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Max

NARRATIVE BY JOEY LATTERMAN



For the second day in a row, Max has not turned in his homework. Rough drafts are due today—none from Max. Max, with not-always clean hair falling over his eyes, acne-faced, slouched-over walk. Max, who seldom broadly smiles but often smirks.

"My desk is organized. You must have lost my rough draft. I gave it to you." Max firmly tells me.

"You come in after school and we'll look for it," I answer.

"That's really fair...You lost it."

The others are working on their children's story in preparation for tomorrow's presentation in a second grade classroom. Max has shown little interest until today and now desperately is trying to finish it. I had typed his story, he got another peer to make the book cover, and now was painstakingly coloring the back page with magic marker. Bent over his desk, the marker grasped by his fingers, he makes little and big circles resembling parts of furniture, attempting to fill in all the spaces on the page.

"Joey," he tilts his head to say, "I don't know why I'm doing this. I probably can't go anyway tomorrow because I've already lost thirty points. I don't know why I'm doing this. It's stupid anyway."

"Well, I hope you can go, but if you can't, your story will and someone else will read it."

"Oh." Back down his head.

Max, thirteen years old, with a struggling but caring dad, a mom in a nursing home and one older brother and sister, seldom around. An eighth grader who does not know his times tables past fours, copies from the blackboard with

slow, unsteady patience and takes two months to read *Old Yeller* because "it makes no sense." A medium-tall, heavy-set boy who will spend more time on evenly cutting strings off the bottom of his pant legs than on any school assignment.

After school, Max finds the rough draft in his desk, hidden at the bottom next to the science folder. He mumbles something about me putting it there.

As he leaves, I have that unsatisfied feeling of not being able to help a student. Of just not being able to figure out what makes him tick, to get him on the right track. Any teacher knows the expected remark, "C'mon. You've helped lots of students. Not being able to help one is no big deal."

True. But in the form of this real person statistics just don't seem to help. His father keeps asking what can I do for his boy to make everything fine — for Max to keep up with his peers — for him to get out of special education. Mostly I listen, try to assure, while gently preparing him for the possibility that Max might never catch up.

The next morning Max is waiting outside my classroom wanting extra help with his homework. He asks, "Joey ... I don't want to lose any points today, so ... can you help me with this assignment?"

There he stands, twirling one strand of hair, head cocked, looking at his shoe, asking for help. An appealing awkwardness, an unkempt quality, a possibility for change.

I answer, "of course," and he comes in. As I hang up my coat, I ask, "what's

the problem," while trying to organize in my mind what materials are needed for the first class.

"It's math. I can't do it...I tried too...asked other people. No one could help. It's too hard."

"What don't you understand?"

"All of it ... I don't understand none of it."

"Have you tried the directions?"

"Yeh," he heavily sighs.

"Looked at the examples?"

"Yup."

"All right. Let's start here. If your floor is shaped like this, with these dimensions, how much carpet would you want?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm in here."

"We've been through this before, Max, you can do it."

We work together — Max protesting, me persisting, and after ten minutes or so, he seems to understand it better and works on his own.

In talking with his school social worker, teachers have been biding their time with Max for years, hoping he would learn to function effectively in a group situation. Recently, this biding took an illegal turn, landing him in a juvenile detention facility. Here even with only eight students in a room, he doesn't function well. The biding goes on.

"I'm done," he says. Good words to hear. Words not heard enough from Max.

He asks to clean the sink and counter-top.

"Yes," I reply, you know how much I appreciate you doing that."

Quickly he gets out a sponge and spray bottle, scrubs and polishes, inside the sink, around the rim and behind the faucet.

As he puts the sponge and can back, he almost inaudibly says, "I can't go and read my story today. I messed up last night."

"Oh Max, I'm so sorry."

"Yeh, sure, whatever you say."



During literature time, Max joins the group reading *My Side of the Mountain*. He's familiar with the routine by now: come prepared with two new vocabulary words and three questions for discussion based on two chapters.

After the groups have settled down, I hear from one of his group members, "Max, where are your questions?"

"I got some," Max answers. "You saying I don't?"

"Show them to us."

"Can't find them right now."

"You know you don't have them."

"Oh yeh?"

The other member of his group leans over Max's desk and states, "Bet you don't have the questions. We don't believe you anymore."

By the time I walk over to say, "Can I help?" Max has pushed his papers and book onto the floor and is standing up.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Nothin'."

"Doesn't look like nothing to me."

One of the boys explains, "Max, as usual, didn't do his homework and won't admit it."

"I did too do it. I just don't have it here."

I answer, "Well then, your group doesn't have it. You know to get credit for your homework, it needed to be done before class. But if it's not, you'll just have to make do with two sets of questions with everyone helping to answer. What questions do you have?" I ask pulling up a chair.

"I did read the chapters, Joey," Max says, sitting back down and leaning over to pick up his things.

"Good, Max," I answer.

A questions gets asked about finding Frightful, the hawk in their story. Max, who has had his head down scribbling on a small sticker in the corner of his

desk, looks up and says, "Once I think I saw a hawk in my backyard."

Silence follows his remark, but he doesn't seem to notice. He's looking outside of the window. The other two return to answering their questions, while Max's pencil remains on the desk.

After school, when questioning Max, it becomes apparent he had read the chapters. "Max," I ask, "if you read the chapters why didn't you do the vocabulary words and the questions?"

"I don' know. I wasn't real sure what to do...and didn't know who to ask...I knew the vocabulary words, weren't no new ones." Then he finished the work in less than a half hour and raced to after-school gym time.



A few days later, while constructing time lines, Max spends most of his time trying to find the right magic marker. He'd make a little line, study it, return that marker and find another one. After the third trip, and two attempts at making paper airplanes on some colored paper he found in a drawer next to the markers, he sat down to start making the lines to divide dates. Once, he mumbled something to a peer who quickly turned away. Needing a ruler and spotting one on another desk, he grabbed it, initiating a confrontation that ended in a borrowing agreement. Finally, slowly, face close

to the paper, tongue in teeth, he begins his lines, sometimes shifting the ruler causing a mismatch of lines and once getting his thumb in the way, creating a bump. By the end of the class session, as the others are hanging up their time lines, Max decides his lines aren't right and throws his whole paper away, muttering about the stupid assignment



At the end of seven months, Max's final day arrives. He wears his favorite blue and white striped shirt and smiles broadly most of the day, excited but cautious, not certain of the future. During the day I share with him his academic progress—a year's gain in reading recognition and comprehension and a half-year gain in math. Gains without me noticing. I look at him and suddenly realize he's taller than me. Where has my focus been? Have I been too close? As I grasp his hand in good-bye and wish him good luck, I think about my lesson: to step back once in a while to appreciate my work and that of my students. To step back a little and appreciate.

Joey Latterman teaches at the Eaton County Youth Facility. She is pictured below, third from the left, with fellow members of the Red Cedar Writing Project who supported her composition of this piece.

