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Confessions of a Student Teacher

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Confessions of a Student Teacher

Everything that you are about to read is a description of my last semester of college, student teaching. The names of places and people have been changed to protect anonymity, but these are all experiences and conversations that actually took place. The teacher in question is no longer allowed to host student teachers from Grand Valley State University.

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It's kind of awkward when you go in for your first meeting with the teacher you're going to be working with for the next four months and the first thing she says to you is: "Well... you see, I didn't actually want a student teacher."

If she noticed the smile slipping from my face, she gave no indication. Maggie March only continued, "I've had three of them in the past. And, none of them made it through the entire semester. I had awful experiences with all of them. The first was a boy who didn't want to do anything. He didn't put in any work while teacher assisting, and didn't think that he had to put in any work this time around. The first time he got in front of the kids, they tore him apart and never came back. The second one, was this girl. She dressed like a whore. But, she got really offended when I told her that and never came back. The last one... well, she told me on the first day that she left her lunch in the car. She went out to get it, and she never came back. So, as you can see, I've had awful luck with student teachers. The principal had to twist my arm in order for me to take you, he thought it might be time for me to try something new."

I stared at her smirk, trying to appear less dumbfounded than I felt. "Well," I offered, "after me, you'll be able to say that you've had one to make it through!" I meant it mostly as a joke, trying to dispel some of the tension that was in the air. I think that she took it as a challenge.

"There's a few things you're going to need to know about working with me. I am the best English teacher in this building. I am the toughest teacher in this building. I have been with Red River High School for 23 years. I am the one with all of the Honors classes.... and the regular courses that I have are just filled with the kids who didn't. All of the superintendents, they request me for their kids-- not a student teacher. They aren't going to trust you teaching them. You need to be aware of this going in. They are going to question you and challenge you constantly."

Biting the inside of my cheek, I forced a smile to hide my annoyance. *Who the hell is this woman? She doesn't even know me and already she's assuming that I'm not competent enough to do this job? This is crap...*

Maggie was continuing, "That's the other thing... the Honors classes are my babies. It's going to be incredibly difficult for me to give them up to someone else, so I'll just let you deal with the normal kids first--"

"I'm supposed to be teaching all of the English classes," I-- as politely as an interruption can be-- reminded her. "That's one of the requirements for student teaching."

Her chipmunk face hadn't changed the entire time we'd been talking. The weird, clearly fake smile was still plastered to it. In fact, most things about her seemed fake, I thought while studying the rest of her. Maggie's hair reminded me of the way a little kid draws a stick woman-- The straight lines with the unnaturally perfect and round flipped curl at the end. She was wearing a flannel shirt, which I'd initially been very excited about-- it's easy to trust someone in flannel. Yet, after this first conversation, I had the overwhelming sense that the comfort I had taken in her shirt was very deceptive.

"Well. We'll get there when we get there. Also. When it comes to student teaching... this is going to prepare you for the real deal. I don't want you using any of my materials. You aren't going to have people helping you when you get your first teaching job, and I want you to get used to that now. It was nice meeting you, Brie." She extended her arm to shake my hand.

I blinked, slightly taken aback. Regardless, I'd rather come up with my own unit than use someone else's... but to be denied help so outright. I wasn't entirely sure how to respond. "Thanks. It was nice meeting you as well. By the way, I like your shirt." If nothing else, I thought it might be nice to end on a complimentary note... to form some semblance of a bond before I came in to actually work with her.

"Oh, this?" Maggie let out a snort. "I'm only wearing *this* because it's flannel day."

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When I was a kid, I dreamt of being a gypsy when I grew up. I'd run around with a make-shift tambourine, in mismatched clothes, trying to convince my parents that we did actually have room in our inner-city backyard for a herd of goats. They were actually more successful in convincing me that living as a free-spirited nomad probably wasn't the best way to earn a livelihood.

It didn't take me too long to come up with my next career aspiration-- teaching. I remember pretty clearly, being a third grader in Mr. Delaney's class. He was spitfire young teacher who seemed to be more excited about his job than anyone I'd ever encountered before. That was when I began paying more attention to what this post entailed-- hanging out with a bunch of kids, who thought that you were the smartest person in the world, all day. Incredible. He, and all of my other teachers, seemed to have this endless stream of knowledge constantly pouring out of them, and I thought, shoot. If I can be the one that's supposed to be talking all day, then I'll stop getting in trouble for not being able to keep my mouth shut. They'll be the ones who will have to listen to me, and I'll know everything! It seemed like a great set-up, really.

As I got older, it didn't take me long to realize that this was not the case. First of all, teachers did not come even close to knowing everything-- they're just pretty darn good at pretending like they do. But, most of all, teaching isn't just about the curriculum that is handed to you from the state or the school board. It's about the relationships that you build with students, and trying to create an environment where learning and education can be meaningful to them as individuals.

Maybe being a teacher wasn't that far off from my childhood vision of a gypsy. After all, I still wore the weird skirts. Inspiring other people to find their free-spirit and the things that they were passionate about seemed like the best thing that I could ever attempt to do. My teachers had been successful with doing such in me. It would be an honor to do the same for even one student.

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I spent much of my winter break successfully convincing myself that my first encounter with Maggie couldn't have possibly been that bad. I tried to bury my feelings of apprehension deep down with my eighth grade graduation speech, fear of driving because someone in the car in front of me could throw a cigarette-butt out of their window, which then hits my car in the exact right location, causing it to explode... and the other things where it's just easier to keep going when you pretend like they don't exist.

Actually, I was fairly confident upon walking into school that first day. I had a cheery yellow skirt on. I'd made a salad for lunch. I had a get pumped mix playing on my drive to school. The day was mine to conquer. Or, at least, that's how listening to A-ha's Take on Me had me feeling.

I got to the classroom early, for good measure. She was facing her computer and smiled in greeting-- it actually seemed fairly genuine. A good sign, I thought.

"Brie, it's good to see you-- I'm glad that you actually showed up."

I half-laughed, "Of course, I've been looking forward to this for the last month. I'm really looking forward to being in a high school setting now. It'll be cool working with 9th graders... Where would be a good place for me to put my things?"

To be completely honest, I had been a little spoiled in my last placement. I had been at a diverse charter school working with a bunch of hilarious middle schoolers and a hipster-glasses wearing teacher who had one of the gentlest and most creative spirits that I'd ever encountered. In this last classroom, I'd had my own desk at the front of the room stocked with dry-erase markers and post-it-notes. It had been exciting being in an actual classroom for the first time, yet feeling more like a peer than a tauntaun who was only there to carry the busy-work load.

Maggie looked honestly surprised at the question, as though this was something that she had not yet considered. "Oh. Well. There's one seat that's empty in first hour... and they're all full in second hour... but the last row is empty in the last two hours of the day. You can probably just set your things in a corner and then rotate around during the day."

"Alright!" I wanted to stay bubbly. "Is there anyone we could talk to about maybe even just getting another student desk in here, so I'll have a more consistent place and won't have to get in the way?"

"I can look into it for you." Maggie had turned her attention to a stack of papers on her desk. "You can just observe me for the first few days and then take over the regular classes next week. While you're watching, if you can get started on this grading too, that'd be great."

I was interested in seeing her in front of the students. It was evident that she thought pretty highly about herself as a teacher... but, frankly, I figured that she kind of had a right too. After all, she'd been teaching for longer than I'd been alive.

I set my tote bags down in the corner and began to set up at one of the desks she'd told me would be available. Maggie was explaining to me the grade book, the attendance system, all of the other formalities that I was going to need to learn during my time there. The systems were all straight-forward. I half-listened while studying the decor of the classroom.

The walls were plastered with posters from the 80's and 90's, faded bubble letters still trying to preach their you-can-do-its from popular figures like Garfield and Gumby. Except for the fact that the majority of the kids that were going to be entering the classroom that day had no idea who either of these characters were... or anyone else who had been popular decades before their births.

*What the hell...* there was one poster in particular that caught my attention, as it happened to be placed directly above where I'd placed my bags. A rabbit was on its back legs in front of a tree, its ears were lopped and it was burying its head into its paws. Above, in sad white letters "How much more of this can I take?" was inscribed. As an English major, there probably should have been some sort of light-bulb go off from the extreme amount of fore-shadowing that had been happening ever since I'd entered the room. Yet, once again, like the grating noise my steering wheel had been making for the past few weeks, I chose to ignore it.

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Never in my life had I felt uncomfortable in front of a group of kids. I thought that years of babysitting, camp counseling, and being the eldest sibling had made that impossible. This confidence was quickly destroyed when the students entered for their first class. I stood near the front, smiling as students eyed me curiously.

"Mrs. March... who's that?" A blonde boy asked, as though he couldn't directly address me.

"Oh?" Maggie glanced carelessly at me. "That's Miss. Jansen.... she might be your student teacher this semester." Might. She had put such an emphasis on that word that I was taken aback.

The boy laughed. "Student teacher? I thought you hated them. Hopefully she does better than the others!"

Great. Apparently everyone knew the stories of Maggie's former student teachers. This was not a good place to start, with a room full of sassy 15 year olds who already seemed to doubt my ability to accomplish anything.

"Yeah... we'll see!" Maggie smiled at him, and proceeded to introduce me that way for the rest of the day... when she actually remembered to introduce me, which was only about half the time.

A pit was growing inside my stomach, continually gnawing and refusing to be ignored. This just sucked. Moreover, sitting there with her classes, I was bored out of my mind. The students had

just begun a Shakespeare unit and she was explaining one of my favorite plays-- Romeo and Juliet. When I heard that I was going to be teaching this, I had been incredibly excited.

Romeo and Juliet is one of those things that is always referenced as the most classic love story of them all.... but then you read it with a bunch of freshman, and watching them come to the conclusion about how absurd the whole falling in love in 5 minutes thing is, is just a blast. But, here she was, seemingly sucking all of the life out of it. The kids sat in their desk as she assigned roles. After each line, Maggie stopped to tell them what it meant. Literally. After every line.

Good lord, I thought, it's going to take forever getting through this... And, if I'm bored, I can only imagine how the kids are feeling....

But that was something that I also thought that I could play to my advantage. If that's how she taught it, then I'd have a great opportunity to incorporate my own touch. Bringing in more creativity into the classroom would be the perfect way to win the kids over, and show her exactly what I was capable of. Maybe this wasn't going to be such a bad thing after all. This could actually end up being pretty fun.

This thought served to lift my spirits. Maybe Maggie didn't think too much of me now, but, by the time the semester was over, I'd become determined to win her over.

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Things don't always go as planned. In fact, sometimes they go so completely opposite of what you had planned that you spend nights obsessing over what you possibly could have done so wrong to make the universe hate you so much.

Trimesters and a plethora of snow-days seemed to be two of the biggest things, aside from Maggie herself, that were working against me, as I got into teaching Romeo and Juliet on my own. We'd lost over a week of instruction because of the polar vortex that Michigan put us through that winter, and my stress level was starting to rise.

"It's takes about a week to get through each act of this play, just reading it. We only have 5 weeks left of this trimester, and you still need to get through 5 more acts of Romeo and Juliet, plus teach The Odyssey so the kids will be prepared for their final exam..." Maggie was explaining to me.

"Okay..." I was trying to think fast. I knew what she was implying, but I did not want to sacrifice all of the activities that I had been planning for this unit. "I know that you want everyone to read the whole thing, but I remember when I was in high school, sometimes we'd break up the scenes in the acts, so that the students could teach them to each other, and we'd be able to get the same informa-

"No." She cut me off. "Everyone needs to read the whole thing. That's why we do it as a class."

Inside, my heart was collapsing. Everything that I had been working on, and here she was telling me to forget it and do it her way. To stand up there and just tell the kids what's going on. One of

the worst parts about student teaching is how powerless you always feel. For the past four years, if not more, you've been working towards becoming a teacher. You've had your own ideas for your own classroom, and you're told that student teaching is the semester where you can finally let that happen.

Except that it's not. Because there's still someone there who has a final say over you. That person will be giving you a grade at the end, and that grade's going to determine whether or not you're going to become a real teacher. This pressure, at least for me, made me feel like I had no room to disagree with her. She was the veteran teacher. She had taken me on. She was giving me my grade. I felt like it was my job to please her.

"Okay." I tried to sound bubbly. "I'm glad I was able to observe you, then. I think I have a pretty clear picture of what you're looking for!"

"I should hope so!" *Do you?* It was always very confusing when Maggie smiled at me. I wanted it so badly for it to be genuine, but I never really felt like it was...

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Part of the problem with teaching all day every day while you're still in college is the fact that you hardly have time to work at an actual job where you get paid, so everything that you own sucks. This was especially true with my car, Urkel.

The beater that I'd had since high school was pushing 200,000 miles, and needed something fixed every other month. Still, he was reliable enough to get me where I needed to go. Except for the Friday that I was supposed to be giving my first quiz.

Standing in the sub-zero February temperatures, I tried over and over again to get him to turn on, but there was not so much as a click or a flicker of the headlights. I bolted back into the house to wake my friend Josh.

"Josh please help my car won't start and I need to get to school--" My words spewed out as one, as he blinked at me. My panic stricken face seemed to wake him up fairly quickly.

"Alright, just let me get my jumper cables."

My relief was not long lived, as we waited for my car to show signs of life. Still, nothing. Tears were starting to build up. I could not miss school. Maggie was going to be livid.

"I don't think it's going to work, bud." He said at last.

"Could you maybe drive me in then?"

He glanced at his watch. “I wish, but you know that I need to get to work...” I sighed. I did know that. He and everyone else in the house had their own responsibilities, and they couldn’t just drop theirs to help me get to mine.

After calling the vehicle every terrible name that I could think of, I realized that it was time to call Maggie. School was starting in 45 minutes, and she was not answering her phone. I left a frantic email, explaining to her what had happened and that I wasn’t going to be able to make it in for the day.

During our prep, I had planned to go over the quiz that I made with her. She had instructed me to make sure that the quiz would last the whole hour, and for it to be challenging. I had wanted to be sure that it would meet her standards, so I told her to feel free to change anything that needed to be reworked, as I was not there to go over it with her.

I guess this is probably the best possible day that this could happen, I thought. It’s not like she actually has to teach anything, she just has to hand out the quiz.

I got an email about halfway through the day.

“The quiz has been going terribly,” Maggie wrote. “The kids think it is way too difficult. They don’t think that they are doing well at all. You need to work on this.”

My heart sank. In my desperation to meet her standards, I hadn’t realized that the language that I was using was not clear to my students. A part of me fumed-- that’s why I had wanted her to look at it-- but, mostly, I was disappointed in myself. I had forgotten that my main purpose was to teach them, not to prove myself to her. Because of this lapse, I had failed my kids.

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I think the fact that teachers don’t have favorites is a lie. Even if you try really hard not to, there’s going to be a few kids that you’re able to connect with more than the others. I don’t really think that there’s a problem with that, as long as you can remain impartial when it comes to grading and the opportunities that you give everyone... but, in my case, one of my favorites was a student named Jason.

To put it bluntly, Jason was kind of a pain in the ass. The first few days of teaching on my own, I noticed very quickly that he was trying to test me. At first it was small things like constantly tapping his table on the desk to see if I’d ask him to stop. Other times, he’d wander about the classroom and try to distract others.

At first, it was difficult for me to decide what to do. I knew that Jason was troubled. He had a difficult home life, and was often angry. Sometimes he’d fall asleep in class, because he didn’t get much sleep at his house. Other times, he’d act out, and that often got him kicked out of his classes. I didn’t want to be another teacher who wrote him off as a bad-kid and excluded him from class, but it was getting to the point where he was becoming too distracting to the other students in the class. I had to do something to make him have more respect for me.



The perfect opportunity arose as he was chatting with one of his friends about his weekend--  
“Sorry, man, I won’t be able to hang out with you. I gotta go to work.”

My ears perked up. “Jason, where do you work?”

“The DeltaPlex.”

“Oh my goodness! Did you get to work at the Alpaca expo?”

My excitement caused him to laugh. “No, but I’m working at the hunting and fishing expo this weekend. Should be pretty legit.”

“Do you hunt or fish?”

“Yeah,” he shrugged. “I do a lot of both.”

“That’s cool.” I tried to sound way more nonchalant than I felt. Finally, a chance to make a more personal connection with him. “I’m looking into fly-rods that I can buy for this summer. I’m getting bored with my normal pole and want to look into doing some more stream and river fishing this summer.”

“You fish?” He couldn’t hide his shock.

“Definitely. Why, do I look like someone who wouldn’t” I was teasing him now. With my grandma skirts and over-sized glasses, we both knew that it didn’t even look like I knew how to operate a pole.

“You might actually be kinda cool then, Miss. J.” He conceded. Miss. J! My first nickname, I grinned at him as the bell went off. From then on, I was actually able to get him to participate in class and pay attention to what I was saying. He still dozed off, sometimes, but I was happy with my small daily victories.

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One of the most awkward things about teaching literature in an incredible conservative area is all of the sex, drugs, and violence that pervades the cannon. When parents think about the fact that they’re kids are reading Romeo and Juliet, they often forget about the fact that the premise of this story is that Romeo is a fairly horny teenage boy, and the only way Juliet is going to hook-up with him is if they get married, and there’s only about a couple hundred of blatant sexual references throughout the tale.

Something that Maggie told me at the beginning of our time together was to be careful not to pop the “Red River bubble” by addressing anything too risqué or controversial. How she usually managed to teach Romeo and Juliet, then, (or much of anything, for that matter) was beyond me. Either way, as we got further into the story, I found it more and more difficult to try and explain what was going on without touching on certain subjects... particularly as the main two characters became more romantically involved.

“Well.” I stopped, after one of my students asked why Juliet was in such a hurry to marry Romeo. “You see, the thing is...” I was struggling with explaining what was going on while trying to maintain this bubble. “Juliet wants to be sure that Romeo is going to purchase the deed to the bakery before making cookies with him.”

Silence. And then a series of giggles. Of all the euphemisms that I could’ve chosen, baked goods were the first things to come to mind. The kids all knew what was being implied, but we were able to skirt around the topics that were deemed to be uncomfortable by just making them silly.

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Webster’s dictionary defines the term bitch as: the female of the dog or some other carnivorous mammals, or a malicious, spiteful, or overbearing woman. The later seems to fit better with my own definition: Maggie March.

Because of the requirements of the semester, I had taken over all of the classes in their entirety about two and a half weeks into the semester, even though it had been difficult for her to give up her honors courses. The time came for my second observation to take place.

This particular professor knew me very well, as I had been in his course before and he observed me during my teacher assisting semester. He came to see me during the hour that I was most concerned about-- my fourth hour. This class was the one with Jason and a few others that I had to work even harder to engage, and-- even though things were going much better-- there were still some days in which the kids gave me a hard time.

We had taken to sitting in a circle during class as we went through Romeo and Juliet. This gave us the ability to use the center to act some parts out, if need be. Moreover, I sat with the students. I hated feeling like I was spoon-feeding the students answers or information when I wanted them to be reaching certain conclusions on their own. Sitting with them created a more informal, discussion-based environment where we could talk more about the underlying themes of the play, instead of just translating the lines into modern English.

In general, the day went really well. The class was fairly typical, and about 15 minutes before the class ended my professor left to talk with Maggie. They didn’t get back until about 10 minutes into my 5th hour, which meant that they were gone for quite awhile. I didn’t really think much of it since I thought that everything had been going well, and I was focused on teaching my next block of students, but when they got back, my professor said he wanted to debrief with me, and Maggie took over 5th hour.

We walked out of the classroom and the first thing he says to me is “So Brie... I thought that your lesson was great today, but Maggie brought some issues to my attention that I believe we need to address.”

I was a little confused considering the fact that I thought she hadn’t mentioned anything with me, but I just said: “Alright, of course! Like what?”

He had a slight frown as he looked at me. “Well... you know that you’re supposed to have completely taken over all of the classes by now.”

I blinked. “Yes. I’ve been teaching all of the hours for the last month or so already, I’m not quite sure what you mean.”

Maggie had told him that I haven’t done anything yet or made the classes my own. I was shocked. Earlier in the week, she had mentioned the fact that she was upset that I had not created many worksheets for the students to complete. Anyways, I had explained to her that I didn’t really feel like that was the only way to learn, and that I felt that discussion and taking notes could often-times be more memorable than creating a standard worksheet to follow along. I also told her that I was a little frustrated because I didn’t feel like the classes were really my own. There was so much pressure to get through our material and prepare for the exams in such a specific way, I thought that my creativity was being stifled. We ended the conversation, with her telling me that she completely understood where I was coming from and that she was excited for me to make the class more my own during the next trimester, and I was feeling pretty good about our relationship. Anyways. Fast-forward again to the following day.

Maggie told my professor that I haven’t been doing anything, and that what he had seen that day was not an accurate reflection of what had been happening in my classroom. Like... literally. She said him that because I hadn’t created many worksheets, and that meant that I hadn’t been doing my job correctly, essentially ignoring everything we had spoken about the previous day.

Trying not to shake with anger, I explained to my professor that what he saw was a perfectly accurate representation of what was happening in my classroom. We were not doing all of the activities that I would’ve liked, because I was told that I couldn’t, but I was still managing to engage my students and to create meaningful discussion amongst the groups-- without worksheets. I was still working my butt off to get through the material and please her at the same time.

My professor then told me that my Maggie had told him that I left early every day. I was pretty floored by this statement. I’ve stayed late so that students can ask me questions or makeup quizzes/tests. I stayed afterwards to debrief with her after every day after school, and then I walked out *with* her almost every day. Most days I had stayed until 2:50-3:00 when school lets out at 2:30.

My mind was racing. She was always trying to hurry through our conversations to pick up her kids and get them to their sporting events. I explained this to my professor. Moreover, the last time he came in for an observation was during the last hour of the day. Afterwards, she had gotten on her cellphone right away and didn’t even have time to speak with him, because she wanted to get out of there so quickly. Where was this coming from?

As if that was not enough, he continued with more complaints that I had never heard before. She told him that my energy-level did not always seem to be as high as what it was that day. I could tell he was struggling with what he had been told, considering how well he knew me. Anyone who has seen me teach knows how I am constantly laughing and smiling and using weird voices

and making lame jokes and trying to do all sorts of things to keep students engaged and having fun.

Warm tears had been streaming down my face this whole conversation, but at this point I began bawling. I knew that Maggie had her issues with me, but she hadn't ever said anything like this to me before. Did she actually believe that any of this was true? Did he? Was she just delusional or did she really hate me that much? I couldn't figure it out.

“Don't worry... I know that none of this sounds like you... maybe there's been some sort of miscommunication. We'll figure this out.” He tried to be comforting. “I understand that what she says isn't gospel truth, so don't worry too much about it yet...”

I tried to pull myself back together after he left. I still had to pretend like everything was dandy until the end of the day. Returning to the room, I sat down towards the back, knowing that she wasn't going to want to hand the last class back to me half-way through the lesson. And, frankly, I wasn't certain I'd be able to pull myself together enough to do the lesson justice.

By the time class ends, I'm oh-so-very-thankful because at this point I'm just feeling sick. All of my kids leave and she began talking to me like everything is completely normal, collecting her things to leave.

I paused for a moment, wondering if I should say anything or not, before working up the courage to say: “Actually Maggie... Mr. Leal brought a few issues to my attention that I didn't realize were concerns that you had, and I was wondering if we could talk about them.”

She batted her lashes at me innocently, “Of course!”

“Well, you know, right now I'm staying after to talk to you. I feel like this is a regular thing. I talk to you every day and you know that I've stayed late before to input things or so that students could retake their tests, etc. However, my professor brought up my contract times and said that you were concerned that I am leaving too early, and I didn't understand where that was coming from. Frankly, we walk out together most days, and you are the one who has the keys... I didn't know that I was able to stay even later or that was something you wanted me to do. However, you know that when I head out it's because I'm trying to get to either class or work, and that I'm not trying to head out early.”

The smile hadn't left her face at all, and in a cheery tone, she exclaimed, “Oh, not at all! I know that you stay as long as you can. I'm not here to babysit you, and I know how much work you do from home. You bring your laptop here and back everyday, so you don't need to do all of your work from school, and that's totally okay! But, do you know what... It was probably the principal that said something to your professor. He's approached me multiple times before saying ‘Wow, she leaves so quickly. How is she able to do that? What work does she even do? I definitely couldn't hire someone like her...’ But I know that isn't the case! You are just trying to get to your other responsibilities. There was just this *other* student teacher who stayed til 5 every night, and everyone wants to know why you don't do the same. But, she lived with her mom just down the road and didn't have another job or a laptop, so she had to do all of her work from

here, so I know that it's an entirely different situation for you..." She kept going on like this, saying that she understood why I didn't stay for hours longer than necessary everyday, but that *other* people keep complaining about it, including the principal.

I wasn't entirely sure how to react. If everyone in the building had been talking about me, then why hadn't she mentioned anything about it to me before, or defended me to them? I decided not to press the matter and continued, "Okay, well, he also mentioned that you were concerned that maybe my energy level wasn't high every day, and that today wasn't an actual reflection of how I teach..."

Again, she appeared to be shocked-- "Not at all! But, that's actually something else that other teachers have been complaining to me about. Because sometimes you're sitting down in a chair, and when other teachers walk by, they've seen you sitting there and it just looks *so* lazy to them. They don't think you're doing anything. I know that you are! But I've had people call me out on it before and ask 'Really... does your student teacher just sit there every day? Why the hell do you even have one then?' Actually, that's one of the reasons why we don't eat in the lunch room. Because everyone is talking about you and I don't want you to get your feelings hurt. Like, the first time that I was gone and you subbed for me all day, the other teachers came to me afterwards and told me what a terrible job you did and how you just sat there and spoon-fed them everything."

At this point, I had once again begun to cry. This was all coming out of the left-field. She had never mentioned anything even remotely close to this to me before and I asked her how I was doing every single day. Trying to get on the same level as the students occasionally made me look lazy?

I furrowed my brow thinking about the subbing instance she was referring to. After every hour the teacher that was supervising told me that I had done a great job. I hadn't adopted the sitting down for discussion idea yet, at that point. It had still been early in the semester when I'd wandered around the classroom like a madwoman. There was no way that someone had said those things.

I took a deep breath, not really able to focus on the other things that she was saying. She was trying to hug me, and I heard the end of a phrase "--you know that I adore you and think you're doing a great job?"

*There's no way. I thought. If you did, then you'd be telling me and not my professor about worries that you had so that we could work through them together instead of giving me a bad review. You'd defend me to the people that are apparently talking about me, because that is a complete misrepresentation of what is happening in the classroom. You'd be giving me feedback and helping me through this...*

I was torn. I wanted so badly to believe that she honestly liked me and had my back, but everything that she had done pointed against it. It's difficult when you're raised in a way that makes you trust and respect authority, and suddenly you're in a situation where you're unable to

trust the person that you call your mentor. But, I didn't want to jump to conclusions. I wanted to be certain about what was happening.

I called Mr. Leal as soon as I left the building.

"Hello Professor... I just wanted to let you know that I stayed and discussed some of Maggie's concerns with her, but she told me that none of these were actually problems that she had... she actually mentioned to me that the principal might've expressed some of these concerns to you. I wanted to see if this was true, if I've made some sort of bad impression on him, I want to be able to apologize and set things straight."

Mr. Leal sounded truly baffled: "No, not at all... He thinks you're great, everyone else that I spoke to had nothing but great things to say about you."

I wanted to feel comforted, but this news really just made me feel ever worse. Part of me thought that it would be easier to work in a scenario where everyone disliked me, but the person that I worked most closely with had my back. However, it was the opposite.

*What is she telling people about me? I worried. She's spreading rumors about me to my professor and then blaming it on other people in the building-- what sort of things are she telling everyone else?*

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About a month into my placement, there came a point where I was throwing up everyday before heading into school. I had become so stressed out about seeing Maggie that the thought of going to school, literally, was making me sick. I couldn't keep down my food. I couldn't keep up with my homework. Every night consisted of grading, replanning, and trying to come up with ways that I could please her. The only thing that I felt like I was losing faster than my weight was my mind.

My only relief was when I was in front of my students. Teaching is an interesting thing. You're literally able to pour your whole self and focus your entire attention on what is happening in your classroom at that moment. There are thirty other souls in there with interests, stories, and questions-- they make it easy to forget about what's going on with yourself.

"Now why the hell would she do that?!" Jason's voice rang clear among all of the others.

I tried to ignore the use of a swear word, because this was exactly the sort of reaction that I had been looking for. "Exactly! Why? Why are you so surprised, Jason?!"

"Because it's stupid! She's known this guy for like... not even 48 hours, and now she's telling her priest dude that she's going to kill herself if he doesn't help her. That's literally the dumbest thing that I've ever heard. Why would you kill yourself over that?"

"I'm glad you feel that way, then. You're more logical than Juliet at this point. But, she's also putting a lot of pressure on Friar Laurence. Why might this be? Think about it in a general sense and from the point of view of his job."

“Well.” Another student offered, “It would just suck if she killed herself. So, he doesn’t want her to do that. But, also, he’s like... a priest right? His job is to make sure that people get to heaven. If she just goes and offs herself, that’s not gonna happen.”

For such a somber subject, I couldn’t keep the smile off of my face. I was psyched that she had made such a connection. “You’re exactly right! So, his options are either one... to help her, or two... essentially let her send herself to hell, via Catholic tradition at the time.”

“That’s not true.” Jason interjected, looking truly concerned. “That’s not what I learned. In my catechism class, I asked my teacher about that. She said if the person prayed for forgiveness right before they did it, they’d still get to go to heaven.”

Public school sirens started sounding in my head. I wasn’t sure how much I was allowed to get into this topic in my current setting. I also wasn’t Catholic, so I didn’t have a good answer for him. But, most importantly, I didn’t know if he had some sort of person he’d lost in his life this way, and I didn’t want him to feel unjustified in his beliefs.

“No, that’s a great point, Jason!” was the route I finally decided on taking. “I’m going to be honest with you... I don’t know too much about Catholic beliefs in regards to suicide now, but back hundreds and hundreds of years ago, this is what people thought. But, that definitely could’ve changed in the last few centuries!”

He seemed satisfied with that answer, and I gave a silent sigh of relief feeling as though I’d dodged some sort of bullet.

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About two months into my placement, I had a Monday off. Well, not entirely off, but I was able to miss school to attend a conference on teaching instead. While I was loving the time spent in my classroom, seeing Maggie was continuing to take its toll on me and any day that I did not have to encounter her was a good one.

We had finished Romeo and Juliet the previous week and were the midst of speeding through The Odyssey before the students took their final exam. I had a fun lesson on heroes planned for the next day, and came to school on Tuesday feeling rejuvenated.

The day seemed even better when I got into the classroom and Maggie wasn’t there. Maybe she’s sick again, I thought desperately happy. She’d taken quite a few days off while I was there, and those days were always my best. I was able to do my job without feeling like I was being judged or somehow terribly disappointing her, but my fantasy was cut off when she briskly entered the room.

She looked at me and let out a sob. Instinctively, I stood up and hugged her. I wasn’t sure what was happening, or why she was upset. But, despite our differences, I wanted to comfort her.

“Are you okay?” I was legitimately concerned, but became even more worried when she told me to sit back down.

“Jason’s dead.”

“...What?” Surely I could not have heard her correctly.

“He hung himself last night.”

There are very few moments in my life where I’ve been completely at a loss for words. This was one of them. I honestly thought that my brain had stopped functioning for a moment. She was explaining to me how he hadn’t been in school the day before, and how he’d been having more and more arguments with his dad, but all I could remember was the high-five that I’d given him on my way out of school on Friday and how he’d smiled and said:

“See ya next week, Miss J!” But that wasn’t the case. I wasn’t going to see him again because he was gone.

*Oh god.* My mind went straight to the conversation we’d had a few weeks before in class. Had he asked for forgiveness before he did it? Was that some sort of warning sign? Was there something in that conversation that I should’ve picked up on? I couldn’t help but feel like I had failed him in some way. Like it was my job to stop this from happening, but I did it wrong, and now there was a 15 year old boy who’d never get to go fishing or play football or interrupt class with an inappropriate joke again.

“Now what?” I looked at Maggie, wanting some sort of reassurance or direction. “What do we do from here?”

She shrugged. “This isn’t an uncommon experience in this district. We have one or two every year. We just try to protect the students from it the best we can, and keep going.”

Protect the students? “So, we aren’t supposed to talk about it at all? Don’t they know what’s happened?” I was shocked.

“They’ll know that he passed. They won’t hear how from us. They’ll know eventually, through gossip, but that’s not something that we’re going to address in the classroom. As teachers, we need to be able to provide them with normalcy. We’ll just keep going with the day. And with the week. It’s sad because they’re all going to be torn up about it now... but most of them will hardly even remember him by the time their senior year rolls around.”

My heart broke all over again. Snot was dripping out of my nose in a very unattractive manner, and I was trying to wrap my mind over the concept of just moving on. “I’m not sure like I can just act like everything is okay...”

“Luckily, you have the whole first hour of prep to pull yourself together.”

We spent the rest of that hour in silence.



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As tragic and miserable and terrible as it was, dealing with Jason's death, there was one thing that I hoped would come out of it. That such an awful experience would bring Maggie and I together, and that we'd be able to finish the rest of our time out together on good terms.

It's uncomfortable calling anything that happened during that time fortunate... but we were fortunate to be at the end of the trimester. Going to class everyday and seeing his empty desk during fourth hour was getting to be unbearable. Aside from when I went to his visitation, I was not supposed to cry in front of the students. Other teachers wondered if teaching Romeo and Juliet had had anything to do with his decision. I felt even more sick.

A week later, the classes were switched and I received an entirely new group of students. It was like pressing a refresh button on the semester. For me, Jason was not forgotten, but I no longer felt as though his presence was haunting the classroom. I still don't know if that's a good or a bad thing.

One thing that can be said is that my new classes were incredible. The kids were funny, ready to learn, conversational-- and we were beginning with *The Odyssey*. I didn't take a break from the memory of Romeo and Juliet. I had a chance to teach something outside of the shadow of Maggie. I wanted to shine during my last few weeks.

The start of this particular week had been a great one. Maggie was sick on Monday and Tuesday, so I really appreciated having a few days to myself in the classroom. Wednesday and Thursday were bearable and passed largely without incident, but that all changed with Friday.

Friday mornings were typically really great because one department always brought in breakfast for everyone. Starting the day well-fed and in conversation with teachers that I didn't frequently get to interact with put me in a positive mood.

Maggie and I walked down to the lounge together. As soon as I enter, I separated from her and began chatting with some teachers on the other side of the room while grabbing some fruit. After a minute or two, I look around the room and see my Maggie talking to another teacher who is crying. This teacher, had been out of school for a few months battling cancer and had to get a hysterectomy before she could start her chemo treatments. Because of this, there'd been a long term sub in the classroom, who was still there to help her out.

This morning, other teachers were encouraging her to go home because she was feeling terrible because of her chemo treatments the day before. Her long-term-sub was already covering for different classes throughout the day, but she wanted her sub to cover her classes since she knows the kids, so they were looking for someone to cover other classes during the day.

The secretary came in, looking rather frazzled, until she locked her gaze on me. "Guess what, Brie, you're subbing!"

This was not a problem at all. It was evident that the poor woman was suffering, and I was happy to help out: "Okay," I agreed, "I have to go back to get stuff for prep." As there were a million

people trying to figure this situation out, and I was under the impression that they wanted me to sub for these classes all day, and that Maggie would have to take over my classes. This I meant that I needed to get my information to her so that she could teach my lessons.

But, before anyone had a chance to talk about it further, I noticed Maggie storming out of the room and into the front office. Smiling, the secretary told me to wait in the lounge and she would grab the subbing information for me and come back.

Not thinking anything of it, I continue eating my fruit and chatting with a History teacher, when the secretary comes back to tell me that Maggie would actually be taking over the classes, and I'd be teaching my own as normal.

“Alright!” That made sense to me, so I just went back to my classroom and continued with the day, as planned. I thought the day had gone very well, but— as soon as school ended, Maggie huffed over to me.

“We need to talk about what happened this morning.”

Happened? I hadn't realized that anything had 'happened' that morning that elicited such a tone.

“It's a good thing that you weren't at lunch today. People are furious with you for refusing to help out this morning. One person told me that I should fire you. They all agreed that they never want you in there eating lunch again.”

That day, I had missed lunch because I stayed in with a student who was making up a test. Refusing to help? What was she going on about now?

“I think there must've been some kind of miscommunication this morning— I hope you know me well enough by now to know that I would never refuse to help someone who needs it!” And I explained to her what I thought had been going on, and how I wasn't trying to get out of helping this teacher or anything, but I was just so confused because I hadn't meant to be unhelpful or anything, and she just kept talking about how much everyone disliked me now.

“Who can I apologize to?” If I had wronged someone, I wanted to make amends. When feelings were hurt or people had been offended, I was not the type to pretend like nothing happened. I wanted to take responsibility for my actions, even if they were unintentional, and make sure that everyone knew that I had not communicated correctly, and that I'd love to help out in the future.

“No one. Everyone has gone home. My advice to you would be to avoid the front office for this week, stop going to lunch with the other teachers, and hope that everything blows over.” With those gems of wisdom, she collected her things and left for the day. Still unsettled, I immediately went to the front office because I still wanted to apologize. Unfortunately, the secretary and principal had already left.

While walking to my car, I called my Mr. Leal to tell him what happened, and to ask for advice, because I felt awful about hurting feelings and offending the other teachers. He was mainly upset that they'd asked me to begin with, because, apparently, it was illegal for them to use me

anywhere but in Maggie's room. But, that wasn't the problem. I told him that I wasn't as much concerned with that, as I was giving the wrong impression to the other teachers.

"Try not to worry," he tried to comfort me, "I'll call the principal to get an idea of what happened and get back to you."

Less than 10 minutes later, Mr. Leal called me back. "I think Maggie is just upset that she got worked into working more that day. It seems to me that she's making things up again, and trying to isolate you from the other teachers-- the principal told me that no one was upset about what had happened this morning, they did not think that anything had happened."

Once more, it appeared that Maggie had lied to me. Apparently things were not getting better between us, as I had hoped.

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The following Monday, I was called in to have a conversation with the principal. Throughout my experience at Red River, the principal had remained informed by my professors about the situations that were arising with Maggie. He had told me previously that he did not want to get involved while I was still there, because he was afraid that would only make the environment more difficult for me.

There were less than a week and a half left before spring break. He shook my hand as I entered the room.

"Hello, Brie. I just wanted to say that I'm sorry for the events that have transpired this semester. I know that it's been difficult for you, and I appreciate the way you've handled yourself. I want to make the rest of your time here go as smoothly as possible... I understand if you don't want to come back... I can try and switch you in with another teacher... just let me know what I can do to make this better for you."

Almost every fiber of my selfish being wanted to shout for joy and tell him that I never wanted to come back and that I wanted to call my semester quits right then and there. But, apparently, the part of me that really cares about what I do outweighs that other piece.

"I appreciate your kindness and the offer... but I wouldn't be able to do either of those things. I love my students, I'm mid-unit... it wouldn't be fair for them for me to just bail out halfway through. This has been difficult, but I've made it this far. I'll be able to finish it out here."

I'd already started my unit in my classroom, I'd begun to build relationships with my students, I'd assigned projects... I couldn't do that to my kids. I knew that it wouldn't be fair for me to suddenly up and leave, when there were so many things that we had started. Their education and the trust that I'd built with them was more important to me than anything. As I was thinking all of this through, this was the moment where I-- without a doubt-- knew that teaching was truly my calling.

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I wish I could say that the last two weeks at Red River got any better, because they didn't. But, I'd come to accept my circumstances at that point. Frankly, I tried to stop caring about what Maggie thought. I taught the lessons how I wanted. I did writing prompts every day. I incorporated a lot of media and discussion-based activities. The kids were working in groups and out of their desks most of the time. The classroom always sounded like semi-organized chaos and I loved it. She, apparently, did not. Not that she'd tell me that when I tried to get her feedback at the end of the day, of course. I continued to receive a hollow chorus of "Well-dones!" from her.

I can't say I was surprised when I received a horrible review from her. I was, however, disappointed. There was still part of me that thought, at the very end, my months of hard work would pay off and she'd give me a genuine hug and an apology.

Instead, she gave me the minimum passing grade of a B-, with the note: "Only because I don't want her paying for another semester of college" scrawled underneath.

It's officially been a week since I last saw Maggie March. Thinking about her and these last few months still causes my stress level to rocket and my stomach to turn. I honestly don't think that I could say that I've gone through a more miserable experience in my life.

I struggled more, yet I also grew more than I ever could have imagined. I am so happy that I've had an experience where I was beaten down, but never broken. I was able to get up every day, get in front of my class, and pour my heart into doing what I love instead. When teach, I can forget about everything that's going on in the outside. I'm entirely focused on my students and what we're learning together. I am in my element, I am happy, I am where I am supposed to be. Student teaching just reaffirmed that over and over again. For that, I will always be grateful.