pam couldn’t always hide her amusement. For example, the day when she told the class that primates have tails,

and Clarence stood up, poked out his rear end, patted it, and said, "Check out mines."

Chris didn't witness those scenes. Leaving Pam alone in the room for a period, Chris would go out to the sofa in the hall and try to work on her plans for next week's lessons. She had a hard time concentrating. She'd hear distant, muffled sounds of commotion, then Pam's voice, high and angry, then more commotion. Chris would flinch. She'd get up and peer down the corridor, to see if Pam had put Clarence out in the hall. One time, when Pam had put him out there, Chris waylaid a passing teacher and said, "Give Clarence a dirty look when you go by, okay?" When boys came by on the way to the bathroom, she waylaid them. "Felipe, come here, please. What's going on in the room?"

"Miss Hunt is in a bad mood," said Felipe. "Clarence was talking back to her, and everybody laughed. He wrote on the board, 'Miss Hunt is a jerk.' She kicked him out, and he wanted to come back, and she yelled at him, and he's mad."

"Okay. Thank you."

Felipe moved on. Chris sat on the couch, fuming. "Children can be so cruel when they sense a weakness. I'd like to go in there and . . ." She bared her teeth.

On the bulletin boards in the hallways, Halloween displays lingered almost until Thanksgiving. Most of the displays were store bought or inspired by books of ideas for bulletin boards, on sale at all stores that cater to teachers. No child would have recognized his fears in the black cats, toothy pumpkins, and witches on broomsticks. They all looked much too benign. But some of the witches' faces that hung in the classroom, over the closets and under the clock, had malevolence, especially high-strung Felipe's. His witch's face was long and distended, like an El Greco, and her mouth suggested an appetite for little children. And Clarence had acquired a pair of plastic fangs, painted red, which he wore for the class during one of Pam's lessons.

As November wore on, Pam taught more and more. Chris grew increasingly restive out on the couch in the hall. Now and then Chris felt a little consternation at Pam. One afternoon, she stood on a chair just outside the door, taking down an old bulletin board display. While she pulled staples, Chris eavesdropped. A fair amount of noise came out of the room. "Does it always sound like this?" Chris muttered under her breath.

From the room came Pam's voice. "Felipe! Why are you out of your chair?"

"That's a good question, Miss Hunt," muttered Chris. "Why is he?"

Sometimes rivalry develops between a practice teacher and the one whose class she borrows. Neither Pam nor Chris committed any rivalrous deeds,

though. Chris really liked Pam. She ached for Pam while she sat on the sofa imagining trouble back in the room. But Chris had more on her mind than Pam's travail. In December, the real test began, both for Pam and Chris. Pam took over the class for three whole days in a row. Chris couldn't sit still. She roamed the olive-carpeted halls like an expectant father. Two days went by. Finally, Chris sat down on the sofa. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "I want my class back!"

* * *

A dusting of snow covered the playground. Heavy coats filled the closets. Out in the hall, just before Pam's last grammar lesson, one of the last lessons she would teach the class, Chris said, "Well, Pam, are you ready to slam down the book, and close the door, and let 'em have it?"

Pam looked at Chris, and then Pam hunched her shoulders and smiled.

Chris went to the sofa. In a moment, she arose and sneaked up to the door of Room 205. She peeked through the gun-slit window. "Oh, good. Pam just threw down the book. I wish I could hear what she's saying. I told her to get right up to Robert's face with her teacher finger."

Chris went back to the sofa. From there, she could hear Pam's voice, not the words, but the form of it, loud and angry but confident. In a moment, all was still. This time, quiet endured.

Afterward, Pam told Chris that the class behaved well after she slammed down the book and let Clarence have it. Pam said she felt better. She said she believed that the class had been waiting for her to do that, and that they felt better, too.

"She's learning," said Chris after school that day.

They gave Pam her farewell party on a day in mid-December. Chris, Judith, Alice, and Mariposa organized it. Chris sent Pam on an errand so they could hang up crepe streamers. Felipe got so excited during the preparations that Chris had to send him out to the hall. "So you can calm down."

When Felipe came back in, Clarence, now on his best behavior, looked at him and said, "You still ain't calmed down."

On the front table was apple juice and a cake inscribed "Good Luck." Pam had brought each child a candy cane and now laid them on the desks. Robert refused even to touch his. He refused to get into the class picture that Pam took. He sat at his desk, and while the other children scurried around and chattered, Robert pulled his sweatshirt up over his mouth, to his nose.

Then he clawed at his eyelids. Then he began slapping himself, harder and harder, in the face.

Chris stared at Robert from her desk. "Look at him! I gotta get him out of here."

She took Robert down to the office to see the counselor, but the counselor was busy, as usual. So she sat Robert down on one of the bad-boy chairs outside Al's office. "Why didn't you want to make a card for Miss Hunt?"

Robert shrugged. "I didn't have no paper," he said in a squeaky voice.

"Don't give me that!" said Chris. She lowered her voice. "What's wrong, Robert?"

"Nuttin'!"

She left him there. Maybe the counselor could get something out of him. Probably not. Later, she'd wish that she had asked Robert, "You're sad Miss Hunt is leaving, aren't you?" At the moment, though, Chris had to get back to the party.

Pam gave Chris a new, larger bookbag and a note that concluded, "You are a very special person and a dear teacher."

Chris had decided that she missed Pam already. So had the children, including most of her tormentors. They were putting on their coats.

"Bye, Miss Hunt," said Jimmy.

"We'll remember you," said Felipe.

Pam smiled and gulped.

The time arrived for the walkers to leave. Judith pulled Arabella back by the collar and delivered her to Pam. Arabella hugged Pam. So Felipe had to hug her, too. Judith, who had said she'd like to give Pam a present but couldn't think of anything except maybe earplugs, gave Pam a casual, one-armed hug. Last was Clarence. He hugged Pam hard for a long time, burying his face in her dress.

"Bye, Miss Hunt."

"Goodbye, Clarence. Be good and do all your work."

"I *will!*"

Then it was Chris's turn. Walking Pam to the door of the room, she said, "I think you'll do well. I really do. I hope you have an easier class. And remember, the first day it's gotta be *grrrr*."

All of the children except Robert had made cards for Pam. Clarence's was the longest and most elaborate. He had decorated the outside with hearts, inside which he had written, "Spelling BEST" and "Teaching is the BEST." Inside, in very neat lettering, he had written:

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Dear Miss Hunt

*I am sorry you are leaving Today and I now how i been bad to you but i
Want to say something before you leave That here it is I Love you And
thank you for all the help i needed Thank you Miss Hunt?*

Merry Christmas

Your Friend

Clarence by!

Once again, Chris felt moved by Clarence's note. But when, several weeks later in the Teachers' Room, someone said that Westfield State should pay part of Pam's tuition to Chris, Chris remarked, "Actually, they should pay Clarence." She added, "Pam took Clarence 202."