

Temporary Classroom

I have 267 students. Six parents show up for conferences. Two of them are drunk. I hope Kwami's mother will appear before me so I will have proof that his stories are just fables, ghetto bravado, overblown cartoons of a monotonously bad situation, like gangsta rap.

I speak slowly to Blanca's bobbing father, who smells like beer and limes. I tell him she has an "A" in my class and that she wants to be a doctor, which is a very good goal. I don't mention that although she is the only student in her sophomore English section who scrupulously turns in every assignment, her writing skills are fourth-grade level, she has yet to master the concept of placing periods at the ends of sentences, and she misses class nearly every week so she can look after her younger sisters while her mother waits at LA County General for prenatal care. The school administration, in its panic to retain students and federal funding, mandates that I assign homework every day and that I give students credit for completing it, regardless of quality of work. I can't fail any student without filling out a pyramid of paperwork to document each incremental incident of underachievement and then getting written permission from the parent, and parents are an elusive entity in this neighborhood.

Most of the telephone numbers on the students' official records are out of service. They don't "live" anywhere. They "stay" at revolving addresses that they don't bother to memorize, places without answering machines or alarm clocks or calendars or newspapers or magazines or books or an extra pen. One thing these tenuous households do have is cable television, an indulgence I'm not able to afford on my paltry new teacher's salary. Television teaches them about white people. We are villainous or sexually available or unforgivably sappy. We sit down to

dinner together and always speak in full sentences. Our sole displays of any kind of passion are mute sex acts. My students are convinced that these televised portraits of Caucasian culture are true. They tell me it would be boring to be rich.

Blanca has an inner-city “A,” and the SATs are going to eat her alive. I feel like grabbing her father by his shirt-front, slapping him until he steadies, then telling him that we’re all lying, Blanca has been trying hard but she’s sixteen and it’s too late, she can be a medical assistant maybe, just please don’t let her give up, it took my mongrel Welsh-Irish-German family a hundred years to start living comfortably in this country. You breaking your back, sir, is not enough. Your daughter will have to be a beast of burden, too.

Blanca sits on the edge of her chair, smiling primly at the scarred ceiling as the faulty electrical wiring flickers. The fluttery dim and buzz of the classroom lights give an impression of neon signs and screened porches. I wear gloves and a coat because the heater has been broken for months and my trailer classroom has all the insulation of a cardboard box. It’s built like a pauper’s coffin—hurried, unfinished and drab, long and narrow—and always crammed with bodies, festering with the murk of kids who share a bathroom with six others and only shower on certain days, mixed with the seasick squall of cheap colognes and body sprays, the astringent florals of those who are clumsily birding and beeing. The trailer has squatted on the outer edge of the campus for almost thirty years, longer than I have been alive, but it is classified as a temporary classroom and does not qualify for any improvements. It reminds me of the twine and toilet-roll rooms my childhood friend and I used to construct for her hamster, an insult to any energetic creature, just asking to be bitten and clawed to shreds. It’s better than last year, though, when I had no classroom at all, when I roamed from room to room, crisscrossing a campus nearly as big as the business district of the town where I grew up, displacing peeved veteran teachers during their planning periods, lugging my bells and whistles through the shrieking salmon-swimming halls in a doomed attempt to slide in the door and assume an air of authority before the bell. The school was designed to hold fifteen hundred students, but now has nearly three thousand. Last year, I was not even offered a filing cabinet. This chewed-up hamster room is my prize for surviving year one.

One day as I drill the class on capitalizing sentences, a hefty girl’s desk crashes through the rotting wood floor. It is impressively sudden

and thunderous, the sort of lightning-nerved wham-bam that I imagine must accompany spontaneous combustion. We all look skyward, as if trying to catch a glimpse of a smiting god. The poor girl seems marked for misfortune. She already has the shrewd, bunched-up face of the perennially cheated, her harlequin of a mother having named her after a brand of hairspray, then left her to be raised by an end-of-her-tether grandmother. Falling through the floor doesn't surprise or outrage her nearly as much as it should. She lumbers out of the hole with enormous gravity, a polar bear heaving itself from arctic waters. I expect an uproar from the other kids, but they only twitter in the spooked hush of the superstitious.

It would be against the law to operate a dog kennel with such a hole in the floor. Despite numerous maintenance requests and phone calls, the hole still gapes at us months later, a smirking smart-mouth full of dirt. I outline its jagged edges in red caution tape. Cold air and tiny, biting ants come and go through the splintery portal. Boys stick their arms in up to the shoulder and pretend they hear the rustle of a scheming *mapache*. ("You know, Miss, the one what gots them black eyes and gets all up in the trash and that.") I insist that there is nothing down there, while secretly fearing that we will all be bitten in a rabid spree. The students lose interest in the hole and learn to walk around it.

Neither health nor safety are expected here. My students are in chronic ill health. Asthma, runny eyes, unattended swellings, constant coughs. Their diet consists of junk food foraged at irregular intervals. There is a district-created period called "Nutrition," a sort of mid-morning kiddie coffee break. It's standing room only on the bald school grounds. The students guzzle soda and *dulces mexicanas* and have disconcerting brushes with their enemies. They return to the classroom in the throes of bouncing sugar seizures, unable to do much more than kick and scream. I am mortally concerned that I will catch consumption, which is back from the third world and sailing with airborne glee through the light-choked cells of LA County Juvenile Hall, a place some of my students visit with the same regularity and minor annoyance with which I go to the dentist or change the batteries in my smoke alarm.

If anyone from this school manages to become a doctor, I vow to myself that I will follow that person as my personal messiah.

I tell Blanca's father that it would be good if she could check out books from the public library. He doesn't bother to nod because time is as tightly budgeted as money in his subsistence household, and no one is going to take Blanca to the library. She's only allowed to go to school and

come home. The streets are dangerous and she has housework to do.

Blanca waits sweetly for me to finish delivering the school-sponsored words of encouragement, a good girl, not looking at me or her father. She has perfected the art of blocking out lying adults.

I am genuinely glad that Blanca wants to be a doctor, no matter how far-fetched this goal is. When I ask my students to write what they will be doing in five years, the most common answers are:

Playing on the Lakers

Stripping

Prolly dead

When asked what they will be doing in ten years, ninety percent leave the answer blank, informing me that it is stupid to guess at something that far ahead. They clearly don't believe anything will exist in ten years.

The teenagers in Lincoln Heights aren't kids. They are children with raging, undisciplined emotions and too many adult responsibilities. They have been to too many funerals. They know the procedure for prison visitation: file a request, be on time, don't wear denim. They get patted down a lot. They aren't hardened, but guarded. When their guard slips or gets knocked away, they attack with the obstinate frenzy of neglected toddlers. They have never been in a situation in which they have to sit still and be quiet, including nine years in LA public school classrooms. Tests and lectures are discouraged by the district. Every lesson should be interactive entertainment. Note taking has been declared obsolete, though someone forgot to inform the colleges. I remember how torturous it was for me to sit through Mass when I was three years old, and recognize the same imprisoned squirming and compulsive need to needle and comment in my adolescent students. I have forgotten that most of my behavior was learned. Most of my students aren't really ornery. They are merely unschooled.

I struggle to find ways to motivate them. If I mention college, a good job, a nice apartment, they are unmoved. They have mastered a lexicon of scornful hissing they exhale toward me when I bring up their futures. The two subjects in my repertoire that interest them are 2Pac and my boyfriend, whom they hypothesize must have a white name like Scott, must drive a Ferrari, must dance terribly, like a goat. It baffles them that I am in my mid-twenties and have no children. I am confused by their interest in me. My high school teachers were nuns, and I would have been indescribably embarrassed to hear them reveal anything about their

personal lives. I develop a dry, affected Ms. Chips manner, taking on a brisk nasal tone and addressing the students as “Sir” and “Madam.” They call me “Miss,” a queer formality brought up from Mexico, one reliable flash of graciousness in the midst of twirling chaos. “Hey, Miss,” one of the fifteen class clowns asks, “did you get really freaky this weekend and drink your Coke without no straw?”

Sometimes I want to save them all, pile them into a bus and take them to the utopian streets of Brentwood and tell them, “Look. This is your city, too. A better life is only twenty-five minutes to the west.” Then they steal the fan I had to buy out of pocket to save us from the broiling summer heat. They punch out the speakers on my little boom box, on which I let them play golden oldies tapes because it’s something to compete with the jackhammers and car horns bombarding us from the street. They stick wads of pink bubble gum in the pages of the textbooks, our rarest commodity, only eighty books for 267 students. I get so irate over the books that tears glisten in my eyes. They are genuinely curious about this reaction, and so put more gum in the books and add comic strip balloons to all the pictures, with misspelled commands for blowjobs and accusations of homosexuality.

When I call them up to my desk, they often space out on what I’m saying because they’re fascinated by my blue eyes, the likes of which they’ve never seen up close before. My light irises half-repulsé them, as if they are confronted by something raw, something premature and unprotected with layers missing. When I blush, the class goes wild. It’s like a magic trick, all that pale skin turning traffic-light red. I feel lonely with my out-of-place features and spotty comprehension of conversational Spanish. I know formal Spanish from Spain. I can read *Don Quixote*, but I can’t tell when someone calls me a cunt in front of everyone. Another failure of my private school education to prepare me for anything useful.

I’m not a good teacher. I’m smart and thorough but have no compassion for people who don’t value literature. It takes me a long time to realize that public censure always backfires, that these kids have to be scolded in private so they don’t lose face. When the boys complain bitterly about having to carry a book home, I condemn them as lazy. I eventually discover that I am not teaching the criminals of this neighborhood, just the rapscallions. The criminals hang on the streets in gang clumps and watch my students walk home. A backpack heavy with books is a sign of a “schoolboy” and grounds for a beating.

I neglect the Asian kids from Chinatown because they're quiet and diligent and strangely severe toward me. I figure out that they are mortified at seeing a teacher treated the way I let myself be treated. The Asian kids bend their frail, black heads over their work and copy things over and over. Unlike for the Spanish-speaking students, the school has never provided the Cantonese speakers instruction in their native tongue. They grip their 99 Cent Store ballpoint pens with sink-or-swim determination. They do precisely what is asked, blotting out originality and enthusiasm with the same angry exactness the privileged kids at my high school used to employ when our parents forced us to play a piano piece at a party. The tiny Asians get stomped in the bathrooms until they learn to scale the chainlink fence and sprint home if their bladders get full.

I'm not a real teacher, anyway. I'm a would-be screenwriter who needs health insurance. The woman who taught in this classroom before me left her acting headshot in my desk. All too often, these kids don't get real educators, just dilettantes out for a thrill, trying to earn some instant karma and gritty story material. I get plumed and perfumed on weekends, go to parties where people complain about parking and compare hair-straightening techniques. I want to say: "Do you realize the state of the public schools in this city? In ten years, everyone will be an illiterate thug." But my friends clearly don't believe that anything will exist in ten years, either—that is, nothing beyond themselves and their imminent success.

My greatest failure is Kwami. A wiry black kid bussed in all the way from South Central, which is what happens if your parents don't get it together to enroll you in your neighborhood school before it fills to capacity. Many of the Latino boys are openly racist, and Kwami is small, with a dented afro. He has a big mouth, and he spends the entire class period on defense, battling petty harassment with caustic outbursts. He whips his licorice body this way and that, fending, parrying, panting like he's on the coliseum floor instead of in my classroom. Blanca scrapes her desk away from the troublemakers, isolating herself in a corner, her keen face straining as she struggles to listen over the bombastic bullying. I say, "Stop it" at regular intervals and strike with the iron fist of detention, which no one ever shows up for since walking home later by yourself is as treacherous as riding through Sleepy Hollow alone.

Kwami doesn't have the luxury of listening to the lessons. So it's shocking that he turns in his assignments and that they are very well

written. When I compliment him in class, his face ripples with hostility and he mutters something crude under his breath that makes the boys near him laugh. They add leers to their lounging postures, and I know I will somehow have to teach the rest of the period without turning to face the chalkboard.

I begin writing elaborate comments on the tops of Kwami's papers, in green pen as red is forbidden by the district because it might harm someone's self-esteem. I owe him the time. He turns in the only papers that I don't have to correct to pieces. "You write very well. Where did you go to school?"

He begins writing back at the top of his next paper, just answering my questions, nothing more. "New Haven." He's not a lifelong product of LAUSD. Someone in Connecticut, god bless them, taught him to write, and he has an aptitude for telling stories. He never does any work during class, too busy trying to confiscate the drawing of him as a loin-clothed primate that the rest of the students are passing around. In spite of the district's clearly articulated anti-racism policies, I cannot get the artist suspended for even one day because no one can get his mother on the phone to agree to come to a meeting where she would have to give permission to suspend her son. The artist knows this. He does things like pass around racist drawings because he wants to force me to be his mom—to rant at him with a focused passion that his swing-shift parents don't have time for. If he were my kid... I'd be the same failure. I belong to a culture and education level that trained me to consider money before children. The kid's mother and I both end up with boys we can't control. I cover day shift and she covers night and the lunatics run the asylum.

Kwami writes a character sketch of an incredibly abusive, crack-addicted mother who calls him "Dirty Ole Bastard" and "doesn't listen to any type of music—she's too mean." The portrait seems outlandish, but it has an eerie idiosyncrasy that might be a sign of things no one could make up. I tell Kwami that I need to speak to him after class. He sneers, "I ain't talkin to you." Later that period, he and another boy devise a huge spitball that ends up lodged in my hair for several minutes before I notice the Chinese kids' clenched jaws and averted eyes and the Latina girls' hands over their laughing ruby lipstick, and understand the Latino boys' sly questions about how often I wash my hair. Kwami knocks his textbook on the grimy floor as he leaves instead of putting it back on the shelf. I am dead tired with my impractical college degree

and my waitress feet. Such a sizable patch of my head is dampened that Kwami must have Oppenheimed the most massive and destructive spitball of all time. When he acts this way, it seems reasonable that his mother would call him a bastard.

The end of the semester approaches. Predictably, almost no one turns in their five-page story, even though it is the main component of their grade. After the bell, Kwami tosses a ten-page story on my desk and flees, elbowing a delicate Chinese boy out of his way.

Kwami's story is about the son of the abusive mother. The tone is at first detached, but quickly turns wistful. The son smokes a lot of blunts to escape his problems. The process of soaking a cigar in whisky, then slicing it open, removing the tobacco, and filling it with marijuana is painstakingly described with an awed tenderness that cleverly satirizes badly perverted maternalism. The son has one dream, which is to become a writer. The ending abruptly announces that the son should stop dreaming because he will not live that long.

I look up numbers for Kwami's guidance counselor, the school psychiatrist, and his mother. I am afraid of his mother. Kwami has written her into an evil queen, all-powerful and implacably cruel, possessed of a sizzling tongue and icy larynx. He will never report to his guidance counselor, and filing a formal request for him to get involuntary psychiatric help means spelling out the reason I am worried about him, which involves legal liability. I frequently get memos from the district regarding some seemingly innocuous behavior—bringing snacks, being alone in a room with a student of either gender, giving car rides—that can make me vulnerable to a personal lawsuit. These memos might as well bear the heading: "You're on Your Own If..." I can't be sure how seriously Kwami's drug references will be taken, or if the story will lead to real-life punishment. The school is under the protection of the Rampart Division of the LAPD. I have had few interactions with law enforcement and generally think of the police as knights with *deus ex machina* powers. But I have noticed the stomping, mirror-faced bulldoggery of the Rampart cops, the whiff of hooliganism, the way even the good kids hate them so much they spit on the ground after mentioning them. I have the instinctual impression that a drug bust will be valued over rescuing an abused teenager.

A friend of mine believed her student's stories of his grandmother hitting him with a cane and making him sleep on the floor without a blanket. These stories were probably true, but the kid refused to make

a statement against his grandmother and the teacher is still embroiled in litigation a year later. The young grandmother actually showed up in my friend's classroom and tapped the cane menacingly against her desk while repeating, "You oughtn'ta done that. You know you oughtn'ta done that." The teacher gets hang-up calls late at night. She believes it is the boy calling for help.

No thank you. Not unless I see it with my own eyes.

And I know Kwami will never cooperate with my efforts to rescue him. He will fight me every step of the way. I reread his story and decide that it has to be an exaggeration. A kid with a life that bleak would not keep showing up for school every day, catching the bus at five in the morning, sitting here listening to me blather about commas and using your five senses to enhance your writing. Wouldn't he be standing on his desk, waving a red flag, pleading with me to get him out of his home? Aren't victims charming and defenseless? I have never known anyone in a true crisis. It is hard to judge.

I am not a real teacher. My one dream is to become a writer. I write Kwami a long note in the margins of his story. The gist of the note is that the son character is extremely talented, and he can become a writer if he works hard, that education can get people out of dire circumstances, that if an adult is hurting him or the adult needs help, he should tell a teacher or counselor directly, maybe by writing a note. I do not miss the opportunity to close with the message that drugs are bad, they kill your brain.

After I hand back the graded stories, I watch Kwami surreptitiously devour my comments, his paper hidden in his lap, shaded by his desktop. As he reads, he visibly deflates. Some kid aims a red laser pointer at his eye and he barely flinches. He rests his cheek on his desk and stares listlessly as someone throws candy sprinkles into the hood of his sweatshirt.

I know I've made a mistake and wish I had at least kept a copy of the story. I am over my meager copy allowance at the school, and have been too exhausted to go to a copy shop myself. After school, I go directly to district-sponsored courses required for me to earn a teaching certificate. These courses are appallingly lax in academic standards, but fiercely loyal to the concept of mandatory attendance and busywork. If you turn in a lot of pages, you are praised. If you print on multicolored paper, you are held up as a shining example of pedagogy. If you talk about cultural awareness, it is okay that you have a shaky command of your subject and no idea if your students are learning anything. I pick

up tried-and-true tricks from my students on how to cut class, but I am too cowardly to attempt it. I have a hundred semiliterate papers to grade every night. I am profoundly sleep-deprived and buy enough underwear to last three months so I don't have to do laundry. Copies are beyond my capacity.

I try to corner Kwami after the bell, but he rams his way out, his story rolled up in his rear pocket, the stiff tail of an animal with its back up. The laser pointer hits my eye, smacking me into blindness. I lurch around the room bellowing like Oedipus, hearing the giggles and the street-justice slam of the door. It is horrible, the things I cannot pinpoint or prove.

Kwami shows up for class for the remainder of the semester, but he stops doing the assignments. When I threaten his grade, he retorts, "Don't matter. I'm leaving anyway." I ask where he is going. He gives me a slit-eyed shrug that means, "I ain't about to tell *you*." I keep waiting for his name to show up in the endless stream of transfer papers, but no one ever requests his grades or indicates that he is going to a new school.

The next semester starts and Kwami is gone. He has not gone through the school's check-out procedure, and no one has called to explain his whereabouts, so he is still on the roll. I ask the class if anyone knows where he is. They don't know, but inform me that another boy who hasn't come back has been shot. Then they grow quiet and sulky. I am in a world in which sixteen-year-olds can suddenly drop off the face of the earth with no official explanation, that living or dead is a distinction that will be left to my imagination. I keep hoping Kwami will come sauntering through the door, surly and unapologetic, unchanged, unharmed.

The attendance books at LAUSD are more regulated than the grade books, and there is an intricate system of symbols that must be filled out next to the students' names every period, a ten-minute task infringing on instruction time. Various tardy and absence excuses are noted. "Present" is a vicious little dot. "Unexcused absence" is a horizontal line. When a student is absent for a long period of time, the lines connect across the page and seem almost peaceful, a medical flatline.

Kwami's fate stretches out in a straight line of absence. I assign this line geometric properties, imagining it to be clean with the unassailable rightness of mathematics and extending forever in both directions, as if Kwami never existed, or exists on another plane. I tell myself it is a new horizon for him, a sign of hope. I am terrified of receiving a

call from some official who has uncovered my gross negligence, my stubborn naïveté that did not allow me to believe that a person in such desperate straits as Kwami would ever intersect with my life. His story was melodramatic, I tell myself. It was so busy with abjectness that I couldn't have been expected to accept it as truth. All of my education trained me to diagnose his tale as sensationalistic bluster. In my world, skepticism and intellect go hand in hand.

After Kwami disappears, I lose my taste for gathering streetwise tales. Even the baddest kids notice that I am heading for a collapse, though they can't bring themselves to relent and behave. I want out, but have credit card debt and am too unemployable to quit. There are quotes from the school's namesake, Abraham Lincoln, engraved on the walls of the buildings. Every day, I read the stonemason's message: "YOU CANNOT FAIL IF YOU BELIEVE RESOLUTELY THAT YOU WILL NOT." *I will get out of here*, I repeat to myself. *I will get out of here and never come back*. Leave it to LA to have a naturally beautiful ghetto. The street level is drenched in all the flotsam of human failure, but if I just point my head upward, there are the green hills and stately palm trees, as confident as they were at the turn of the 20th century when downtown was thriving and wealthy Jewish families lived in the clapboard Victorian houses of Lincoln Heights, now subdivided and sunken like collapsed soufflés. I stare up and try to believe I will somehow escape.

One afternoon, I look up from the attendance book and imagine the buffalo-grizzled figure of Honest Abe, leaning against the windowsill with the other kids for whom there aren't enough seats in the classroom. I am bleary and hung-over from a party the night before where I'd told a story about my dismal teaching job and overheard somebody who works in a production office whisper, "She really overdoes it. I don't believe half that stuff. No school is that bad."

I imagine that Abe has come about Kwami, that he will pull the scales of justice out of his sun-faded waistcoat and wave a terrible swift sword at my head.

"Get me out of here," I telegraph to him. "Please, show me the way out. I want to be great, like you." But he is not yet a national hero with well-known quotes. He is a backward, unbearded youth with a couple of election losses, a mentally ill wife, and an assassination ahead of him. I watch his farm-weary frame struggle to stay awake while I drone on. I realize that if Abraham Lincoln had had me for a teacher, he would have gone back to the plow. I leave my students' greatness untapped. I am

training people to keep their heads down, to end sentences with periods. I don't believe in other people, not in their potential or their capacity for goodness, not in their ability to endure unspeakable hardships, not in their trust when looking to me for guidance.

After Abe, I write many grad school applications, carefully playing up my nobility in educating the ghetto, leaving in the dangerous details while expunging the absurd, cobbling together poetically licensed uplifting scenarios, all in politically correct dialect. I am careful not to include anything that might be mistaken for sensationalism. I need those ivory tower gatekeepers to believe my story and respond to my veiled cry for help. I am offered several fellowships.

I still worry about Kwami. I search for his name. I scan book jackets and screenplay credits. I think I will find him mentioned in the Metro Section obituaries, in the liner notes of a rap CD, on the driver ID card in my New Year's Eve cab. I picture him huddled outside a scorched, windswept Greyhound station in Phoenix, writing furiously on stained notebook paper that he folds and sticks in his pocket when he sleeps. I imagine him forgetting to eat or bathe or relieve himself, hypnotized by the serene blue lines and firm red margins, paper the one thing that ever provided any structure for his fractured life. He gets jailhouse headshrinking and is diagnosed with hypergraphia and given budget shock treatment. He becomes a legend on the slam poetry circuit and gets into Yale.

Under the right teacher, Kwami could have become the voice of underdog LA, telling stories for his unfortunate peers who the LA school system encouraged to go on speaking street Spanish and Ebonics and to use invented spellings. Students who were head-counted in dollars and buffeted at the whim of every slick theoretician who talked their way into a fat consultancy contract. Students like obedient, determined Blanca, whose raw intelligence was bound and girdled by low expectations, shaping her into the perfect fit for a hospital orderly's smock or a fast food manager's apron. All the kids to whom the self-absorbed taxpayers of LA gave relentless feel-good home culture lessons without providing the tools to add to written history. Kwami wielded a pen that could have been mighty. My failure to help him illustrates an important lesson about writing: The pen is only mightier than the sword in certain circles.

I curse myself for not reaching out a hand to the little boy who was so obviously drowning. I am overwhelmed by sadness for him—and for my former self, too, for I was twenty-five years old and far from

home and saw nothing recognizable before me. I was equipped with an extensive vocabulary and only the most myopic crumbs of experience. I was as unguided as I was misguided. There is a truth at the heart of this story more disheartening than all the others: I could not have acted any other way. Stand at the lip of chaos and you will learn what you believe in. From the front of an English classroom in East Los Angeles, everything looked like a lie.