

## Teachers Like Me

I never knew I wanted to be a teacher until, very unexpectedly, the idea hit me; it fell heavy as a meteor, targeting me immutably from out of the blue. I was thirty-one years of age, and it was *not* on my agenda to change professional careers so unexpectedly. Nevertheless, I spent the next three years of my life working toward a Bachelor's Degree in English Education and testing my way to an instructional license. I was excited to finally land my first teaching position inside the halls of an expansive, multi-cultural high school located on the outer edge of a large inner-city district.

An integration-based busing plan allowed the school hiring me to serve students from various areas of the city; disparate cultural and socio-economic groups mixed freely inside our imposing, multi-leveled building. Having personally grown up inside, and attended the small schools of, a tightly-knit rural community, I had minimal experience inside the walls of a big-city high school able to accommodate more than two thousand students.

Privately?

I was petrified.

Absolutely convinced that I would soon be making countless unforgivable new teacher mistakes.

Painfully aware that I would now be expected to stand in front of huge classes filled with unfamiliar teenagers, I was determined to hide my weak-kneed uncertainty. Adopting an air of casual assurance to cover what I felt must be my unmistakably obvious small-town girl's lack of sophistication – making the effort to get my head around various unfamiliar names as I made my way down the main hallway on the first day of classes, I scanned a recently printed roster: Elisso, Jhante, Shartone, Guilleramne, Tarnet, Yasnin. Crowds of students mingled, divided, and flowed around me as I inched my way down the corridor whispering the intriguing names to myself.

An initiation into contemporary high school culture came without warning, arriving, as it did, in a sort of high-pitched squeal behind me. It was a shrill, insistent petition able to bring me sharply out of my reverie.

“Shut the fuck *uuuuup*.”

The sounds of a scuffle ensued.

“Oh my god, you goddamned *pussy*. I'll kick your motherfucking ass down this goddamned *hall*, and yank that tiny little dick of yours down to your motherfucking *ankles*.”

Panicked, I turned – expecting?

Well, I didn't know.

Surely imminent pandemonium.

At the very least?

Impending mayhem.

What I found, however, was an astonishingly small blonde-headed girl in a blue and white cheerleader's skirt shoving her hip flirtatiously into a tall, dark-eyed boy twice her size. No one in the halls reacted. Teachers, students and administrators – everyone went about their business, as these two apparent lovebirds passed me by.

Dumbfounded, I stood in an open-mouthed wonder. Feebly turncoat at best, my stiffly imposed veneer of urbanity had quickly evaporated. I had grown up, as I said, in a *very* small town. When a boy in my history class had pulled a ribbon out of my hair (a ribbon I had spent the better part of an hour putting *into* my hair) I had turned on him. Mustering up all of the

outrage available to my thirteen-year-old soul, I had sputtered the very worst thing I could imagine: “You...*bastard!*”

The teacher had stopped teaching.

The students had stopped talking.

In a shocked silence, *everyone* had looked my way. Within minutes I had found myself seated in the principal’s office.

*And he was calling my mother.*

Ah, well; clearly, as they say?

Times have changed. Twenty years later, I, too, can rattle off a scathing invective, much like the proverbial sailor. Or, to state it more accurately, much like a twenty-first-century inner-city teenager. Contrary to middle-class America’s romanticized fantasy around educator role models, I am no Miss Landers: that pretty-as-a-picture, sweetly virginal icon made popular in an era of the *Leave It To Beaver* TV series.

However; having slowly and painstakingly built my instructional craft for more than twenty years, I am, on the other hand, a very good teacher. This means that I am experienced, well-educated, disciplined and tolerant. I know my subject; I defend my purpose. I protect children; I am dedicated, vigilant, self-assured and opinionated. And, in modern years; in years “compassionately” committed to the implementation of a no-excuses, high-stakes testing accountability?

It is exactly these traits which also make me a very *bad* teacher.

Yes, I know. This likely feels confusing.

But, all of those problematic teachers you’ve heard so much about lately; all of those so many *bad* teachers about whom you’ve been endlessly told to worry? Well, despite the relentlessly advertised anxiety, in reality those teachers are simply reliable, hardworking, everyday people.

Hardworking, everyday people – *like me*.