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## Survival: A Teach for America Memoir

Christopher Neal Schumerth  
*University of South Carolina - Columbia*

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**Survival: A Teach For America Memoir**

By

Christopher Neal Schumerth

Bachelor of Arts  
Anderson University, 2007

Master of Arts  
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, 2012

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Accepted by:

James Barilla, Director of Thesis

Elise Blackwell, Reader

John Muckelbauer, Reader

Bobby Donaldson, Reader

Lacy Ford, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of Shane Jeremiah Schumerth (June 30, 1983-March 6, 2012). I would do almost anything to have one more conversation with you.

## Acknowledgements

It's almost overwhelming to think about how many people have been encouraging and/or helpful in seeing this manuscript come to fruition. The first person I think of and want to thank is Dr. Robert Rebein, for taking my writing (and me!) seriously long before anything I was producing was any good. In addition, a long host of other classmates, friends, writers, and professors have generously read my work and offered quality feedback. To the best of my memory, those people include Dr. Stephen Fox, Jacob Nichols, Meagan Lacy, April Long, Mindy Weaver-Flask, Caitlin Caiter, Matt Mossman, Christina Phillips, Jennifer Blevins, Anna Barry, Jon Timmons, Nicola Waldron, Jessica Handler, Chris Koslowski, Justin Brouckaert, Rebecca Landau, Amanda Mitchell, Cayla Fralick, and Adele Norton. And a huge thanks to my thesis committee: Dr. James Barilla, Professor Elise Blackwell, Dr. John Muckelbauer, and Dr. Bobby Donaldson. You were the perfect group of personalities and interests in order to push my work forward.

I would also be remiss if I neglected to mention my colleagues, students, friends, and even Teach For America as an organization for having put up with me during those two years of my life in Atlanta, Jacksonville, and Houston. I will use their book names, but thanks especially to Neal, Joe, Mike, Kelly, Betsy, Rick, Danica, Kim, Dr. Smith, Matt, Jameson, Rafe Esquith, Amanda, Lamaar, Franklin, Kayla, Charlie, Jada, Nina, Mrs. Jamison, and Anthony. If any of you ever read the book, I suspect you will know who you are. I hope I've been fair in representing you.

Lastly, thanks to Andrew Sprock for his faithful friendship and personal mentorship, to my parents, Steve and Susan, for raising me in a house with books, and to my younger sister, Mandy, for putting in countless hours of getting the formatting for this thing right.

I've tried my best to be comprehensive, but I'm sure I'm forgetting someone, so please forgive me, whomever you are!

## Abstract

“I grab Franklin and pull him upright, standing in between him and the smaller student. I spread my arms in each direction. That second of new life gives the smaller student renewed vigor. His fists shoot around and even into me. Franklin, whose punches actually hurt, gladly obliges in kind. Suddenly, I am the main, albeit incidental, object of both children’s rage. A sharp, stabbing pencil glances off my wrist, drawing blood. I look at the two cafeteria workers, dressed in white and protected by a shield of glass and the food they are distributing. They look the other way.”

So reads a section of my book, *Survival: a Teach For America Memoir*. The book chronicles my two years in the program, which includes my experience with a tropical storm, a veteran teacher quitting at my school, racial tension, students’ struggles with basic literacy, my own breaking up fights, my controversial decision to keep certain students in the same grade for consecutive years, the state taking over my school, a visit to nationally-known Rafe Esquith’s classroom in Los Angeles, my getting fired and reassigned to a different school, teaching with a co-teacher during my second year, a student of ours winning second-place for a poem she wrote in a school district of 123,000 students, and my summer on Teach For America’s staff for a training institute in Houston.

With its obvious connection to the politics of education reform and race, the implications are many. How should we train teachers? Can a teacher really make an impact in just two years? Are poor and minority students better or worse served by young high-achievers? Is high-stakes, standardized testing driving too many of our decisions

about education? How do we institutionally dig ourselves out of decades of destructive racism?

And because *Survival* is a memoir, perhaps most of all, what role do I, a young, white man, have to play in the process? The story that unfolds is mostly mine, but it also includes story threads for several of my students, including Lamaar, Kayla, and Franklin. In addition, readers will meet a few of my Teach For America colleagues and peers, such as my apartment mate, Rick, and my not-quite-girlfriend, Danica. Readers will interact with Dr. Smith, the principal of my first school, and Amanda, my co-teacher during year two. These characters will serve as valuable voices of those who aren't affiliated with Teach For America.

My book combines the techniques of memoir, much like Pat Conroy's *The Water is Wide* with literary journalism in the vein of Donna Foote's *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach For America*. Because of this interdisciplinary approach, *Survival* will possess both personal and public appeal.

Thematically, *Survival* explores the physical and psychological impact the Teach For America program had on me, while making the connection that my coworkers and the students we taught were also just doing everything they could to get through each day. Hence, the book's title. *Survival* is an honest examination, critical and questioning when it needs to be, but also empathetic and nuanced in a way that challenges the often-entrenched education-reform camps, one of which glorifies Teach For America and another that tends to demonizes the program. My book seeks a third, and hopefully fairer, path.

**Author's Note:** The following is a work of nonfiction, which is to say the events described in these pages actually happened. In writing the book, I did, of course, rely on memory, but I also corroborated as much as I could with friends and former colleagues. Obviously, the dialogue has been recreated, but I did my best to honor the spirit of what was said and by whom at specific moments in time. The people and places are real, though many of the character and school names have been changed to protect the identity of those who may not have wished to show up in a book someday. Obviously, I can only tell my own story. This book doesn't make any attempt to speak on behalf of Teach For America.

## Preface

“We will now discuss in a little more detail the struggle for existence.”  
-Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

“And in that instant was born the terrible awareness that life eventually broke every man, but in different ways and at different times.”  
-Pat Conroy, *The Water is Wide*

By eight a.m., thirty-four students have entered my classroom. It’s my first full day as a fifth-grade reading teacher at Northern K-8 in Jacksonville, Florida. Maybe two or three of the students take a seat and wait for instructions, but the rest participate in an impressive ruckus of laughing, cursing, whacking classmates, tripping over desks, and calling out to old friends across the room. I thought we were going to have class today, but I guess there will be a special kind of party instead.

Perhaps I should not be so shell-shocked. In meeting other teachers around the building before the school year began, conversations mostly went something like this:

“Hi, I’m Chris.”

“Nice to meet you. What will you be teaching?”

“Fifth grade.”

Then, whomever I was talking to would cringe. “Oooohhh. You have some *special* babies. You’ll probably be fine, though. Good luck!”

Back in the classroom, I’m pleading for order. “Please sit down so I can take attendance,” I yell. No response. Then: *pop!* I flinch from the noise in the back of the

room. The boy from whom the noise came holds a half-folded piece of paper in his hand. A “popper,” I will learn later: one of my students’ many creative inventions. The boy is taller and chunkier than most of his classmates; his black hair has been cut into a fade. With this small but proud act, he is declaring his leadership and territory to anyone who will listen. His act also has the unexpected result of quieting his classmates and focusing their attention. I’m almost grateful as a few of them sit down.

“What ‘cho name?” the boy asks me, as if I am the one who deserves to be questioned.

“Mr. Schumerth,” I answer. “What’s yours?”

His eyes get big. “Mista what?!”

The class laughs.

“Mr. Schumerth,” I repeat.

“Mista Schuma?”

“Sure,” I say. “What’s your name?”

“Lamaar,” he tells me.

“Boy, you ain’t black enough to be called that,” someone calls from a few desks over.

More laughter.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I say. “We’ve got a lot to cover today.”

“Man, we ain’t goin listen to you!” Lamaar says. “You begone in two weeks, watch.”

*Will I?*

A knock on the door interrupts us just before the discussion moves to the enlightening part. I open the door and see the teacher from next door, a large black woman who walks with a limp. Ms. Mason and I will each have a homeroom, but we will also pass our students back-and-forth. She'll teach math and science, while I handle the language arts. We're a teaching "team," to use the lingo. In this moment, her homeroom group, just as large as mine, stands silently next to a wall in the hallway.

"Hi," I say.

"Mr Schumerth," she says, "You've got to yell at these kids or they're never going to listen to you!" Then, looking past me to my students, she says "Y'all ought to be ashamed of yourselves! I could hear you all the way down the hall."

My students are all looking at her, nodding their heads, and listening.

"Umm, thanks," I mutter. She turns back to face her own class, and I shut the door. Class proceeds in the same fashion as it started. We get back to the banter, continue to feel each other out. I try being stern, I try laughing at my students' jokes, I try scolding and lecturing, and I try being witty and funny and cool. All in the same five minutes, and none of it works. I abandon most of my plans for the day, and we're less than an hour in.

How did I get here, you ask? About two years before my first day of teaching, I was in an apartment, eight blocks from Capitol Hill, sitting at a computer desk and about to press submit for my online Teach For America application. The program requires a two-year commitment to teach in an underperforming school in the United States. Before I finished the application, I heard Neal saying something. He was one of my five assigned apartment mates at the American Studies Program, an off-campus, semester-long, study-and-internship experience.

I looked up and came out of my trance. “What did you say?”

“Why do you wanna join Teach For America?” he asked again.

I resented the question. I was in my final year of a political science undergraduate degree that I started mostly out of personal curiosity. As opposed to, say, professional ambition. The truth is, I had no idea why or even if I really wanted to join Teach For America. Am I the only person who relies this heavily on trial-and-error? Some of my peers seemed so sure about what they would do next, or, for that matter, what they were going to do for the rest of their lives. Neal, for example, was a Southerner who had just signed the next four years of his life over to the Navy. If I had asked him why, he probably would have said something about serving our country, fighting the terrorist, and all that. And when he said that, I would probably have said, “Come on, you’re doing it so you can run for office someday.” And he probably would have denied that. And so on. But he didn’t seem to be wavering about his decision to sign on with the military.

As far as Teach For America applicants go, I was pretty far from the stereotypical Ivy Leaguer looking for a bridge from college to law school. In fact, law school sounded about as fun as getting water-boarded. I was a failed college baseball player, a fired resident assistant – drinking alcohol at a school that prohibited it – and a Dean’s List student. No Teach For America recruiter had called me.

“I don’t know,” I finally said to Neal. “Gotta do something, right? I guess this sounds kinda cool.”

Neal seemed concerned, but he didn’t press me the way I might have him if the conversation had been reversed. Teach For America’s admissions process is notoriously

competitive, and apparently whomever was on the other end of my application noticed my ambivalence because the application got rejected before I even reached the interview stage.

Several months later, I graduated from college and moved back to Culver, a Northern-Indiana lake-and-boarding school town of 1,400 people. Residents of the town like to brag about how the population doubles in the summer. I lived with my parents and worked four part-time jobs. I was trying to stay busy enough not to dwell on a bunch of unanswered “real job” applications or the dilemma of how to gain “experience” before anyone would hire me. On any given day, I might have run into the same child in a classroom for which I was substitute teaching and then again at the Boys and Girls’ Club where I worked after school. After that, I could potentially serve that child’s parents when I bartended, or greet the whole family on the weekends, as a barista at the local coffee shop. My customers thought I worked everywhere, and they were kind of right. I didn’t own a vehicle, so I walked to my destinations. The town is small enough that I could get away with that. When the weather was bad, I caught rides with my parents, who worked, respectively, as a teacher at the town’s private school and as a teacher’s aide at the public school.

The socioeconomic differences in Culver are stark, and the town’s two schools often postured and battled over the best students-athletes. You can imagine which school held more power, and as such, it was the private school who won more than their share of those tiffs. There was plenty of resentment over the issue, and I lost friends when I left the public school after eighth grade to spend my high school years at the private school. One of the best perks of my dad’s job was a significant tuition break for any kids of his

that went to the private. Anyway, my point is, as small as Culver is, it can be pretty divided, and somehow my family was always right in the middle of that. Sometimes nobly, other times stupidly.

I hardly blinked at applying to Teach For America a second time, roughly a year after my first rejection. My decision to apply again had a lot to do with trying to prove to myself and to an ex-girlfriend who crushed my soul that I was not going to stay around in my hometown and be a loser. *I will go somewhere and make something of myself.*

It didn't hurt that the program was getting a lot of press those days. The organization was technically younger than I was, but it had grown quickly by almost any measure one could point to: placement regions, applicants per year, alumni, budget size, and even the amount of controversy it stirred up among the educational (and political) establishment.

Selecting inexperienced teachers to solve educational inequity? The sheer audacity of such an idea. *Who better than me to carry it out?* I've always been a doer, one who errs on the side of action. That my first application was rejected only made the challenge more appealing. *I will be the underdog story.*

I came from an outwardly-focused, religious family. I was guided by a gospel of guilt, well-practiced in the art and skill of martyrdom. When in doubt, serve others. This played itself out uniquely for each of us, but what we had in common was that the instinct was there. During his youth, my father hitchhiked around the country to preach about Jesus. During the same season of her life, my mother lived and worked on a Native-American reservation in Utah. One of my sisters will join the Peace Corps and move to Ecuador for twenty-seven months. My other sister will spend a summer on the Southside

of Chicago volunteering for the Salvation Army and eventually landing a job on the Eastside of Indianapolis, working for an after-school program at a low-income school. At this particular juncture of my life, I had no money, hardly any sense of what my professional skillset was, and no idea how to be an adult. I couldn't even take care of myself, but somehow I thought it was part of my lot in life to help and fix *other people*. I was out to save at least some of humanity from its sins.

I took the Teach For America application much more seriously the second time around. I practically memorized the website. I read books from the suggested reading list. I job-shadowed a former teacher of mine. I solicited feedback on my written materials from a childhood friend and baseball teammate who was part of Teach For America's Chicago corps. I felt confident and prepared for my phone interview and then again during my in-person interview in Indianapolis.

One evening in November, I stopped in at the Culver Public Library after a day of substitute teaching and playing dodge ball at the Boys and Girls' club. I didn't have a laptop at home, so I sat down at a computer and logged in. In my inbox, there was an e-mail from Teach For America. I clicked on it. "Congratulations" it started, and went on to say I'd been assigned to teach elementary school in Jacksonville, Florida, one of three new regions across the country. Jacksonville and elementary school were my third preferences for place and content. I had wanted to teach high-school English or social studies in Washington, D.C. or Indianapolis, but those seemed like minor details at the time. The real point was, I was 23 years old and elated that my life finally had some direction. So I hoped, anyway.

I've been to Jacksonville one time, about three years before my acceptance into Teach For America. I went with Chris, a college friend of mine. We spent a warm Thanksgiving with his wealthy grandparents, surrounded by their immaculate Christmas decorations. We visited the Jaguars' stadium and ate dinner at Hooters downtown, watching the Notre Dame-Southern California football game. I remember trying to flirt with the waitress with strawberry-blond hair who insisted she was going to become a sports broadcaster one day. Okay, so it wasn't exactly "teaching in the inner-city," but other than the fact that USC crushed my Irish that day, my memories of Jacksonville were fond ones.

Not long after receiving the good news from Teach For America, I was bartending in Culver for the last time. One of my childhood best friends, Joe, came in and sat down on a bar stool right in front of me. After being inseparable for so much of grade- and middle-school, we'd silently drifted apart during high school, maybe around the time I quit playing football. Even now, he still looked every bit like the star he'd been: trunks for legs, thick neck, huge arms. He was one of the few African Americans in our mostly-white town.

"Hey, man," I said, handing him a menu. "What can I get ya?"

"Just a Sprite," he said.

I nodded and grabbed a red glass. I filled it with ice and pop from the fountain and set the drink down in front of him.

"I heard you're leaving," he said. "Teach For America, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, trying to conceal my pride.

“So you’re gonna teach little black kids how to read?” he asked, not even trying to withhold his skepticism.

I cringed and looked down at the floor. “Ummm, something like that.”

We didn’t say much after that, but he left a fifty-dollar tip, which I received as a goodbye gift.

In early June, I was still thinking about that conversation with Joe when I – my whole life in three suitcases – boarded a plane headed to Jacksonville. I hadn’t been sleeping very well, and I was full of anxiety about moving to a place where I hardly knew anyone. *What if my students and coworkers aren’t excited to see me when I arrive? And what if the results of my teaching are somehow less than heroic?*

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## Chapter 1: Institute

In Jacksonville, I transition from retail worker to teacher-in-training. On our first night together, local sponsors treat us to a riverboat cruise on the St. Johns River, one of those rare rivers that flows north. Our orientation week is more of the same: getting wined and dined, tidbits about the city, and sessions that drill Teach For America's mission and goals into our psyches.

None of my Teach For America colleagues have long-term places to live yet, so we stay in dorm rooms at the University of North Florida. My orientation roommate, Jameson, is a former-student-body president at Florida Gulf Coast University. He, several others, and I get rowdy at the Jacksonville Beach bars the night before Teach For America staff members send us off to Atlanta in carpools. Along with hundreds of new teachers from other regions, we're headed for five weeks of intensive training known as "Institute." The word daunts us.

In my head, I have visions of boot camp: long days, short nights, staff members telling us to get down into push-up position. Obviously, I'm nervous, but I figure I can do anything for five weeks. And come to think of it, maybe that's how I view this whole thing: I can do about anything if I know there's an endpoint built in from the start. I guess it's fair to say that true commitment isn't really my thing yet. I'm mostly experimenting, trying to figure out who the hell I am.

I ride to Atlanta with two core members with whom I've hardly even shared a conversation. I don't have to drive, so I try to sleep through as much of the five-hour car ride as I can. When I wake up in the car for the final time, we're surrounded by brick buildings, and we're driving by what could only be a football stadium. Georgia Tech's campus seems empty until we arrive in a full parking lot. Before we get out of the car, a man approaches us.

Like a panting dog, he welcomes us and points at a nearby building. "That's where you register."

We leave our luggage in the car and follow the man's directions. Just in case anyone misinterprets him, signs labeled "Teach For America Registration" are everywhere. We open a set of double doors into an open room full of tables, signs, and the buzz of frantic twenties-types. The pace is market-like. Type A's everywhere. Faces are a blur, and new corps members moving through the sequence look as dazed as I am. *What, exactly, is the hurry?* The onslaught of questions and commands began.

"What's your name?"

"Sign here."

"Move on to the next table."

"Do you have your ID?"

"Here's your room key."

Finally, a woman says to me, "You'll be teaching middle-school reading this summer. Your bus leaves tomorrow at 6:00 a.m. Breakfast is before that. Don't miss the bus or you'll be responsible for paying for a cab to get you to your school."

*Middle school?* I ask her for clarification. “Shouldn’t I teach the same thing over the summer that I’ll be teaching in the fall?”

“The assignment’s correct,” she assures me. She goes on to explain that there’s no way Teach For America can accommodate everyone with the same summer and fall placements. I’m not the only one in this situation. “You’re one of the lucky ones,” she says. “You already know what you’re teaching in the fall.”

“Oh.”

The thought hadn’t occurred to me that some of my new colleagues have shown up for summer training without a guaranteed job placement for the school year yet. I thank her and walk away.

In the morning, I make it on time to the factory assembly line that we call breakfast. When I’m finished eating, staff members hand me a white, cardboard lunch box filled with a turkey sandwich, an apple, a chocolate chip cookie, and a Coke. These food items will become what I look forward to during the next month of my life.

The bus I ride is mostly silent. My female colleagues wear dark skirts or pantsuits, while the guys boast their best dress shirts and shiny ties. Lanyards with nametags dangle from our necks. One corps member looks to be about forty years old and stands out because she is easily the oldest in our group. I’m one of only three Jacksonville corps members assigned to this school for the summer; the others on this bus will go on to their two-year stints in Atlanta or Charlotte or Nashville or Memphis.

The bus pulls up to Preston Middle School, a brick building with hardly any civilization around it. Of course, none of us know that a few years later, Preston will make national headlines for a school shooting that takes place just outside its walls. After

the bus parks, staff members direct us into a converted school library. We'll spend hours here, watching PowerPoint sessions, planning lessons, and complaining about the broken air conditioner.

A man of about thirty introduces himself as our School Director. He has four years of teaching experience. He tells us he wants to dispel some rumors and hopefully put some of us at ease. He says some of us may have heard about "improvement plans." I already have no idea what he's talking about, but it sounds ominous. He says improvement plans can have a negative connotation, but they're not used very often. If we're repeatedly struggling with something in our teaching practice or professional habits, we may get put on one of these plans by a staff member. Our School Director tells us an improvement plan is an intervention, and the real goal is additional support, but in rare cases an improvement plan can lead to dismissal from Institute. So it's really important that we get on board right away.

*Sounds like a dressed-up three-strike policy.*

At Institute, it doesn't take long for factions of corps members to develop. The Kool-Aid drinkers sit in the front of sessions, looking on at the presenters with admiration. They take copious notes, hoping for the "A" that'll never come. When presenters pose questions, a line of Kool-Aid drinkers' hands shoot up immediately. The answers given mostly sound the same: "It is, *like*, so disturbing that these kids, *like*, don't get adequate education, ya know? I just can't wait to start, *like*, teaching. Last night I stayed up until, *like*, three in the morning working on my plans."

Then the presenter will say something like: "Let's give a shout-out for working so hard for our kids!"

The two standard finger snaps follow, except I refuse to snap. *Staying up until three in the morning? What is this – fraternity rush week?* The Kool-Aid drinkers annoy the hell out of me, so I join the smaller of the two cliques: the Cynics. We sit in the back of the room. We learned how to think critically in college, and boy are we gonna show it. We roll our eyes at the presenters. We grumble about how young the Teach For America staff members are, how they couldn't have more than a couple years of teaching experience. What do they really know at this point? I text my ex under the table, and I take bathroom breaks in the middle of every ninety-minute session. Staff members who pick up on our group's cynicism hover over our shoulders when it's time to practice whatever skill we are learning about today.

Early on during my training, I sit down for lunch across from one of the other Cynics. He's a few inches taller than me, and his hair's been cut short, almost shaved. "These food options suck, man," he says.

I nod, but really I'm just glad we don't have to pay for lunch because I wouldn't be able to afford it.

"I'm a vegan," he informs me, as if the implications are self-evident. He picks his way through a salad in front of him. I love meat, but I keep this information to myself. I learn that his name is Mike, that he's from Charlotte, and that his fiancé back home is pregnant. He's a triple major from Wake Forest who loves to talk about whether or not humans really possess any free will. I happily oblige and argue with him about this topic, even though I don't feel as strong an investment in the issue as he does. We're the nerd table at a place filled with nerds. Not surprisingly, a few years later I will notice on

Facebook that Mike leads the Charlotte Occupy movement, even to the extent of getting arrested for the cause.

One morning at Institute, Mike is the last one on the bus, looking disheveled, no tie, and a half-buttoned purple shirt. We exchange nods, too zoned out to speak yet. As the sleep wears off our eyes, we discuss the merits and weaknesses of Senator Barack Obama's campaign for president. We're full of the brilliant insights and answers and critiques that one might expect from 23- and 24-year-olds who studied political science. We arrive at the school and mosey off the bus. A staff member – recognizable because he presented a session the day before – intercepts Mike, saying he needs to have a word with him. I keep walking into the building but hold the door open enough to hear the conversation.

“It's important that you come to work this summer with a tie on,” the staff member says.

“Why?” Mike asks.

I smile. If I were betting, my money would be that this particular staff member doesn't really care about the tie either, but that someone told him to confront Mike about it. As for me, I hate ties, but if my employer tells me to wear a tie, I'm not going to fight *that* battle. But what does it say about me that I so enjoy someone who will? There's something about the authority in front of me that immediately turns me off, so I'm drawn to the alternative voice, even if I'm not exactly ready to be that voice myself.

The staff member does his best to stay composed and answer the question.

“Students will take you more seriously if you look professional,” he says.

Mike isn't convinced. "The Japanese have done studies on these things. Workers who wear ties are less efficient."

"Maybe so, but if you don't have a tie on when you get off the bus tomorrow, you'll be on your way to an improvement plan."

"Fine," Mike says.

I wait for him and flash a gloating grin in his direction. "Japanese research, really? That's the best you could come up with?"

"It's true!" he insists. I don't know if his claim is true or not, but I do know that Matt is the only one who really cares.

In session that day, the staff breaks us up into smaller collaborative groups. My leader, Andrea, is an African-American woman who has just finished her first year of teaching. She speaks in a voice just louder than a whisper. She tells us we'll be paired with a teaching partner for the rest of the summer. We'll teach the same content to the same students and be expected to plan lessons together. I'll learn that the teaching-partner assignment has make-or-break capacity at Institute, and at this point, I'm not very good at working with other people. I recognize my partner, Kelly, as a card-carrying member of the Kool-Aid Drinkers. She has migrated to Atlanta's Institute from Stanford.

At a breakout session, I learn a little more about her. Andrea explains the exercise we are about to do: we'll reflect out loud about the most difficult experience in our lives. In leading with her own story, she sheds tears, setting the mood. Several others follow Andrea's lead, but when it's my turn to go, I mumble something about being back home after college, broken up with and directionless. My eyes are down as I talk, and I keep my story as short as possible. This whole thing is uncomfortable.

And Kelly? Her voice quivers as she tells us she's from D.C., that her father is a top-level advisor for the Bush Administration. She tells us how hard it has been to hear the criticism about Iraq, a war she opposes. She says she doesn't feel close to her father anymore. Instead of being moved by her vulnerability, I'm annoyed, judgmental, and wondering what any of this has to do with teaching kids.

The tension between Kelly and me develops early, probably in no small part due to my cynicism. Some early struggles to get our students interested in a poetry unit leads to a conversation between the two of us about how to make our content more interesting.

"What if we had a poetry slam?" I ask. "That might energize them instead of just forcing them to read people they've never heard of."

"I don't think that's a good idea," she says. "We haven't talked about anything like that in our sessions."

She's referring to the teaching schedule that Teach For America has given us, a schedule I interpreted as a suggestion. Our conversation leads nowhere, so we move to a brainstorming session with Andrea. She asks us what the problem is, and we try to explain.

"It's tough material for middle schoolers," Andrea concedes. "But at my school, we organized a poetry slam, and the kids responded really well to it. You could try something like that."

"That's such a good idea!" Kelly says. "Maybe we could that. What do you think, Chris?"

"Yeah, maybe," I mumble.

I can't get myself to call Kelly out in front of Andrea, but I'm not very good at hiding my resentment either. Andrea's suggestion and Kelly's response confirms every stereotype and fear I have about this working relationship. Kelly must sense that because – to her credit – she apologizes later for taking the idea seriously only after a staff member recommended it. I could probably apologize to Kelly for being so defensive and dismissive of her, but I don't.

Even worse, it's becoming more and more apparent that I don't have a clue how to teach. Which, let's face it, is to be expected. I have no experience. But in agreeing to join Teach For America, I had somehow allowed myself to believe that I would be a star on day one. Middle schoolers have a way of humbling such delusions.

Kelly and I each get scheduled to teach half a 90-minute language arts block per day. Our class consists of twelve black seventh graders, all of whom are significantly behind in reading. They need to pass summer school in order to move on to eighth grade. Things go okay but not great on my first few days in the classroom.

On the day of our students' first quiz, Kelly and I both show up early and move quickly, arranging all the pieces of the lesson accordingly.

“Get any sleep last night?” I ask her.

“Maybe an hour or so,” she says, without looking up. I believe her, despite the fact that I had dismissed myself from our planning session around midnight.

Kelly teaches first, and her part of the lesson goes fine. We're reading Robert Frost's “Nothing Gold Can Stay”:

Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.

Toward the end of my segment, it occurs to me that I don't know where the quizzes are. Kelly and I had created them together, but it had been my responsibility to type them up, print and copy them in a computer lab, and bring them to school this morning. I know I did at least the first two of those tasks.

"Why do you think Frost wrote this poem?" I ask my students, as I walk to the back of the room. No hands go up. I glance down at the table in the back corner of the room: a couple books, leftover handouts from the day before, my boxed lunch, no quizzes. I look at Kelly, who sits in the back on the other side of the room. We're not supposed to interfere with the other's lesson, but this seems like a dire situation.

"Quizzes," I mouth in her direction.

She shoots back a look of concern, stands up, and joins my panicked search. "Ummm, any thoughts?" I ask the class again. Silence. I roam back to the front, trying to keep up a façade that nothing is wrong. I stop at the wooden podium; I pick up and look through my clipboard. No quizzes.

A few students giggle. I'd been working particularly hard to win Jason over because his classmates seem to follow his lead. It had felt like I'd been making progress, but now he's making hand signals across the room to a classmate. I have no idea what the signals are or what they mean, but I give him my best teacher look, which doesn't seem to faze him in the slightest.

“Why do you think Frost uses so much color in the poem?” I try again as I keep moving, this time over to the bookshelf by the door. Lots of books, a few loose papers, nothing helpful.

*Shit!* I must have left the quizzes back in my room at Georgia Tech. More gestures by Jason, more giggles from his classmates. *Is he mocking me?* By the time I look up, his hands have dropped to his desk. I’m mostly mad at myself, but I take it out on Jason.

“Out to the hallway!” I yell, resorting to tactics found nowhere in my training but definitely somewhere in my memory from elementary school. But now what am I going to do? If I go out to talk to him, I’ll lose the rest of the class. If I stay here, what will he do out there? Jason bursts into laughter as soon as the door slams behind him. Kelly anticipates that I have no plan for dealing with Jason and follows him out.

“Silent reading for the rest of class!” I order. *Yes, I have just made reading a punishment.*

“What if I don’t have a book?” one boy calls out.

This dilemma hasn’t occurred to me as a possibility. “Then go to the bookshelf and get one,” I say.

Several students shuffle over to the bookshelf. A few of them watch while one looks for a book. They’re in no rush. And of course, there’s no real reason to be. Picking a book one actually wants to read takes time.

“This is stupid,” someone says. “I thought we had a quiz today.”

So did I, I want to say. Instead I say, “We’ll take the quiz on Monday.”

“There’re no good books over here,” a boy calls out. “They’re all baby books.”

I mostly agree with his assessment, but I can't say that, can I? By now I'm only watching the clock, wanting so badly to be saved by the bell. This will become a daily ritual of mine, watching the clock, praying for it to tick faster. By the time everyone sits down and opens a book – including Jason, who has calmly returned after his talk with Kelly – it's time to go. Our students disperse with a focused pace I dream about seeing *during* class. Not that I'm sad to see them rush out of here. I pick up their books, which they've left lying open on their desks. I'm grateful that Kelly doesn't say much about how class just went.

Back at Georgia Tech that night, I finish up my lesson for the following day in a computer lab. Though we don't necessarily see that much of each other during the day, corps members from the same region stay in dorms together. As I type in harmony with a girl who sits next to me, suddenly I hear it: the unmistakable sound of a sniffle. And another one. I peek over and tears have begun to streak down this woman's cheek. It's almost a relief to see that someone else is having a hard time, too. I jump in to console and to try to solve whatever the problem is.

“You okay?” I ask.

She can hardly even get the words out at first, but she tells me she's been sick all week, and that she's way behind in her work. She was teaching middle-school math before, but she just got switched to reading. She has no idea how to plan a reading lesson.

“My boyfriend's back in Texas,” she says, “and he just can't understand. He thinks I should just leave.”

I tell her that sucks, that I'm sorry. I offer up my own lesson plan for her to use. That's allowed, right? Aren't we supposed to collaborate? Is this what collaboration is? I

almost feel like I'm plagiarizing, but I remind myself that I'm not in college anymore. I print out another copy of the lesson and hand it to her. She tells me her name is Danica, and I tell her I'm Chris. Then, I dismiss myself and call it a night.

Mike's provocation – with me soaking in his critiques – continues to appeal to me throughout my time in Atlanta. I'm a disciple, learning from the master rebel. Okay really, I'm uncomfortable, insecure, and terrified of failure. But the two of us – and a few other Cynics – have gotten quite good at tuning out sessions. To take the instruction seriously would require the acknowledgement that we don't know what we're doing, that we need help.

During one session, Mike is teaching me about “conscious rap,” as he calls it, or maybe about 9/11 conspiracy theory. Building seven and all that. As we talk, I notice a female corps member glancing back at us. She's attractive, and I'd like to think she's checking me out, that soon she'll turn all the way around to introduce herself, and ask me to drinks this weekend. But from the look on her face, that's not the direction things are going.

Finally, she whirls around, her blue eyes blazing. “Why don't you guys just leave? Seriously, why are you here?”

I fear that half the room is waiting for our response. I want to duck under the table or take a cab to the airport. I want to go back to college, to bartending in Culver. Instead, Mike and I take the bait, we shoot off our mouths a little bit, and pretty soon this woman is running out of the room in tears. Everyone who witnesses the exchange probably thinks we're assholes. And that question the woman asked us, the one about leaving? It's a question that will hang in my consciousness for months.

## Chapter 2: Jacksonville

After Institute ends, I fly back to Jacksonville. I'll be living in an apartment with a Teach For America colleague. Before I move in, though, I have an errand to run. At the airport, I have an address on a small piece of paper in my hand. I walk outside into the heat and hail a cab. I tell the driver to take me to the address. Chris, my college friend who lives in Jacksonville, works at Enterprise and is going to help me buy a used car. I have every intention of completing this task today, despite the fact that I've done zero research ahead of time and hold literally no bargaining chips in my hands.

The salesman is only a little older than I am. He seems eager and grateful to Chris for dropping the easiest customer of all time right in his lap. I tell him my price range, and we look at one car: a black, 2008 Chevrolet Cobalt with 32,000 miles on it. Automatic transmission. Its listed price is a little more than \$11,000, which the salesman insists is under its Blue Book value. I take his word for it.

I test-drive the car around the block, and that's enough. I'm ready to sign the papers and pay the down payment courtesy of needs-based Teach For America transitional funding. The only detail out of my control is securing a car loan. I'm expecting a teacher's salary, but I have almost no credit history to my name. The first option we try denies me. Second one, same result.

I hadn't considered this potential obstacle. What if this doesn't work out? Chris could probably get me to my apartment, but what then? How will I get around town and especially to work? But I'm saved when the third attempt (and high-interest option) gets

approved. I'm stoked to have wheels, and I should be able to pay the monthly payments. The salesman gives me the run-down of all the warranty policies, and I purchase insurance from Geico. He gives me the keys, and I thank him. My grown-up life is upon me.

Less than a week later, I'm driving my new car home from a day of teacher orientation. Heading south on I-95, I exit before I cross the river. The streets in Jacksonville are still mostly unfamiliar to me. I decelerate around a loop. A quick stoplight surprises me, and I step hard on the brake. My car responds the way I want it to, but I hear squealing tires that aren't mine. Someone else is as surprised by the light as I am. I glance up at my rearview mirror just in time to see a truck smashing into me. I lurch forward, my neck whips backwards, and I'm in the middle of an Alanis Morissette song:

And isn't it ironic  
Don't you think?  
A little too ironic

The pain is minimal, and my car can still move, so I turn right onto a side street, and the man behind me follows. We both park and get out of our vehicles. I survey the damage in the back of my car, while he looks at the front of his. Mine is way worse. I wonder if it can even be fixed. The man apologizes and admits he is at fault. We exchange insurance information, and he suggests a place to which I might tow my vehicle.

This is how I land in the passenger's seat of my apartment mate's blue truck on the way to our first full day of teaching at Northern K-8. The two of us will join twelve other Teach For America corps members – an unusually high number – at our school. The teacher-orientation meetings are over, and I will have a real classroom, full of

students, from eight to three, starting today. The day I have been preparing for all summer, anticipating for months, is finally here.

My apartment mate is a guy named Rick, slotted to teach sixth grade. We had first met on a basketball court. A University of Georgia graduate with short blond hair, he stands about six-feet-two inches tall and holds his own quite nicely on the court.

Rick and I – along with about half of our corps – decided to live in a set of apartments called The Villas, located in an eclectic Jacksonville neighborhood called Riverside. Plenty of bars, restaurants, shops, and even a park are within walking distance of our apartment. The neighborhood sits maybe ten minutes west of downtown and ten minutes south of Northern. Riverside is also right around the unwritten dividing line between where most of city's poorer and often black people live (in the north part of the city) and where the whiter suburbanites live (on the Southside).

We arrive at Northern way early, so Rick has his choice of parking spots. We want to get to our classrooms for last-minute preparation. I step out of the passenger seat and whiff the smell of fertilizer coming from the stretch of factories just north of us. I snag my black teacher cart – full of books and other teaching materials – out of the truck bed. We walk into a brick building that possesses technology that's so modern it almost feels too good to be true: Mac computers in each classroom, microphones, smart boards, even our very own school television station. The building had been built to combine three struggling elementary schools, but I wondered about what seems to be the accepted equation: poorly-performing school, multiplied by three, plus shiny new toys, equals better performance.

Soon, my students have arrived, Lazaar is making his dramatic introduction, and Ms. Mason is scolding both my students and me. Afterwards, I give my students a reading pre-test to see who can read and at what grade level. I notice that “testing behavior” seems engrained because once the work is in front of them, most of my students actually quiet down and try to complete it. With the exception of Lazaar, that is.

“Man, I don’t know any of this stuff!” he announces.

“Shhhhhhh!” a brave female classmate says.

“Girl, you shhhhhh!” he shoots back.

She doesn’t respond, but he continues on his monologue, anyway. “Mista Schuma, I ain’t doin’ this!

“Lazaar, you need to be quiet while your classmates are testing,” I say. It’s as if all I need to start speaking the universal language of teachers was a classroom of my own. “I’m sure you’ll do fine if you give it a shot. No more talking.”

For a brief moment, it appears as if he might actually comply. What I mean is, he doesn’t say anything back. I turn my attention back to my own desk and work, only to be interrupted by the unmistakable sound of paper ripping. A brief second of silence. Then more ripping.

“I didn’t know any of the answers anyway,” Lazaar says.

I consult all my mental manuals, but I can’t remember what you’re supposed to do when your student rips up the test. I don’t really do *anything* except scold him weakly, put another test in front of him, and tell him I’ll be calling his mother later.

That afternoon, when our class lines up at the door for dismissal, I congratulate them for finishing their first day as fifth graders. I’m really congratulating myself. Before

I finish my pep talk, Lamaar, who stands toward the front of the line, reaches out, turns the door handle, opens the door, and takes off running. He flings his backpack off to the side like cargo at sea.

“Get back here, Lamaar!” I yell, knowing I’m wasting my breath. I’m still trying to convince myself that I’m in charge, but so far, everyone knows Lamaar is. Rick stands outside his classroom down the hall, about to let his own class go. He looks up and adjusts his body, trying to stop Lamaar. Lamaar dodges Rick’s attempt to block his fifty-yard dash to the stairwell.

“Stop running, young man,” Rick orders.

Lamaar calls out, “Fuck you!” and is gone. I pick up Lamaar’s bag and dismiss the rest of the class, feeling completely out of my league.

One student, a girl named Kayla, stays back to help clean up. “These kids don’t have any home trainin’,” she says.

Together, we pick up the scattered debris from our first day together. You name it, it’s there: used poppers, opened books, notes written to friends, gum, food wrappers. I ask Kayla if she needs to get home, but she says no, she always stays after school until her mother gets off work. I nod. Northern offers an after-school program in the cafeteria for students in Kayla’s situation. I tell her she better get going to where she needs to be.

After she leaves, I resist the urge to take a nap on the rug that makes up our classroom library. The library itself has been dismantled, and the contents of my prize box have been combed through in the back of the classroom. *What just happened?* I wipe the desks with disinfectant. Restart all the computers. File the pre-tests into a folder and make a note to grade them later that night.

The classroom phone rings. I pick it up and say hello.

“This Mista Schuma?” a woman’s voice asks.

“Yes,” I say. “What can I do for you?”

“Let me tell you what you can do for me. You can make the boy who keeps hitting my son stop. Or else, I’m gonna come in there and do it myself, and then I’ll probably be headin’ back to jail.”

“Can you tell me who your son is?”

“Lamaar.”

I can’t immediately come up with which boy she is talking about, but I don’t necessarily doubt that someone hit Lamaar. Unfortunately, there was a lot of hitting going on, some of it playful, some of it aggressive. But I also figure that Lamaar almost certainly played an active role in whichever incident his mother is talking about. Would now be a good time to tell her about her son’s leaving class early? Or that he ripped up a test?

But I’m too scared to argue with her. “I’ll keep my eyes out,” I say.

“You better or you’re gonna see me in there soon,” she finishes.

I hear a click. I have a feeling this won’t be the last time I hear from her. *Can I really enter into conversations like this one as an equal?* I feel impossibly outmatched, like a child talking to an adult in her own house.

I open my school-issued laptop and begin to plan the next day’s lesson. With every key I hit, I grow more disillusioned. If I have a tendency to see the negative first, there seems to be plenty of negativity to find right now. *We can’t even sit in our seats!* How am I ever going to teach anything? My legs hurt standing, and my throat hurts from

talking all day long. One day into my teaching career, and I already want it to be over. Not just the day or the week, but the semester, the year, the two years. *What should I do after Teach For America?* I Google graduate programs.

I shut down the computer and look up at our classroom clock. It's after five, and I'm ready to go home and eat dinner. I throw my things into my cart. I go in search of Rick. I peek into his classroom, but it's dark and empty. *Maybe he's in the bathroom or down the hall talking to another teacher.* I take out my cellphone and call him.

"Hello?" he answers.

"Hey, Man, this is Chris," I say. "Where are—?"

"Shit! I was supposed to bring you home! I totally forgot. I left a while ago."

He's apologetic and vows to come back to get me, but I can't help but consider this the perfect ending to my first day of teaching.

### Chapter 3: The Storm Hits

My second day of teaching goes much like my first, and after school, I'm back to the drawing board without any ideas to draw upon. I feel completely run over by my students. I open a window, hoping the fresh air will help me think. Rick bursts into the room. "Hey, did you hear about the hurricane?" he asks.

I've been so buried in work and my own head that this is the first I've heard of Hurricane Faye. Rick tells me it's barreling straight for Jacksonville. I try to decipher whether this is good news or bad news. Will we need to evacuate? Is this be my opportunity to get out of here?

When Faye gets downgraded to a tropical storm, the change seems like a technicality, but it's enough for Rick and I to decide to stay put in our apartment to wait out the storm. In our living room, we watch news updates. My older brother, Shane, is also with us. He made the late-summer decision to follow me south. He's only eleven months older than me, and the two of us rarely drift too far from each other before our lives intersect again.

After my months-long application process with Teach For America, Shane used his Spanish-speaking skills to land a job teaching middle school on literally the first day he looked for work. I'm more than a little annoyed, and on top of that, Shane asked me if I would live with him. As far as I'm concerned, he and I have already spent too much time living together, and besides, I had agreed to live with Rick. So I declined Shane's offer as nicely as I could.

While it's Teach For America that accepted and trained me, it's the Duval County Public Schools that will pay both Shane and me during the year. Shane needs a paycheck or two before he can sign a lease of his own, so he sets up temporary camp – which lasts about three weeks – in my bedroom. The arrangement feels completely invasive to me, but I can't really blame Shane for being broke. I don't even have enough money to buy a bed yet. So Shane and I sleep on the floor. This kind of behavior isn't that unusual for us. We grew up in a family of seven, supported by a dad who taught and a mother who worked part-time. We lived in a three-bedroom house with one-and-a-half bathrooms. There was never enough space or money. When we traveled to see our extended families in Wisconsin or Pennsylvania, all seven of us would pile into the van together and then ultimately share a hotel room. I slept on the floor.

About the time I started high school, a summer storm flooded my makeshift bedroom in the finished basement of my parents' house. I learned of the several inches of water after waking up in the middle of the night. You never want to hear a “plop!” when you drop your pillow onto the floor. I trudged through the water, up the steps, and woke my parents up. By the next day, we were all down in the basement together, vacuuming water and ripping the carpet out.

By the time I tried to sleep down there again, the room was still damp and moldy. We couldn't really afford to fix the problem, so eventually I resigned myself to sleeping on the couch in our family room. Then it was off to boarding school and college: lots of moving in and out of rooms with twin beds. Internally, the message I learned was to sleep wherever there's room, whenever there's time. Don't speak up. Stay out of the way. Make it work. *Survive*. I got pretty good at that.

Rick, Shane, and I watch as announcements flash across the television screen, informing us that school in our district has been cancelled for the following day. What a stroke of luck, a gift! When I awake the next morning, rain pours down from the sky, and there is nowhere to go. I have plenty of work to do for whenever we have school next, but where to start? Images of loud and squirmy children flash through my mind.

For the next several days, I settle into a cycle of movement followed by paralysis. I don't change out of the clothes that I sleep in. I open up my laptop, check my e-mail, work on upcoming lesson plans. Get frustrated, close the laptop. Grade a few papers. Turn the television on, check out the huge green mass that hovers over Jacksonville. Peek out the window and notice the accumulation of water in the street adjacent to our apartment. Walk outside, into our outdoor hallway, and notice the water lapping over the side of the St. John's River, less than fifty feet away. Observe the water creeping toward the hallway and hope it doesn't reach our doorway. Return to the apartment and repeat.

Eventually, I say screw the work, and I watch episodes of *The Wire* on my laptop. I marvel at the artistic genius of David Simon. I watch while pacing around the apartment, laptop in hand. Like any good scavenger, I eat standing up, nibbling on apples, granola bars, bowls of cereal, and other food that requires no preparation. Dirty dishes pile up in the sink. *This must be what they call bachelorhood.*

By Saturday, the rain slows down enough for Shane to drive me to my car mechanic who has remade the back of my vehicle. Thankfully, the other man's insurance company has taken care of the bill. My car looks new again, and I drive it back to my apartment where Rick invites me to join him for a meeting he has set up with Betsy, our Teach For America program director. She's responsible for supervising, coaching, and

problem-solving with about half of our city's corps members. I'm suspicious of Rick's ask-for-help-when-you-need-it instinct, but I decide to go with him anyway. Betsy is already sitting down at Starbucks, laptop open, when we arrive. She's in her mid-thirties, has a master's degree in English Education from Brown, and has taught for several years in both D.C. and Jacksonville. I can't help but notice that her experience in the field dwarfs so many other Teach For America staff members, and this opens me up a little bit to what she has to say.

“What problems are you seeing in your classroom?” Betsy asks me.

“Everything,” I moan. “It's *all* bad.”

“Try to narrow it down to the most important thing,” she says. “Then start there.”

I think about that for a minute. It makes sense. My tendency toward all-or-nothing thinking is much safer than what Betsy is suggesting. I'd rather just bitch and play the victim who doesn't have to do anything about the problems I encounter. On the contrary, Betsy seems to be saying something about process, what a concept. I have to start somewhere. And with Rick and her help, I decide to prioritize getting my students to sit in their seats during instruction. It takes everything in me to get over my expectation that students should already know how to sit in their seats and listen as I pour wisdom into their young brains.

By Monday morning, school is back in session. I park my own car, greet a few teachers, and roll my teacher cart through the hallway. I turn on the lights in my classroom and can't believe what I see. Water everywhere. Papers and pencils have blown all over the room. Textbooks drenched. My smart board and other technology almost surely ruined. I look around and discover the culprit. On the other side of the

room, one of the windows has been completely knocked out. I walk through the puddle that is my classroom and look out at the empty window. The glass has fallen outward and shattered on the ground below. I consider this and remember: *the window I left open!* The thought hadn't once occurred to me while I was at home during the storm, but I almost surely forgot to close this window. Hundreds and probably thousands of dollars of damage, and it's my fault.

I try to think of a way to avoid admitting that this disaster is on me. It was a tropical storm and there's bound to be damage out there, right? I had been watching footage of these things my whole life. But I have to act quickly because my students are going to be here in forty-five minutes. My classroom phone sits in a pile of water on my desk. I check the dial tone: nothing. I bolt to Ms. Mason's room next door. Her room is dry, and her windows intact. She's putting folders on student desks. I ask her if I can use her phone.

She says sure, but asks the question I don't want her to ask: "What's wrong with yours?"

I ignore the question. I pick up the phone and dial the office. Our principal, Dr. Smith, is a middle-aged African-American woman. She's often the last person out of the building at night. I can count our individual conversations to this point on one hand, but I do know by now that she cares. She's always been friendly to me.

Dr. Smith answers after the second ring. I tell her my room is full of water.

"Be up right away," she says and hangs up.

My classroom is the farthest room from her office in the whole building. But she arrives, a little out of breath, in record time. She walks in and looks around. Strolls over

to the empty window and peers out. She's seeing exactly what I've already seen, trying to figure it out. The deliberation is agony.

“But what would have caused this?” she asks. “Why would it have fallen outward?”

Rain and wind, obviously, I want to say. And lightning and thunder and everything that's bad in the world. I try to speculate, but I just stutter because I have nothing to say. Whatever comes out just sounds stupid. I don't want to get caught in a lie of omission, and I can't take the guilt any longer, so I cave. “I think I left it open,” I admit.

She looks at me and says, “Oh, Mr. Schumerth.” And then again: “Oh, Mr. Schumerth.”

I apologize, again feeling like a child.

Dr. Smith waves me off and leads me down the hall. She shows me to a classroom I can use for today. I look around at this virtually-untouched space: none of my posters on the walls, no writing utensils or books. Just a dry-erase board, desks, and the requisite technology. It will have to do. I ask Dr. Smith if there are any extra books anywhere. She leads me across the hall, keys into a storage room, and tells me to call if I need anything else. I'm on my own again. I find the fifth-grade books and lug as many as I can across the hall.

I'm surprised to hear a quiet voice call out from behind me: “Mista Schuma?”

I turn around, and there's Kayla. I start to ask why she's here already, but the truth is, I don't care. I could hug her. She asks me why our classroom is full of water. I ignore her question and ask if she'll help me get our new classroom ready. Pretty soon,

Lamaar is there, too, and others. With hardly any instruction on my part, we become a team: carrying books, adjusting desks, bringing undamaged items over from the wet classroom, communicating to confused classmates in the hallway. Without knowing the water incident is my fault, my students take pity on me or at least realize the gravity of the situation. They handle the adjustment so well that I wonder if they're used to this kind of unexpected chaos, and, like me, used to finding ways to make things work anyway.

## Chapter 4: Franklin

I've just rounded a hallway corner and entered the cafeteria when I see the fight. I'm seconds away from the brief solace of adult conversation and a snack in the teacher's lounge if I can just usher my students through the line for their plastic-looking rectangular pizza and pineapple in a cup. As voice levels increase, I pick up my pace. I zigzag through students like a running back dodging linebackers. A scattered array of spilled peas squishes underneath my foot. *There they are.* One student with bicep muscles that rip out of his Jaguars' jersey pummels a smaller student: short, tiny waves in his hair. The smaller student is bent sideways over the refrigerated crates of milk. He protects his face with his hands.

"Franklin' winnin'!" one student cries, and I'm thankful for his cue, because I haven't learned the fighters' names yet.

I grab Franklin and pull him upright, standing in between him and the smaller student. I spread my arms in each direction. That second of new life gives the smaller student renewed vigor. His fists shoot around and even into me. Franklin, whose punches actually hurt, gladly obliges in kind. Suddenly, I'm the main, albeit incidental, object of both children's rage. A sharp, stabbing pencil glances off my wrist, drawing blood. I look at the two cafeteria workers, dressed in white, and protected by a shield of glass and the food they're distributing. They look the other way.

After a few torturous seconds of helplessness, another first-year teacher, a converted Target manager, bullies her full-figured frame through the swarming group of

thirty-plus jeering students. She grabs the smaller of the two fighters. I take the opportunity to wrestle Franklin in the direction of the front office, through a cafeteria full of terrified younger students and teachers who are trying to reassure them.

“Drink your milk, Honey,” one teacher is saying.

Franklin, maybe five feet tall, continues to resist. His shirt is untucked, and he lost a shoe somewhere along the way. “He be sayin’ stuff ‘bout my mama!” he wails.

He doesn’t calm down until I’ve dragged him completely out of his peers’ sight. I don’t know it yet, but Franklin will become a microcosm for my first year of teaching. My work won’t all be breaking up fights, but we’ll live in the extremes, and I’ll find myself mostly reacting. Living and making decisions based on the immediate fires around me rather than acting from any real sense of long-term vision or plans.

Later that day, with everyone back in the classroom, we get our textbooks out. I have my students read aloud, one-by-one. Apparently it hasn’t occurred to me yet that this isn’t great teaching practice. We’re reading some story that no one in the room – myself included – cares very much about. When it’s his turn, Franklin looks down and shakes his head.

“Come on, Franklin, try it,” I encourage him. Nothing. “I’ll help you,” I say.

“Can’t we just skip him?” asks Lazaar.

In the moment, I ignore Lazaar’s comment. As I think back to my own elementary days and the discomfort of listening to students who wanted nothing to do with reading aloud, I recognize the sentiment. I grew up in a house full of books, and I can’t think of a time when decoding words didn’t come easily to me. I wouldn’t have dared say what Lazaar said, but I almost surely *thought* it. As such, it’s still difficult for

me to really understand the agony of a young student for whom reading seems next-to impossible.

I'm already frustrated with my inability to reach Franklin. And then, out of my mouth comes: "Come on, it's easy!"

I know immediately that I've made a mistake, but no one is prepared for what happens next. Franklin closes the book and pushes it off his desk and onto the floor. Then, he drops his head and rhythmically bangs it on his desk. Over and over. *Thud! Thud! Thud!*

"Franklin, I'm sorry," I plead. "You don't have to read this time. Please stop. You're going to hurt yourself!"

He doesn't stop. All the little heads in the classroom stare at Franklin. Lazaar, quite pleased with himself, is dropping his book to match the beat. A couple others join him.

"He crazy!" someone says.

I'm begging Franklin to stop now, but he ignores both my gentle and aggressive attempts at persuasion. I consider trying to physically restrain him. It's not like he and I haven't wrestled before. But this idea has lawsuit or getting fired written all over it. I imagine the headline: "Teacher bangs student's head on desk."

I'm out of options, or at least that's the way I see it, so I call the office and explain the situation. Dr. Smith comes up to save my ass again. When she opens the door to our classroom, she doesn't even have to say anything. As soon as Franklin sees Dr. Smith, he stops. Just like that. Sits up, eyes open and mouth closed, acts like nothing happened.

“Franklin, come with me,” Dr. Smith demands.

I’m relieved that the situation is over, but still, I wonder: why did an administrator have to come to my classroom to get it under control? Maybe this is the first time it occurs to me that the degree to which my students trust me is also the degree to which they’ll listen to me. But I still don’t fully understand why Franklin did what he did until a few days after the head-banging incident.

I stand in the front of my classroom, scribbling on the dry-erase board before dismissal. I read aloud what I’ve written, something about the option to meet me at McDonald’s on Saturday for extra help with reading.

“You goin buy us food?” Franklin asks from the front seat in which I’d placed him.

“You goin buy me food?” I ask in return. I haven’t quite caught on yet to the fact that fifth graders don’t respond all that well to my sarcasm. I pass out memos for parents with the same information I’ve written on the board.

On Saturday, I sit in McDonald’s and pick at a chocolate sundae. Tucked in the back of a crowded room, I put a stack of papers to grade on the table to my left and a pile of pale green story books to my right. The props are my emotional protection: this way I’ll look busy and purposeful in case none of my students show up. My advertised start time comes and goes, as does the ice cream. I ignore the grading. As I scrape up the last of my chocolate syrup, I start putting my materials back in the same maroon backpack I’ve been using since college. Before I can zip it up, Franklin bursts through the door. “Mista Schu-ma!” he cries and runs over with his feet pounding on the floor.

“Hey, Franklin,” I say, a little surprised. A woman follows behind him, wearing a green and purple track suit, as if she’s come straight from the gym. Her brown eyes convey warmth, but the kind that holds itself back until you prove to be a trustworthy person.

I stand up, introduce myself, and ask if she’s Franklin’s mom.

“God-mom,” she corrects. “Thanks for doing this. He needs a lot of help.”

“You goin’ gimme money?” Franklin asks her.

She smiles, pulls a five-dollar bill out of her pocket, and hands it to him. “Be good,” she says, and then she leaves.

Franklin and I walk to the counter, where we wait in line with weekend workers: landscapers, construction workers, janitors dressed in navy blue. I ask him what he likes to read.

“Man, readin’ so boring,” he tells me. “Can’t we just play on the playground?”

“Maybe after we read for a bit,” I say.

Franklin retrieves his cheeseburger, ice cream cone, and cup. He fills his cup with Coke from the fountain. We sit down. At Northern, most of our formal curriculum consists of non-fiction books, so I spread out a book about snakes, one about LeBron James, and a third one about President Lincoln. “Which one do you want to read?” I ask him.

He unwraps his cheeseburger and takes a bite. “Can I eat first?”

I relent, and we make small talk as he eats. When it starts to seem obvious that he’s stalling, I tell him to take his last bite; it’s time to read. He’s hesitant but pleasantly compliant.

“Let’s read this one,” he says, picking the Lebron James book. He opens to the first page, then pauses. “What’s this word?” he asks.

“Lebron,” I say.

“Dis’ one?”

“James.”

“Oh, dis about Lebron James!”

“Yup. You like Lebron?”

“He aw’right but Kobe better.”

I resist my urge to argue basketball with him. “Keep going,” I say and point to the book.

“What dis’ word?” he asks again.

I look at the book. The word is “is.” I study Franklin’s face. He appears to be concentrating. *How did he get to fifth grade?* Before this moment, the “achievement gap” had been a theoretical concept. I knew that poor and minority students perform significantly lower on tests than their wealthier (and whiter) classmates. I knew that national graduation rates for African-American males hovers around 50 percent. I knew that many of those graduates read at an eighth-grade level, and that many of those who drop out of school end up in prison. I also knew that so many students like Franklin come into schools with vocabularies that consist of thousands of words less than their more privileged classmates, and that the demographic most likely to repeat a grade in elementary school is the black male.

In other words, I’m well-versed in conversations about systematic injustice. Surely, students like Franklin are a result of our nation’s long romance with racism. But

encountering the reality face-to-face – to really see and experience it like this – feels so much different than reading or talking or theorizing about these things. I’m overwhelmed with sadness, and I feel the weight of the task I’ve committed to. The truth is, I have no idea how to really help Franklin. Soon I’ll discover that he has an individual learning plan and a special education designation, but even so, what can I give to Franklin that the others in his life haven’t been able to give him yet?

In the moment, all I can think to say to him is: “How about I read to you today, and we’ll work our way to you doing the reading?”

## Chapter 5: Showdown

I've seen several of the breaking-the-colts scenes in teaching movies. You know the ones: *Stand and Deliver*, *Dead Poets' Society*, *Freedom Writers*. I'm waiting for my opportunity, so when I see Lamaar on the basketball court at recess, I watch him shoot. After he clanks a few shots by himself, I stroll over. *This is my moment*. Teacher earns cred on the basketball court, turns troubled student around, and the crowd goes wild.

"You think you can beat your teacher?" I ask him.

"Easy," he laughs. "You wearin' church shoes!"

I look down at my feet and can't argue. But as a former high-school basketball player, I'm still confident in my abilities to beat a fifth grader. I roll up my blue-and-white-striped dress shirt, ready to go.

"I'll make you a deal," I say. "I'll play you to five, and if you win, you get to pick out of the prize box. How's that sound?"

He nods. "Okay."

"But if I win," I continue, "then you have to start listening to me and getting your work done."

Nothin' like a little bribery.

He laughs again. "That ain't gonna happen, though."

It's my best guess that Lamaar's lack of intimidation is sincere. He really can't imagine me being competent on a basketball court. And this oversight plays right into my hand. "Do we have a deal?" I ask.

“Deal,” he says.

I let him have the ball first. Like a hustler in *White Men Can't Jump*, I stuff his first shot attempt and take possession of the ball. From the top of the key, I cross over and easily make a left-handed layup. My lead, 1-0. On his next possession, I let him get a shot off, but with my hand in his face, the ball bangs off the backboard. I snag the rebound. This time I pull up from about ten feet, miss, but follow my shot for a tip-in: 2-0. I'm enjoying this way more than I should be. It's cathartic. Maybe I should do this every day, knock these kids down a few pegs.

By now, Lazaar realizes he's outmatched. “You play basketball?” he asks.

“Not much anymore,” I tell him.

The rest of the game plays out the same way it started. Maybe I let him score once, but I have no problem beating him. I'm so pleased with myself that when recess ends, I feel ready for my next genius teacher move. At our school, an outdoor hallway cuts through a newly-landscaped courtyard, and we line up together under the green canopy that marks the path. My class is getting better at actually sitting in their seats in the classroom, but the lesson doesn't necessarily translate to places like hallways and buses and cafeterias.

“If we can't walk quietly together,” I warn, “we're going to stop until we get it right.”

We start walking, which serves as an invitation for three or four students in the back to begin their own conversation. It's a natural enough instinct. To make matters worse, though, the students are so involved in their conversation, that they stop moving and create a gap between them and the rest of the line. Franklin wanders into the yard to

check an extra shirt that had been cast aside during a football game. Lamaar turns around and socks a classmate and then takes off running with the other student following close behind. Apparently he has already forgotten about our “deal.” He probably has to have a short memory, anyway.

But all this chaos makes me look bad. I don’t know why teachers develop such a controlling outlook on life, but a lot of them do, and I’m no exception. I want order, beauty, perfection. I want teachers to look out their windows and think that our line is the best class line they’ve ever seen. The problem is, my students won’t cooperate with my scheme.

Stop!” I yell. I’m loud enough to distract a class of first graders that sits in a circle closer to the building. About three fourths of my class stops. One boy walks right into the girl in front of him.

“What’chu doin’ boy?” she cries. “Watch whe’ yo’ walkin’!”

“Who you think you talkin’ to?” the boy shoots back.

“We’re not going to move until we’re quiet and together,” I’m saying again. A couple students laugh. The students in the back of the line finally catch up to the rest of the group. Lamaar and his opponent are still off on their own.

“You guys better get back in line or you’re going to have a lot of angry classmates!” I say. They seem unconvinced.

“I got asthma,” one student explains. “I can’t be out in this heat.”

I can’t resist. “That didn’t seem to bother you during recess.” There is always the hope that solid reason might correct a fifth grader’s thinking.

“I’m gonna tell my mama,” another student threatens. “She goin’ call you and cuss you out!”

This time I withhold my inclination to argue. I stare, straight-faced, at the line. I pace back and forth like a commander in the army. And that’s probably how my students see me at this point, except I have a lot less power, and I have not yet won the respect of most of my soldiers. I keep barking the same mantras, though. We’re not going to move until...blah blah blah.

“I hate this school,” another student informs me. “I’m gonna sue if you don’t let us go inside.”

It goes on this way for a half hour or so. *These colts just won’t break.* When I – instead of my students – finally relent, we move into the building and finish our day together. I feel defeated. There are blocks, miles, whole states, nations, oceans between my students and me. We’re on the verge of an insurrection. I make more idle threats; I throw worksheets at them, anything to move the clock forward. I’m everything I always hated about some teachers.

Luckily it’s an early-dismissal day. We have them every-other Wednesday, so we can get our faculty meeting and professional development time in during our union-mandated contract hours. When the bell finally rings, I usher my students off to their parents or after-school programs and join the rest of Northern’s faculty in the school library on the first floor. I sit with two other Teach For America colleagues who teach fifth grade on the opposite side of the upstairs hallway. Shivaun is a tall brunette from Wisconsin. She teaches language arts and – bless her heart – keeps trying to work with me on the planning of lessons and units. The problem is, I can’t seem to plan more than

one day ahead, which doesn't exactly lend itself well to collaboration. Christy hails from New England and teaches math. Both Shivaun and Christy are in their early-to-mid-twenties. Before the meeting starts, the three of us swap "war stories" about our classrooms.

Dr. Smith calls the meeting to order. Our school's union rep – a teacher from one of the lower grades – joins her in the front of the room. The two of them discuss a decision we need to make together. Breakfast in the cafeteria has apparently been a disaster. Everything is disorganized, there are too many kids down there, food gets thrown, no one cleans up, and cafeteria workers are complaining. A duty roster is inevitable unless we vote to take on a program called Breakfast in the Classroom. If we take the program on, a breakfast will be brought around to each class, every day, where it will be served as soon as the bell rings to start the class day. Today we're going to vote on whether or not to take that program on. That this program is going to ask for more supervision and clean-up by teachers is enough to irritate me, but I'm also bothered by something else. The two women who lay this dilemma out for us are kind of hem-hawing back and forth, stalling a little bit, using politicized, evasive language.

Something about it doesn't sit right with me, so I raise my hand to ask a question. "What will happen if we vote this down?"

The answer confirms my fear. In so many words, the decision has already been made. If we vote Breakfast in the Classroom down, it will get implemented anyway. The vote is basically for documentation's sake. I'm sure this kind of stuff probably happens semi-regularly in the professional world, but it's new to me. This is one of those times when it feels, up close and personally, like a democratic system and process is for

appearance's sake only. A future colleague of mine refers to this kind of thing as “playing the game” or “the-dog-and-pony show.”

With the kindness Dr. Smith has shown me couple times already, I suppose I could let this situation slide. Is it really that big of a deal? But I can't get over how insulting the whole thing feels. I don't argue the point, as it's clear nothing is really up for discussion. Apparently my colleagues are less bothered than I am because the vote passes almost unanimously, despite my abstention.

## Chapter 6: Teach For America Takeover

It's a Friday after school when Ms. Mason, the teacher from next door, opens my classroom door, walks in, and sits down at a student desk. I'm back in my original room, which has been cleaned up. The window and technology have been replaced. Ms. Mason has been offering me before-and-after school counsel through my teaching woes, so a debrief isn't completely out of the ordinary. Today, something else is on her mind, though. Matter-of-factly, she tells me she is taking an administrative job at another school. Her new situation will work better for her disability, she says, as she won't have to be on her feet as much and climbing up and down stairs. Today is her last day at Northern, and a substitute teacher will be taking over her position on Monday until Dr. Smith can find a permanent replacement.

As she talks, I wonder if working with and depending so closely on someone who had no idea what he's doing contributed to her decision. At the moment, I'm simply unable to be happy for her. What the hell is going to happen to our fifth-grade group in Ms. Mason's absence? So far, she's been the only one keeping any kind of order. What I really want to know is: what are the ethics of bailing on students a month into a school year? Sure, I'd felt my own desire to get the hell out of here at times, but I haven't yet considered that as a serious option. I keep forgetting that I'm here by choice. That it's okay to take care of one's self. At my core, I'm envious of Ms. Mason. I want to ask if her new school has any other openings. I could use a new start. I don't say any of this, though. I just say congratulations and thanks for helping me.

She stands up slowly and says: “You’re going to be fine, Mr. Schumerth.”

If her statement is meant to provide conciliatory assurance, it fails. I’m not sure she even believes it herself. We’re a few weeks into a school year, my kids have yet to learn a thing, and now the only veteran teacher on the fifth-grade staff is ditching.

If I need to be reminded that I’m not the only one struggling, I hear swirling rumors about Teach For America teachers around the city. We’re far enough in that at least two schools have let corps members go because of their initial struggles. Two others – both of whom worked at Northern – have chosen to leave the program. One is going to take a job teaching LSAT prep back home in Maryland and the other is going to seek recovery for a relapsing eating disorder. Other acquaintances of mine are drowning their sorrows and creating new destructive behavior patterns at the bars on weekends. “Work hard, play hard,” we say. Many of us are either gaining or losing significant amounts of weight. People tell me I look thin.

The remaining fifth-grade teaching staff gets called to the office after school a few days after Ms. Mason informed me she was leaving. We meet in a conference room adjacent to Dr. Smith’s office. We sit down at an oval table scattered with pens and Hershey kisses. A dry erase board filled with names and arrows hovers over us. The walls are still plain and blue, the same as they’d been when we arrived in the building for the first time. Apparently wall decoration hasn’t been a priority yet. The room is clean: one of the few rooms on which students have yet to leave their mark.

Dr. Smith sits at the head of the table, smiling. I sit across from Shivaun and Christy. The two of them live together in the same apartment complex as Rick and me. They seem to have developed a pretty good rapport with each other. Dr. Smith introduces

us to a fourth person in the room, an older woman named Dr. Badger. She is a recently-retired University of North Florida professor of education who is going to play the role of an upper-grades math coach.

Dr. Smith explains our current dilemma. There are two problems we need to address. The first is that Ms. Mason is gone and we need to replace her. Secondly, all four current fifth-grade classrooms are considerably over the state limit of twenty-four students in a class. Not only do we need to replace the only veteran teacher we had on our team, but we're also going to create three new fifth-grade classrooms. We have the space to do it, but we don't yet have the teachers yet.

Some of this new sounds goods: my class is going to get smaller and hopefully more manageable. Dr. Smith wants Shivaun, Christy, and I to choose four teachers in the school who we want to work with. We are going to pull them from within, from other grade levels, rather than hire from the outside. My first thought is that this approach is only going to create more vacancies elsewhere – shuffle the problem rather than solve it – but Dr. Smith anticipates the concern.

“Fifth grade is a testing grade,” she says, “so it's the priority. We need to move quickly. I'll hire new teachers for other grades.”

We start throwing around names. The truth is, we don't even know all the available options at this point. Mostly we know Teach For America teachers, so that's who we discuss. This doesn't seem to bother Dr. Smith; in fact, her instinct seems to be that we need crazy (my word, not hers) 23-year-olds who don't know any better in order to convince them to dive into the fifth grade a month late and still have their kids ready for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) by March. No one in the room

voices any concern about creating a teaching team with zero years of experience between the seven of us.

We settle on four names: Rick, my apartment mate; Diana, a white woman who lives with Christy and Shivaun; Weston, a guy who came to Teach For America from the University of North Carolina; and Kim, a slim black woman from Pennsylvania. Kim will take Ms. Mason's place as my team teacher. Just like the previous set-up, she and I will both have our own homerooms, but I'll teach reading to both groups, while Kim handles the math and science. Weston and Kim also live together, so we've effectively pulled seven first-year, Teach For America teachers who all live in the same apartment complex to make up the whole of the fifth grade staff. After Dr. Smith has a chance to deliver this news to the four others, it will be on the seven of us to divide the students up and send rosters back to her. I leave the meeting thinking this is going to be quite the story, one way or another.

Later that week, all seven members of the new Northern fifth-grade team pile into Kim and Weston's apartment. The room is sparsely-furnished, so I sit on the floor and look up at a few of my peers who sit on a newly-purchased leather couch. I try to gauge the four new team members. Are they upset? Stressed? Do they want to be here? Do they resent us for choosing them? But it's hard to get a read. No one is actively complaining, and everyone has their game face on. Those of us who have been teaching fifth grade already hold our rosters in hand. Others scribble names in notebooks. The conversation sounds like a bunch of little league coaches drafting their teams.

"I want John. You can take Jala; she's a great girl."

"What are we going to do with Charlie?"

“Jeffrey’s smart, but he’s got a little bit of an attitude.”

“Rick, it seems like you’ve connected a little bit with Alana in the hallways; why don’t you take her?”

It goes on like this for a while. I cross out names of students who get shipped out of my class. Those students are in for a surprise tomorrow. I keep Franklin, Lazaar, and Kayla. Are the students distributed fairly? For now, it’s impossible to know.

## Chapter 7: Field Trip

As planned, our new experiment begins the following Monday. In our first week together, our new teaching team gets to execute a field trip. We are told that the trip has been on the school calendar for months, and it can't be moved. Our destination is a marine biology center on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, about a half hour from school. On the morning of the trip, I meet Mr. James for the first time, a parent who has agreed to chaperone the trip. His son is in Kim's class. Mr. James is short, round, and has a shaved head. He wears a black shirt that says "security" on it. He tells me he works the night shift at his job but still finds a way to wear a smile and learn every child by name. Dr. Badger, the new math coach, is also coming on the field trip.

Our mass of eager fifth graders makes our way downstairs and out to the back of the school where buses wait for us. I give my students my best "Make sure you behave because you're representing aNorthern" speech, and then I follow them onto the first bus. I sit in the middle so I can keep a pulse on both the front and back. Once the bus starts moving, students open and munch on bags of hot Cheetos. I fear a mess but decide not to make a big deal out of it for now. I want them getting off the bus in good moods.

The students around me start peppering me with questions about my personal life. "Mista Schuma," Kayla starts. "How old are you?"

"How old do you think?" I ask.

They start guessing. Twenty, one says. Forty, someone else guesses. Thirty-two! I tell them sorry, but none of them are right.

They get bolder. “Do you have a girlfriend?” Franklin asks.

I tell him I don’t.

“Yes, you do!” Lazaar says. “I see you flirtin’ wid Ms. Martinez all the time!

I tell them Ms. Martinez is my friend. They aren’t convinced. And in fact, Lazaar is right that Danica – the girl I met in the computer lab back in Atlanta – and I *have* been spending time together. She teaches Spanish at Northern. She still has her boyfriend back in Texas, but the relationship is constantly rocky and she complains about him to me.

I decide it’s time to change the subject. “Have you guys been to the ocean before?”

“I been to the beach,” Kayla says. “Is that the same thing?”

I’m not sure, but I don’t ask her to clarify, and I say it is.

Lazaar and Franklin both shake their heads. “I’m afraid of water,” Franklin admits.

The conversation is so pleasant that we’re almost enjoying ourselves. I think my students have begun to believe that, for better or worse, I’m going to keep showing up, and this is no small thing to them.

The niceties dissolve, though, when we arrive at the science center. My class spills out of the bus like prisoners freed from bondage. Voices escalate as curiosity pulls the students in all kinds of directions. Bodies brush up against each other, and little spats arise. Three hosts – a balding, middle-aged man and two younger, women, all of them white – wait for us, looking terrified. We follow the staff members into a building that used to be a school. A hallway leads into small classrooms full of fish tanks, skeletons,

sand, diagrams, and captions. Windows on the far side of the building look out to the ocean itself.

“Don’t touch anything, yet!” the man, apparently the director, shouts, to no avail. “I need everyone in the hallway so we can give you directions!”

A few students move toward him, but most don’t. There are too many new things to see. The man looks in the direction of the other teachers and me and says, “If you can’t gain control of your classes, we’re going to ask you to leave.”

Part of me knows how he feels and doesn’t blame him, but there’s another part of me that is infuriated by the comment. *You enter into our world for five minutes and you’re ready to throw us out?* This is not the first or last time I’ll feel like this. The chances of outside people understanding our group at all, or even of trying to, seem slim. We’re “a threat” to the “peace” of their everyday lives and operation. The other teachers, our chaperones, and I circle our students and gesture them toward the hallway. We plead with them to be quiet and listen. The situation improves enough for the nervous man to give us instructions. He says not to touch anything unless we have permission. He tells us each class will be in a different room. As soon as he points us in the right direction and dismisses us, the chaos ensues again.

“They said not to touch that yet!” one student is yelling at another.

“I don’t have to listen to you!” the other shoots back.

“Stop that!” one of the female hosts is yelling.

I look over. Franklin has dunked his hand inside a tank, and he’s quite amused by it. Then he shouts, “Get your hands off me, Lady!”

Should I intervene or will that only make things worse? Before I can decide, I feel a little hand patting my arm. I look down, and there's Kayla. "Mista Schuma," she says. "Lamaar gone."

"What do you mean he's gone?" I ask.

She points toward the hallway. Just in case, I look around the room: no Lamaar. I'm scared to think of what might happen if I leave my students for a few minutes, but I know nothing good is going to happen with Lamaar out and about. I can only count on Kim and Mr. James to keep things under control while I go looking for Lamaar.

"Shit!" I mutter under my breath and start toward the door.

"Mista Schuma, I heard—" Kayla is saying, but I don't really care to hear her finish.

I move through the hallway and stop at a window to peer out at the ocean. Would Lamaar be bold enough to leave the building? But I only see waves crashing against sand and a few birds waddling around. No Lamaar. I turn around, open the front door, and look at the parking lot. A few idle cars, still no Lamaar. Then, I hear arguing voices from one of the rooms down the hall. I recognize Rick, Dr. Badger, another student, and Lamaar. I jog in the direction of the commotion.

"What are you doing?" I demand, when I finally see Lamaar. Rick is physically restraining him, while Dr. Badger holds the other boy. The rest of Rick's class huddles around one of the hosts, who's in the midst of showing them something. I'm admittedly not all that interested in Lamaar's explanation at this point. I just want him to put on his happy face and not embarrass us today. I tell Rick and Dr. Badger that I'll take the two boys outside and call their parents. I know that keeping them away from each other won't

be easy, but I also know they'll be way less apt to act out when they've lost their audience. It'll be quieter out there, and it might be a respite from all this mess.

We go to the bus. I don't know the other boy's name, but I've seen him around in the hallway back at Northern. The bus driver opens the door for us, and I apologize for bothering her. We're in need of a little timeout, I say. I tell Lamaar to sit in the back and the other boy to sit in the front. They listen. I'm learning that there are times in which strong commands work better than weak requests.

"What's your name?" I ask the boy in front.

"I ain't tellin' you," he says, sitting down. "You ain't my momma."

Hard to argue with that. "Well, maybe we should call your momma and include her in this conversation."

"You ain't got her number," he says. I hate that he's right.

I turn to Lamaar and tell him I *do* have his mom's number. I ask him to tell me what

happened before I call his mother.

"I ain't tellin' you nuthin'" he says.

"Okay, then," I say, pulling out my phone.

I dial the number, and it rings several times. I'm just about sure it's gonna go to voicemail when she picks up and answers. I tell her I'm Lamaar's teacher, and that I'm with her son who has just gotten into a fight with a classmate on the fieldtrip. I ask her if she'll speak to him about his behavior. She says sure, and I hand Lamaar the phone.

He listens for a moment. Then he cuts in: "Mom, Mistah' Schuma be lyin' on me! I didn't even do anything. This lil' boy hit me first!"

Lamaar's mother speaks again and Lamaar listens. Then, he hands the phone back to me. Lamaar's mother is still on the phone. She repeats what I've already heard from Lamaar. She's convinced of her son's innocence. "You need to learn how to keep your class under control," she tells me.

Before I can defend myself, I hear a click. "Hello?" Nothing. The line is dead, yet another strategy of mine a total failure.

I'm not sure what to do next, but the boys let their disagreement die. I get to almost enjoying myself as we settle into a morning of silence. Things are calmer here on the bus, life more manageable. The boy in the front of the bus falls asleep, and I'm tempted to nod off myself. I don't, but I've found a way to make it through today. Eventually, a couple students come and tell us it's time for lunch, and we join the rest of the rest of the group outside at picnic tables.

On the bus ride back to Northern that afternoon, I get to thinking about my own childhood interactions with adults. For too much of my childhood, I followed what I thought was an obvious contract: adults tell children what to do, and children listen. I thought it was my job to be compliant. I could read what the adults in the room – especially my parents – wanted and then give it to them the best I could. I earned high grades, played prominent roles on sports teams, and *mostly* stayed out of trouble.

But a few exceptions come easily to mind. There was that time I called my sister "stupid" and got kicked out of church-choir practice. There was that time a few friends and I threw rocks at a house next door during Vacation Bible School. Apparently the neighbors didn't like rocks being thrown at their house, because they called the church, and the pastor's wife and my parents gave us a good scolding.

Then, there was seventh grade. I don't remember too much else about what was happening in my life at the time; I just know that's when I really started testing limits. Mrs. Jacobson was my social studies teacher. My buddy Joe and I would have contests to see who could earn the most detentions from her. We talked to each other across the classroom, mocked Mrs. Jacobson's teaching, argued with her, anything to rile her up. Detention was totally worth the trade. She even sent to the principal's office one time.

Mrs. Jacobson was so sick of me by the end of that school year that she tried to charge me for the textbook I turned in. She said it was damaged, but it wasn't in the slightest, which is an assessment the principal agreed with when my mother met with her to discuss the charge. The charge got dropped, but in exchange I was given another detention to serve at the beginning of the following school year. That was a fine idea in theory, but it never happened. I viewed the exchange as a victory for the good guys.

Of course, there was also Mr. Sefchek that year, my soccer coach. He was the father of one of my teammates. Joe and I would show up late to practice on purpose and then half-ass the laps he made us run. The more he yelled, the more we laughed. We knew he wouldn't bench us for the games, during which we made a competition out of trying to pick up yellow cards. Hard tackles, barking at the referee: it was all in play. This was all well and good until Joe raised the stakes by snagging a red card early in one game and then of course I had to do follow suit.

On the bus, I make a mental note to find a way to send some sort of apology to Mrs. Jacobson and Coach Sefchek, but I doubt this is anything more than my current frustration speaking. I had expected that someday I would become an adult, and children would just automatically listen to me. Wasn't that what life was about? Except now I

have a classroom full of children who often *don't* listen to me. That fact pisses me off, but I have to admit that I recall my own childhood memories of rebellion pretty fondly. There was something so empowering about watching adults squirm because there was so little – short of emotional manipulation or physical abuse – that any of them could really do to control us.

## Chapter 8: Locked In

I read an article about a man named Salome Thomas-El. He is a middle-school teacher in inner-city Philadelphia who found success at his school by reviving a chess club. He teaches his students how to play and tries to instill in them the lessons the game might teach them about life. He encourages them to use their minds rather than their fists. It goes so well that his students start winning regional and national tournaments. I'm a recreational player myself and decide to try the tactic with Franklin, even though he's a little younger than Thomas-El's students. Why not chess as an entry point? Teach For America might call this strategy of mine "investing" a student. I decide it's worth a try.

Franklin is still getting in way too many fights during the school day. Like Kayla, he usually stays for the after-school program. I learn that I can sign him out of the program and take him up to the classroom if we devote our time to academic purposes. We've already started doing this to work on his reading, so I just add chess to our routine. Even though he's so far behind, he works on his reading the same way he fights: with a dogged determination that I wish some of his classmates possessed. Franklin has no idea how to play, but he's willing to learn.

"What the castle thang do again?" he asks.

"Moves in straight lines, as many spaces as you want it to," I say.

"And the horse?"

"It's called a knight."

"But what does it do?"

“Moves in an L-shape.”

For all the game’s complexity and nuance, Franklin shows some aptitude for it. He carefully considers each move, and I recognize the beginnings of a forward-thinking strategy. He doesn’t beat me, of course, and I don’t let him, but he improves and seems to enjoy it, and that’s enough for now. The two of us engage in conversations that make me feel, for a few precious minutes, like we’re not adversaries. “Misa Schuma, you got any food?” Franklin asks me with a big grin on his face. “I see you be eatin’ candy during class!”

Who could turn that down? Like so many of his classmates, I’ve learned that Franklin is quite pleasant one-on-one when he’s not trying to impress and perform for his peers. And when he’s receiving the attention he wants from an adult. I ask him which of the three schools he came from last year, and he tells me. He says he had to switch schools that year, though, because he got in trouble. Imagine that. When I ask him what happened, his tone changes. He gets quiet and looks down. I’m not sure if he’ll tell me or not. “You don’t have to say,” I assure him.

But he seems to want to. He tells me I can’t tell anyone else about this, but he hangs out with his older brother – he’s in high school – and his friends a lot. A while back, they asked him if he wanted to try smoking weed, so he did. Then they just kept doing it until he got caught with the substance at school. “Now I want to stop,” he says, “but I can’t.”

I’m not sure exactly what he means by not being able to stop, and I don’t ask. I ask him if he ever has pot on him at Northern. He says no, but sometimes he smokes before he comes to school in the morning. I am struck in this moment by my own

naivety. Here is a boy who has basically told me that sometimes he comes to school high. I, of course, had no idea. Sure, I've been to a few parties where people toked up, and I've even taken a few puffs myself, but never enough to get much of a high. Then there was also that time at boarding school when I gave a presentation on marijuana for a health class. I tried to stick to the research, but my partner went off the script and made the claim that he could run faster after he smokes pot. I was annoyed and embarrassed then, but now I want to go and wring the necks of the boys who have a ten-year-old smoking the stuff. And yet, I also can't escape the fact that this is just one of the ways Franklin has found to cope with a learning disability, the difficulty of reading, fights at school, and whatever goes on at home.

Is Franklin's admission a cry for help? The responsible thing to do would be to tell Dr. Smith as soon as possible. Maybe involve a social worker and get this boy some help. But I don't do that. Maybe it's because I've got so many things going on or maybe it's because I fear that no one will do anything if I tell them. Or maybe it's even because I want to honor Franklin's request for confidentiality. Regardless, I keep the conversation to myself, a decision I'll regret for a long time.

The next morning is a Thursday and the last day of the fall grading period. For the first time in my life, I will be giving grades rather than receiving them. I try to glance discreetly at Franklin's eyes, but they look normal. Would I be able to tell if they weren't? We're in the middle of a reading lesson when we get interrupted by a P.A. announcement. "Code Red, Code Red!" Dr. Smith says. "Everyone, stay in your classroom and do not, under any circumstances, leave your classroom or the building!"

And that's it. No further explanation. Maybe it goes without saying that it takes a lot less than this to distract my class's attention from a reading lesson. Anything to divert our attention, to argue, to play, to be somewhere else but here.

"What's gonna happen?" Kayla asks.

I have no idea. I've never experienced something like this before. I think back to eighth grade when a P.A. announcement at Culver Junior and Senior High School in Indiana told us about the massacre at Columbine. We shared a moment of silence for the community. Could something like that happen in elementary school? I don't know.

"My momma warned me about this school," Lazaar says.

"This happens every year," Franklin says. "They always be freakin out about somethin'."

His explanation seems to represent the class's perspective as a whole. What would it be like to grow up in a situation where you get used to school lockdowns? Dr. Smith announces the "all clear" before lunch. And after dismissal that day, she calls the faculty back down to the library to explain what happened. She told us that at recess a student had seen someone with a gun near the school. That student told her teacher, who told Dr. Smith. The police were called, and when they came by to investigate, they found a man nearby who fit the description. The police searched the man, and he did, in fact, have a gun on him. Then, they arrested him for carrying so close to a school. Despite any mental worst-case scenarios we could concoct, protocols had been correctly followed and a potential crisis averted. "The system" had worked. Dr. Smith congratulates us for doing our jobs every day, even when we don't get recognized for it.

I run into Danica after the meeting. She asks me what I'm doing tonight. Teachers have to come in tomorrow to turn in their grades. Students have the day off. The weather is perfect outside – almost sweatshirt weather – and teachers who have worked ahead can basically consider tonight a weekend. That club does not include me. A Bible-sized stack of ungraded papers has piled up in the back of my classroom. I tell Danica I have to stick around at school to work. She says she doesn't have any plans and asks if I need help. Obviously, I'm not going to talk her out of helping me, so I say sure.

Up in my classroom, she takes one look at my room and laughs at me. It doesn't help that raisins are scattered all over the floor and books opened face down on desks. Kayla and I hadn't had time to clean things up before the faculty meeting. "Schumerth, you have got to be kidding me," Danica says. "You're bulletin board is by far the worst in the school!"

"Yeah," I say. "It hasn't exactly been the priority."

I hand her an answer key and a pile of papers and we dive in. I turn on the stereo and Amos Lee's soulful lyrics belt from the room's sound system.

Who's bold enough to believe  
In either love or war?  
Both just leave you busted  
and broken down

It gets dark outside, and we order pizzas and Cokes in from a Domino's down the street. We catch up on the latest news about her boyfriend and craziness in our classrooms. She tells me about a disturbing incident in which she walked into a school bathroom to find two first-grade boys in the beginning stages of stripping a female classmate. We shudder at what behavior these students must have seen elsewhere and are now imitating.

Don, the school custodian, opens the classroom door and enters with his back to us, pulling a cart with a small trashcan, a broom, and a variety of cleaning materials on it. He's a short, balding, Hispanic man with a mustache. Maybe in his fifties, he wears jeans with holes in them. During the school day, he doubles as a security guard. In the room, he turns around and surveys the damage before greeting us.

“Schumerth, your kids are killing me! All these raisins ever-where.”

I tell him he can thank the Breakfast-in-the-Classroom program for that. I'm still bitter about our figurehead vote. “Can't your students eat them instead of throwing them all over the place?” he asks.

“You would think.”

I have no answer for him, of course, except that I haven't quite mastered that teacherly skill of getting my students to do what I want them to. He asks us to move the desks out of the middle of the room so he can mop the floor. Danica and I stand up and drag desks to the room's perimeter. Don uses a large push broom to sweep all the raisins into a pile in the center of the room. “Well, don't just stand there!” he says. “Why don't you guys spray down the desks?”

He points to a spray bottle and rags on his cart. We comply, and, in fact, I welcome the change of pace from grading. When we finish, the three of us pull the desks back into rows. “What are you guys still doing here, anyway?” Don asks us.

“Grades are due tomorrow,” I explain.

He puts the rags and broom back on his cart and walks toward the door. But before he leaves, he smiles and says, “I'm gonna dance at y'all's wedding someday.”

Despite Danica and my best insistence otherwise, Don (and Lamaar) are not the only one around the building who thinks Danica and I are dating. We haven't even so much as kissed or spent a night together, but outside of work, she and I have been seeing movies together pretty regularly. I play replacement boyfriend, and she helps me keep my shit together enough not to get fired. She is a detail person, and I'm a big-picture person: a match made in dependency-relationship heaven.

After Don leaves, Danica asks if any of my students are failing. As I answer, the two of us fill out forms that describe student work habits and ultimately insert letter grades at the top of scantron sheets. I've been thinking about Danica's question long before she asks it. I find this whole idea that I can quantify learning a bit problematic, but I teach in a system that seems to accept it. So what am I to do? I've decided that if I have to issue grades that they're going to mean something. Excellent work, discerned by me of course, will get an "A." Average work will earn a "C." No work at all equals failing.

I ask Danica if she knows Lamaar, and she says she does. They've had a few run-ins. I tell her Lamaar and a few other of his classmates are failing. Several weeks ago, I sent progress reports home with all my students with the instruction that they were to bring them back, signed by a parent. I hardly got any of them back. I fear that the response to official report cards will be completely different. I say all of this out loud, and Danica just smiles and shakes her head. Unintentionally, I amuse her. In theory, everything I'm saying sounds reasonable, but I know it is going to cause problems in practice. Battles loom.

Danica and I finish the work. It's finally time to call it a night. We start walking – with empty hands, for once – toward the front of the building. The hallway lights have

been turned off. Downstairs, even the administrative offices are quiet and dark. As we push the set of double doors outward toward the parking lot, a ringing alarm pierces our ears. We close the doors behind us, but the alarm is still sounding. We look around the parking lot. Our cars are the only ones left. Apparently Don and everyone else left before us. But why hadn't anyone checked to see if there were still people in the building? Or, per usual, announced over the P.A. system that the building was about to close?

Alarm dilemma aside, a black fence encloses the parking lot. There are three gates: one in front of us, one to our right, and one to our left. All three are locked. We have no way of getting out.

## Chapter 9: Meet the Parent

Danica and I do the only thing we can think of: we start calling people. I start with Rick and tell him what happened. He listens, asks a few questions, tries not to laugh. Both of us know he can't really do a damn thing to fix our problem. I'm not even sure why I called him, except that I didn't know what else to do, and I don't want to feel useless. Danica has Dr. Smith's number in her phone, which seems a lot more helpful. She calls the number, and Dr. Smith picks up. I listen in on their conversation, but can't quite tell if Dr. Smith is going to come back to the school to help us. Danica closes her phone. She says that a police officer will be here any minute to check out the situation and – hopefully – to let us out of the parking lot.

Less than a minute later, we see the flashing lights come around the corner. A labeled white car pulls up and parks near the front gate. A burly, black officer steps out of the car. We walk toward him and talk to him through the fence. It feels like we're in prison, totally at his mercy. We try to explain, and he just nods his head. He asks for our IDs. I dig my driver's license out of my wallet and hand it through the fence. He takes our cards back to his vehicle.

“This will be funny later,” I say to Danica.

She doesn't respond.

The officer returns to the fence. He fishes a set of keys out of his pocket and unlocks the padlock. “You guys can go,” he says.

We thank the officer for freeing us. Danica and I start walking toward our cars, but we both pause before parting. “Well, I guess I’ll see you later,” she says.

And that’s that. Our night is over. We drive back to our separate apartments. I’m not sure if I’m disappointed or not. I wish what I wanted was clearer to me.

The following Monday, Dr. Smith hand-delivers a stack of brown envelopes to my classroom. She tells me not to give them out until the end of the day, which seems like a good idea. I decide to use the report cards as a carrot to influence student behavior. Sometimes I think I’m getting the hang of this: you just have to dangle things a fifth grader wants in front of them. The trouble is, they’re always better at this game than I am, one step ahead. This time, though, my plan works with moderate success. The talking hushes, students sit up at desks, and pencils scribble.

When it’s time for dismissal, I say, “If you leave your area clean and line up quietly, I’ll hand your report card to you on the way out.”

This promise spurs a flurry of student activity: adjusting desks, picking up trash from the floor, erasing the dry erase board, placing books back neatly on the library shelves. They line up so flawlessly I want to take a picture so I can remember the occasion later. The façade starts to unravel, of course, as soon as I hand out the envelopes. Without fail, each student stops, tears his or her envelope open, and looks. The documents are full of jargon and graphs about which the students don’t care at all. In fact, they’re confused by it. My students look for capital letters, pure and simple. Some of those letters come from our language arts class; some of them come from other teachers and subjects.

For a few students, the occasion is a joyous one. “Yes!” they exclaim before running away.

“Man, you ain’t fair,” others grumble as they stomp off.

When it’s his turn, Lamaar opens his envelope and looks at it. The muscles in his forehead contract, and his eyes close halfway as he glares at me. “I hate you!” he says. “You a racist, and I’ma tell my mama to switch me to another class!”

I’m used to shoving how I feel aside in situations like this, but the words still hurt, even coming from a child. Doesn’t he know how hard I’m working for him? All I can think about is the Saturdays I’ve volunteered, the early mornings and late nights I’ve giving. But of course he can’t see that any better than I can see my own blind spots.

I have my teacher-ly response ready: “Lamaar, there’s lots of time left in the school year for you to—”

But he’s already out the door, back to me, with his hands over his ears. I don’t bother to finish my little inspirational speech. I tell myself you have to take a step backwards sometimes before you can go forward. That’s how it’s supposed to happen, right? Surely progress is right around the corner. Lamaar is going to figure out that I am his ally and that education is his ticket to a better life and all that. I have to tell myself this or there would be no reason to keep showing up every day. Still, I’m tired. Second-guessing myself. Wondering if I’m the worst teacher in the school. I walk back toward my desk and stop at the windows. I refrain from opening them, but I look out.

A baseball team from nearby Thomas Jefferson High School has started a fall workout on the field they share with Northern. They wear practice uniforms and smiles

and hold gloves and aluminum bats in their hands. A hefty coach, maybe 40 or so, and sporting a goatee, barks instructions. Players partner up to throw.

I start to daydream about how great high-school baseball was and would be again. In baseball, there is the beauty of home runs, double plays, and the suicide squeeze. But there's also the order of umpires, balls and strikes, three outs per half-inning. I decide that when compared to my first year of teaching, baseball is a little bit like heaven. Or at least it would be a good way to get through the year.

*I wonder if the team needs an assistant coach.* Just like that, the thought comes. Before I can act on this revelation from the divine, my phone rings. I pull it out of my pocket and check the caller ID: Shane, my brother. By now, he and a friend from college have moved into a shabby house rental near Shane's school. I helped move them in. They are the only white people on their block. I questioned Shane about the wisdom of this decision, and if he really knew what he was getting himself into, but he wasn't interested in my attempt to intrude. He used money as his excuse: the rent is cheap. This is Shane's way to survive. In his absence from my apartment, I've got my own ways of making it work: I've upgraded to my very own futon, which I now sleep on at night. It's a flimsy little thing, but I guess it's better than the floor.

I answer the phone. Shane jumps right in, no formalities. I suppose we're used to this kind of harsh communication with each other. He tells me he got robbed today and they're going to move to a different place that his landlord has for them. I question whether or not continuing to work with this same damn slumlord is really a good idea. He ignores me but tells me he needs my help getting the hell out of his place as soon as possible. He has already started loading shit into his little 1980-something, gold BMW.

He demands my assistance rather than asks for it, but I agree to help. I'll be over later, once I finish up at Northern.

I close the phone and put it back in my pocket. Then, I go downstairs and outside. I haven't forgotten about heaven. I put my elbows on the fence and watch practice. Skills are raw, but a few of the kids can really run and throw. When the coach dismisses the players for the night, I walked toward the dugout. I introduce myself, shake his hand, and tell him that I teach at Northern. His name is Don, he tells me. Up close, I can see that he has skinny legs but a belly that hangs over them. The kind of guy who looks great in baseball pants, in other words. I learn that he runs a tire shop down the street and used to pitch at Florida State. I tell him I've played a bit of baseball in my life and would love to help out if he needs an assistant. Does he need help? He says he has an assistant, but he's probably willing to volunteer, so he might be able to take me on. He takes down my number, and he says he'll be in touch.

I drive to Shane's place. When I get there, he and his roommate are moving stuff one item at a time. Shane's never been a big believer in boxes, bins, or real packing. As small as his car is, this effort is going to take multiple trips. It's already getting dark. I ask Shane what the thieves took, and he tells me his desktop computer and some musical equipment. Shane plays multiple instruments and loves technological toys. He always has an elaborate system set up to play and tinker with music. One of the reasons I refused to live with him is because he's not beyond singing exercises and/or guitar practice in the middle of the night. It's frustrating to no end, but I know his ways of dealing with life just happen to be different from mine. I ask Shane how the thieves got in and if he locked the door. The question is a bit of a dig, my way of communicating that moving him in the

dark is the last place I want to be tonight. An insinuation that maybe he is somehow at fault here.

“I’ll show you,” Shane says. We walk along the side of his house, and he points at a window that’s been broken.

I quit asking questions and say I’m sorry for his luck. I follow his lead and start hauling more shit out to the car. When his is full, we start filling mine. I’ve helped Shane move several times before, but this is the most focused he has ever been, the quickest I’ve ever seen him move in any context other than an athletic arena. It occurs to me that he’s probably scared, frazzled, and traumatized by this. Like me, he’s just trying to prove himself in the adult world, and, like me, he will be back at school tomorrow morning, trying to play it cool in front of kids. We don’t finish the job until after midnight. Shane and his roommate stay at their new place, an almost-rural house that at least looks like it’s in much better shape than the one they moved out of.

The next morning, I’m at school by the usual time. One of the ladies at the front desk stops me. She tells me Dr. Smith wants to see me before I go upstairs. I turn toward Dr. Smith’s office, and the woman mouths, “Good luck.”

I walk in the office where Dr. Smith sits at her L-shaped desk, protected by a fort of stacked books. Lamaar stands in-between her and another woman who can’t be more than a few years older than me.

“Mr. Schumerth,” Dr. Smith starts, “This is Lamaar’s mother, Ms. Wade.”

I hesitate, but she extends her hand, so I shake it. Our faces are blank, waiting for mediation. Dr. Smith says we can sit down, so I do.

“I’d prefer to stand,” Ms. Wade says.

Dr. Smith tells me that Ms. Wade came in this morning because she's concerned about Lazaar's grade. She assures me that she trusts me, but asks what I'm seeing from Lazaar in class. I tell them Lazaar is having some behavior problems, but mostly he just isn't getting his work done and turning it in.

"He be lyin'—" Lazaar cries.

"I told you to be quiet, Boy!" Ms. Wade orders. Then, to Dr. Smith and me: "It's pretty clear that there's a personality clash going on here. I want Lazaar switched to another class. I think he would do better with a black teacher."

The comment feels like a punch. Kim, the only black teacher in fifth grade, teaches Lazaar in math, but apparently that's not enough. I want to respond, to defend myself, sing my own praises, strike back. Dr. Smith beats me to it, which is probably a good thing for everyone involved. She does what every teacher wants her to do: she stands her ground, sticks up for her teacher, and doesn't let the parent control her.

"I think the better solution," she says, "is for Lazaar to start doing his work. Maybe we can find ways for the four of us to communicate better. Mr. Schumerth, have you been talking about these concerns with Ms. Wade?"

"I've tried," I say. "We've spoken on the phone."

Ms. Wade wants nothing to do with this conversation. "If we can't have him switched," she says, "I guess I'm going to have to look at other schools."

"That's certainly your prerogative," Dr. Smith says.

With that, Ms. Wade grabs Lazaar's wrist and yanks him toward the door. "He's coming with me for the day," she says.

In a better mindset or with some perspective, I might consider what Ms. Wade's own educational experiences have been like. How much racism has she encountered over the course of her life? Is she working two jobs? Working the night shift? Struggling to find work? Where is Lazaar's father? The truth, though, is that I'm just trying to get through the day. And I feel slighted and threatened by this woman who doesn't seem to like me very much. Lazaar comes back to class the next day and never does switch schools. I never hear from Ms. Wade again. She stops answering my calls, and eventually, I quit leaving messages.

## Chapter 10: Christmas Break

I'm blowing up at my students pretty often these days. I hear myself repeatedly yelling at and belittling children in a way I swore I never would.

“Sit down, Franklin! Lazaar, you have to turn in homework if you want to pass! Everyone should be reading right now! Kayla, stop talking!”

Sometimes the students listen; sometimes they don't, but who knows, maybe this is the sort of routine that would have made Ms. Morris, from the beginning of year, proud. I'm yelling at kids, just like she told me, too. Kim seems less impressed, though. Sometimes she comes by at the end of the day with a concerned look on her face and asks me what all the noise was about. I feel like I'm becoming a tyrant. My patience is non-existent, my sanity questionable, and my longing for Christmas break has become an obsession. I used to think I knew true longing for vacation as a student, but I had no idea. Counting down the days on a calendar is a given, but I also lie in bed at night and think about the break, how two-plus weeks off will be pure freedom, exactly what I need. And how I will scheme the perfect behavior-management system so that my students will start behaving like saints and how I will create a bunch of lesson plans, finally get ahead in the game, so that my class will become a learning laboratory like the movies and promotional videos. And I will rest, come back in January refreshed and ready to go.

That I have an active fantasy life doesn't necessarily suggest that everything about teaching is going badly. For all the chaos that ensues under my watch every day, Franklin and my chess battles have gained the envy of his classmates. Kayla and others want to

join and learn the game. A steady flow of five, six, or even as many as ten students begin to hang around after school. There are too many of us to play chess, so we pick up a stack of books and make our way through Katherine Patterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, a book I had read as an elementary student fourteen years ago. We sit in a group and take turns reading out loud. The reading levels of those who attend vary quite a bit, but after school there seems to be a culture of patience that doesn't exist during the school day. Kind words replace insults, and even Franklin gives reading aloud a shot with lots of (solicited or not) help from Kayla. I'm sure *I* let my guard down a bit, too.

After finishing individual chapters, we discuss the book. It's not exactly an urban classic, but it's about kids, and I promise that we'll watch the movie if we can make our way through the book. Mr. James even hears about our little group and stops by on occasion. Or sometimes Kim comes over and tutors students in math or Danica joins and gives Spanish lessons. We finish by cleaning the space up together. The time is so pleasant that the adults scheme and carry out secret, illegal field trips with our after-school crowd only: to a movie, to go bowling, or even to a play in the city. It feels exciting, and those afternoons help me hang on for the remainder of the semester.

When the break finally arrives, my mom, dad, and three younger siblings make the trip down from Indiana to see my Shane and me. I give them the tour of my apartment, and they are unimpressed with the futon, which is starting to bother my back. My parents must be in a better financial situation than they used to be because they immediately plan a shopping trip and buy me a real bed. I'm not complaining.

Shane needs some help, too. At his new address, he received notification that the house has been foreclosed. He only rents, so of course the problem is his the landlord.

Vacating again seems like the safe bet. Which means the whole family gets to move his stuff, item by item, across town and into a set of apartments on the West side of town. Not that anyone's counting, but he's now working on his fourth place to live in Jacksonville, despite the fact that he moved here just four months ago. It's annoying, but I know I'm as lost as he is, so I try to go easy. Maybe this is why other people in our lives treat moves across the country as a big deal, worth doing some planning for.

After the move is complete, we stay for a night in Jacksonville, then pile into my parents' van – in which I immediately feel like *I'm* the one who's ten years old – and drive south, to Daytona Beach. Daytona Beach is a popular spring-break destination full of miniature golf courses, under-21 clubs, and cheap hotels with paper-thin walls. Not exactly where most families go for Christmas, but my we land there because it's one of the closest places to Jacksonville that my parents can find to use their time-share. The weather is sunny, the temperature is in the 80s, and we have the beach practically to ourselves.

My mother, who has a degree in education and has taught and tutored over the years, often brings me reading material when we get together. Sometimes I want it; other times I don't. This time, she hands me a white hardback called *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire*. The book is written by Rafe Esquith, a fifth grade teacher in Los Angeles. I take one look at it and roll my eyes. Teaching is about the last thing I want to read and think about, and I'm not shy in expressing this fact to my mother. She proceeds to tell me I should read the book anyway, that I might be surprised.

I obey my mother. I sit outside by the hotel pool and read or, when I want to, I close my eyes and let my mind drift. The book transcends any cynicism that has

developed in me. This teacher seems legit. If his writing can be trusted, than his mostly English-second-language students read and act Shakespeare plays, solve high-school algebra problems, play and score baseball games, and read novels like *A Separate Peace* and *Catcher in the Rye*. His students learn within a classroom economic system that teaches them to budget, save money, buy property, and rent out desks. As a group, they travel to Washington, D.C. every year. All this in a struggling, public school, probably not too different from Northern, other than the fact that we live and learn on opposite coasts. Esquith's kids have performed their plays abroad; his teaching has won awards; he's been on Oprah. He has registered his classroom as an official nonprofit organization, so his friends can get tax breaks when they donate to his efforts. *Finally, someone who meets my standards for what teaching should be.* In addition, Esquith openly admits in the book that he occasionally ignores and resists administrative demands along the way. This is just the permission I'm looking for, and it comes from as close to a star as there is in the teaching profession.

I'm both fascinated and threatened by the book, which I read in two days. Back in our condo rental, I Google Esquith and come across an e-mail address for him. *What the heck*, I think, and I click on the link. I have nothing to lose. I type out a message explaining who I am, some of what I've seen in my first semester as a teacher, and say that I just read his book. Basically I vent at him, hoping he will understand.

Esquith and family aside, the break goes by too quickly. Before I know it, I'm at Northern again with Rick and Kim and Danica, waiting for the door to get unlocked so I can prepare for just a few minutes more before our students invade for the spring semester. It's a little colder and darker than it was at the start of the previous semester,

and I notice that none of us are as well-dressed as we had been back in August. Most of all, I know some of what's coming, which causes me to dread what's ahead a lot more than I had last time around.

Inside the building, I bump into Shivaun. It's been a very slow process, mostly because of my resistance, but we are learning to work together in ways that make our lives ever-slightly easier. Our conversation this morning isn't about planning lessons, though.

We exchange pleasantries and update each other about our breaks, but then she gets serious. "Chris," she says, "I need to tell you something.

"Sure," I say. "Go ahead.

"Over the break," she says, "One of my students' mothers complained about my teaching to Dr. Smith. She wanted her son switched to another class."

"Sounds familiar," I say. "Same thing happened to me."

"Sort of," she says. "Except Dr. Smith agreed to it this time. So you and Kim are going to have a new student this semester. His name is Charlie."

I know him, or at least I know of him. He is one of the few white students in the grade and has quite the reputation. But why the discrepancy of outcomes between these two comparative situations? As I think back to how strongly Dr. Smith held her ground with Lazaar's mother, I'm surprised. Why did she give in this time? Is Dr. Smith getting worn down by the school year just like the rest of us? Or might she have been subconsciously persuaded by Charlie's mother's race or Shivaun's gender? There's no way for me to tell.

I ask Shivaun to tell me a little more about Charlie. She tells me he doesn't get along very well with his classmates, and that he misses a lot of school. She also warns me that Charlie's mother will lie or do whatever else it takes for Charlie to avoid punishment and pass his subjects. None of this sounds the least bit new or original, but I'm still not looking forward to adding Charlie to my already fragile class.

I thank Shivaun and turn in the direction of my classroom. I open the door and walk across the room, toward my desk. I see two circular cracks in the window that was repaired a few months ago. *Bullet holes*. I can only imagine what might have happened, but I have no time to deal with the damage. Fifth graders will be coming in any minute now.

## Chapter 11: Baseball Season

Charlie is bigger than most of his classmates, about the size of Lazaar, and I'm grateful that the two of them are not in the same homeroom. Charlie is in Kim's homeroom, which means I have him during the afternoon. On his first day in our classroom, Charlie wears a baseball cap. I tell him to take off the hat, and he does, but it keeps magically reappearing back on his head. With stern looks and scolding, I pretend to care because it feels like I should set the tone early. Truth is, It's the least of my worries. I want to win him – maybe he did just need a change of scenery – so I try to be patient, even as he cracks jokes that lead his classmates astray while I try to teach. At the end of the school day, someone knocks on our door. I look out at a white lady who comes up to about my chest. She has brown, curly hair and is in her late thirties, maybe. She holds a tray of cupcakes in her hands. She introduces herself as Charlie's mom and tells me today is Charlie's birthday, that she has brought snacks so his classmates can celebrate with him.

I would have appreciated a warning. I think back to what Shivaun told me. It also crosses my mind that teachers at Northern have been instructed to only allow packaged snacks rather than homemade ones because of health and safety concerns. On the other hand, a snack break equals a teaching break, which sounds wonderful. It occurs to me that I'm already falling for this woman's games as I let Charlie's mother come in and disrupt the lesson by passing out her cupcakes. She stays through the bell that signals the

school day's end. After I dismiss the class, his mother tells Charlie to wait outside while she talks to me.

"Mr. Schumerth," she says, "I just want to let you know how much we look forward to having you as Charlie's teacher this semester. I think he'll do much better with a man."

I nod. Same move Lazaar's mother used, except this time the focus is on gender. "I look forward to having him," I say.

"I wanted to ask you about something else, too," she says. "I understand that you're going to be helping with the Thomas Jefferson baseball team."

Obviously this woman has done her homework. I had, indeed, been offered and accepted the assistant coaching position that I'd discussed with Don a couple months ago. It's only January, but with Florida's weather, we're days away from our first practice and a little more than a month away from our first game. What else does Charlie's mom know about me and in what ways will the information get used against me?

"Yes, ma'am," I say.

Charlie's mother asks me if Charlie can go to practices and games with the guys and me. It will do him good, she tells me, to spend some time with older men. He can be a manager or something. Apparently, he's already done this with the same school's basketball team, who are in the process of finishing their season. I tell her I'll think about the idea, maybe run it by the head coach, and get back to her. Part of me already feels like this isn't going to end well, but another part takes pity on this boy and mother who seem a bit desperate. You can't really blame someone for wanting their child to find some role

models, can you? I want to help the two of them out, but I fear becoming no more than a puppet, attached to this woman's little string.

A few days later, with our head coach's permission, I agree to the Charlie-as-bat-boy deal under two conditions: Charlie has to be in class, and he has to turn in his assignments. That is his end of the bargain. A day missed or an assignment left undone equals a missed practice or game. His mother assures me this won't be a problem. So Charlie follows me around on that first day of practice, a brisk fifty-degree day. Charlie seems to be one of those kids who assumes comfort and belonging before he has earned it. Probably a bit like me. After barely meeting the players, he chats them up like he's one of them. The starting second baseman or something. He pulls out a bag of sunflower seeds – which have become, much to my annoyance, a popular item in my classroom – and spits them all over the place.

Besides the coaches and Charlie, eight players show up for tryouts. I'm beginning to understand why the coach took me on as an assistant without even so much as a real interview. Our low number of potential players is a good reminder that this high school, though large, is located right down the street from Northern, and almost surely struggles with many of the same issues. Of the eight who are trying out, there is about a fifty-fifty split between black and white players and between lower- and upperclassmen. By my count, six of them carry themselves as if they have *played* baseball before, which is to say that they can catch and throw competently.

I watch the two who can't. As ballplayers, they're kindergarteners trying to be in high school, and they know it as well as anyone else does. Throws bounce in front of the other player or sail several feet over the intended target's head. On the rare occasion that

the ball arrives at its destination, it gets caught about half the time. This feels unsafe for everyone. I want to complete this very basic task of throwing and catching *for* these two players. Instead, I walk over, introduce myself, and try to demonstrate proper technique. The ones who really can play whisper to me later – as I watch them take hacks at balls on tees underneath the football bleachers – that the two new guys came out for the team hoping for a varsity letter to put on their jackets. They figured they would have a better chance to earn that letter in baseball than in more popular sports like football, basketball, or track. At the end of practice, our head coach, Don, tells the two who can't catch to take a hike and not to bother returning. It seems like a bold move for someone who can't even field a team yet.

“Basketball season just ended,” he tells me. “Some of those guys need a break, but they’ll be out here in a few days.”

His tone with the remaining players is a little different: “Guys, I don’t care what you have to do: make announcements, talk to players from other sports, whatever. But we’ve gotta have more guys. We have a game in less than a month.”

“Coach, I’ll get some guys,” Charlie pipes up. Everyone looks over at him.

After a pause, Don continues. “I’m serious about this, guys. We’ve got some talent, and we could have a good team, get some attention. Some of you guys could get recruited, play college ball. But it’s not going to matter unless we have at least nine players. So get busy, and we’ll see you tomorrow.”

The guys wander off while I wait with Charlie for his mother. She pulls up in a long greyish-looking car. I hope Charlie will get in, and they will drive off while I wave

goodbye. No such luck. The muffler grunts as Charlie's mother turns off the car. She steps out and walks toward us.

"How was he?" she says as if Charlie isn't standing right there with us.

"Ummm, good." I say. "No problems."

"Practice go okay?" she asks.

"Yes." I intentionally keep my answers short because I'm trying to avoid a long conversation. This woman seems lonely, and I don't want to get in the habit of being the one who becomes her buddy.

"Charlie, go get in the car," she tells him.

Charlie obeys without a word. Looking back at me, she says, "He really is a good kid. He's had it tough, though. It's been a while since I've seen his dad. We've had to move around a lot and he's had to change schools. He gets sick easily, too, and in fact he had ringworm not too long ago. When kids pick on him, he strikes back, but we're trying to work on that. Those other teachers he had before Christmas, they just couldn't control him. They weren't very good teachers; they just blamed him every time a problem came up. But things are getting better; it's going to be a good semester."

As I listen, I trust that her family has endured a world of instability, and even that this really is a mother's way of trying to love her child. It's sad that Charlie's father doesn't seem to be in his life, but unfortunately this seems like the norm for too many of my students. I expect that this won't be the last of Charlie's mother and her explanations as to why Charlie struggles and how somehow I'm going to be her child's savior. I hate that I feel so uncomfortable in this situation. Teach your child to read, sure. But to really stand in and feel the pain, the hopeless despair of someone's situation; it feels like too

much. I just don't trust myself not to get run over by this tiny woman. I take steps away from her, but she follows by taking a step toward me. Finally, I make an excuse about having to be somewhere, and I end the conversation.

After tryouts, our team secures a roster of eleven players, not including the two players – both of whom would have started for us – who had been declared ineligible because of their grades. I don't want to admit it, but my coaching commitment takes up more time than I planned for it to, and it all but kills my informal after-school program with my students. In another way, though, coaching accomplishes what I wanted it to accomplish. At least at first, it gives me something to look forward to during the school day. It feels good to be outside in the afternoon, running around a little bit, throwing batting practice, and jawing with the players. Our team wins our first eight games with ease. The teams we beat are a lot like us: city schools, mostly black players, barely enough players to field a team. One of our opponents erupts in a dugout fight with each other in the middle of a game.

As we start busing out to suburbs to play whiter teams, teams with pinch hitters and relief pitchers and backup catchers, something happens to us. We seem to simply accept that we're not going to win against teams like that. Or like our guys have come to believe the narrative that there are certain players and teams and schools that are "better" than they are in a sense so much broader than baseball. It is one more giant reminder of inequality, and how those realities inhabit our being, affects what we believe about ourselves and then becomes a vicious, self-propheying cycle. We boot routine ground balls, watch third strikes. Our pitchers can't find the strike zone. At first, we just lose a few close games we could have won, but it gets worse. Before games, our star players

step onto the bus with glazed eyes, and during games, they text their girlfriends while we get ten-run-ruled by one more team that's barely better than us.

It's not just the players either. As the losses pile up, the chances increase that Coach Don will look at me during our post-game huddle and say, "Coach, can you run practice tomorrow? I've got some stuff going on."

How could I possibly say "no" in front of everyone? I don't even feel confident enough in myself to confront him in private. So I agree to the role, but as the head coach goes, so, too, do some of the players. Sometimes we have six or seven guys show up for practice. I have them throw and hit and then release them after an hour. Hardly a winning formula, but I don't know what else to do. Some of my initial excitement about this gig is getting dashed.

Being around our team's attitude, losses, and drama affects Charlie. How could it not? He adores the players. Charlie's old patterns – missing assignments, bickering with classmates, cussing at and arguing with adults – return. He's having problems with Kim in math class, too, and sometimes he barges into our room when he's not supposed to be there. To keep my word, I disallow him from attending baseball practices and games when he pulls these stunts, but my moves don't seem to affect his attitude or behavior in any kind of positive way. I'm sure he's heard it all a dozen times before, and I'm becoming simply one more teacher who's "out to get him."

More than anything, absences pile up. Charlie misses school for days and then returns for a day or two – without any explanation – before missing another long stretch. He even misses testing days without knowing they're testing days. Charlie's mother comes around less frequently, too. The phone number I have for her has been

disconnected. Before too long, Charlie's failing my class, and that maybe I, like so many others in his life, am failing him, too.

By the middle of baseball season, our team is just trying to hang onto a winning record. One of my favorite players on the team is a guy named Darren. He plays left field and runs like Ricky Henderson, but he can't hit at all. Strikes out almost every time he's up to bat. He's only-a-couple-base-hits-a-season bad. But as a person, he's soft-spoken, polite, curious, and eager to learn. He comes up to my classroom before I make it out to the field, and sometimes I give him a ride home after practice.

At the beginning of one our games, I see Darren take his phone out and answer a call, which infuriates me. Darren of all players? Had he really stooped this low? Can't he understand that answering calls in the dugout doesn't cut it, that the game actually matters?

I stand up to confront him, but one of the other players steps in front of me. "Don't," he says. "It's probably someone calling about his sister. She's missing. It was on the news."

Coach Don overhears the conversation. "He's right. She's been gone for 48 hours. He can be on the phone as much as he needs to be."

I sit back down, embarrassed for being so out of the loop. *But wait, why is Darren even here?* How hard would it be to hit a fastball if you weren't sure you'll see your sister again? And had I thought I could escape the most difficult part of these kids' lives by simply transferring from the classroom to the baseball field?

“They found her,” Darren says after the call. He speaks the words generally, to anyone who’s listening. Almost everyone is. We exhale. A few guys pat Darren on the shoulder. We still get pummeled in the game, but the loss irks me less than usual.

Danica, who has broken up with her boyfriend by now, has become one of our regular fans. She’s in the stands for almost all the home games, this game included. She and I recently roadtripped to her home town of El Paso over our spring break, a trip I financed by pawning my high school class ring. I enjoy having someone around with whom I can talk about things, but the relationship still hasn’t turned romantic or sexual, and we haven’t committed to each other in any kind of strict or explicit way.

The players know who she is and like having her around but also use her as an opportunity to tease me. “Coach, you make a move yet?” one of them asks.

“Naw, he wouldn’t even know how to do that,” another guy says.

Maybe he’s right, although Danica and I have agreed to dinner at an Italian place after the game. At dinner, Danica and I talk about Charlie and about Darren and his sister. After those conversations die down, and we’ve finished our food, Danica gets quiet and looks down. One of her hands reaches up to twirl her shoulder-length, brown hair.

“Chris, something’s been on my mind, and I need to talk about it.”

“Okay,” I say, bracing myself. “Go ahead.”

“Is this ever going to go anywhere? Like are we going to be more than friends? I think about it a lot.”

I suppose this conversation was inevitable, but now that I’m on the spot I’d rather be about anywhere else but here. I suspect that if the two of us go in the direction of dating and a committed relationship, this will become just one more part of my life in

which I feel like I am failing, like I cannot be who someone else needs me to be. I won't have enough to give, and I won't be able to make right the fact that she's struggling through this year just like I am. But why do I feel so much responsibility for other people's well-being? I don't know, but the bottom line is, I don't feel like I can put much more into this relationship. I feel like the biggest jerk of all time when I admit that to Danica.

She winces, shifts her weight, and holds back any tears that might want to fall. "Okay," she says. "Sorry if I just made things weird. I hope we can still be friends."

I assure her we can, but there's nowhere for the conversation to go at this point, so the next time I see a waitress, I ask for the check. We part again in the direction of our own cars heading to separate homes.

The team finishes the baseball regular season with a .500 record and receives a surprisingly favorable draw for the playoffs. On the day before our first-round matchup, our third baseman – also a standout football player – decides it would be funny to tackle our catcher in the middle of a drill. Our catcher slams against the ground and breaks his wrist, season over. This would be less of a problem if we had any depth at all, but we don't, so in order to cover the position, we move our first baseman to catcher, and our third baseman over to first. Our best shortstop pitches that day, and our other shortstop plays third. This leaves us a quandary at shortstop, arguably the most important defensive position on the field. We decide to bring our centerfielder, the best athlete on the team, in to play shortstop, even though he has never played there in his entire life. A substitute plays centerfield. The experiment is a total disaster – errors everywhere – and we get beat by the mercy rule one last time.

## Chapter 12: Health Concerns

Like other members of the Teach For America corps, I have a quarterly “co-investigation” cycle. It’s basically one of the ways Teach For America provides continued professional development after we leave Institute. The cycle involves submitting plans and data to Betsy, my program director. She then comes in and observes a lesson I teach, and then we meet together to talk about what she’s seeing and what some next steps for improvement might be.

Betsy makes the process productive and unthreatening, but I still dress things up for her. What I mean is, I’m more on edge than usual, and I plan more carefully for this lesson than I do for others. I make sure the classroom is clean, and I warn my students that someone will come in, that they should be on their best behavior. I want to make a good impression so I can keep Teach For America staff members off my back. I don’t want Betsy to think I’m a lousy teacher. And yes, of course, these attitudes completely miss the point of a co-investigation.

During one such lesson with Betsy in the room, some of the usual takes place. Franklin calls out without raising his hand. Lazaar refuses to complete his assigned work. Kayla is a little over-helpful to the classmates around her, which annoys them. Someone greets Betsy and asks her if she is my girlfriend. But no fights break out. No one swears at me or at Betsy. No one storms out of the room. This is a relief if not a complete success.

Meanwhile, the FCAT is fast approaching for my students. The acronym has been drilled into our heads all year long, and despite my own vows not to, even I use the state standardized test as a motivational tool. My body even seems to grasp the importance of the test because lately it has forgotten how to sleep and digest food. My stomach aches and burns. At night, I shut my bedroom lights off and collapse into bed shortly after eating dinner. *If I could just fall asleep for a few hours.* Instead I toss and turn until I reach over to my nightstand and flick the light back on. I grab the book I'm reading: Donna Foote's *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach For America*. The story tracks four first-year Teach For America teachers in Los Angeles, and the material is all too familiar. Foote's words offer commiseration, catharsis, solace, and affirmation:

He had worried all weekend. He'd barely slept, and when he did finally nod off, he'd awakened with a knot in his stomach. He kept thinking about school, about the upcoming week, about the kid he had punished and the kid he had not. All the veteran teachers had warned him not to take things in the classroom personally. Well, for him that was impossible.

When I can't read anymore, I reach for my laptop. I log in and type in the URL for my blog. I fire off a post about teaching. It's full of misdirected anger and blame. If my students don't understand all this knowledge and these skills I'm trying to impart into them then maybe at least my audience of 100 or however many Internet users will see how much better things would be if everyone in this world just do things the way I want them to. By three a.m., I'm still trying unsuccessfully to sleep, so I get out of bed and grab the teacher's version of our class textbook. I leave my bedroom, turn on a light in our dining room, sit down at the table, and start working on an upcoming lesson plan. *No time like the present.*

I'm typing away when Rick stumbles out of his bedroom. "What the hell are you doing?" he says. He slips into his bathroom before I can answer. He doesn't say anything on the way back into his bedroom.

Later in the day, I tell Shane about the long nights and how sick I feel. His school isn't far from mine, but for whatever reasons, his first year has gone better than mine. He feels supported by his colleagues, and he says he likes his teaching load and students.

"You should see a doctor," he tells me.

One Thursday night, while dreading the prospect of another sleepless night, I heed Shane's advice. At about 10:00 p.m., instead of going to bed, I drive down the street to a hospital emergency room and fill out the appropriate paperwork. I've never done this before, and I don't know why I chose this method for getting my body checked out, other than the fact that it fits my overall lifestyle of impulsivity. The room is packed with people, many of them black. Kids and families occupy every chair in the waiting room. Others sit on the floor and lean with their backs against the wall.

I figure it will be a while, so I open my book and read some more from Foote:

Three months before, he'd been a party-loving senior at Boston College with a double major and great grades. Now he felt so...sad. Overnight he had gone from being a twenty-one-year-old kid with no responsibilities to a man who woke up before sunrise. The old fun-loving Hrag was gone. In his place was an overworked, stressed-out, lonely guy winging it as a teacher in a dysfunctional inner-city school thousands of miles from his home in New Jersey. More than one person had stopped to ask him what was wrong. He looked terrible. His hair was always a mess, his tie awry, his eyes heavy with fatigue behind his thick glasses. It wasn't just the hard work and the long hours that bothered him—or the fact that he had no girlfriend at a time when he needed one most. It was the idea that if he failed, it wasn't just him. His kids failed, too.

It's after midnight before someone calls my name. I look up. A young nurse in sky-blue scrubs leads me through the hospital maze. I smell all kinds of aromas: cleaning chemicals, stale coffee, bodies. The nurse points me into a small room enclosed by a

curtain and tells me to sit on the bed. She asks me a few questions while taking my temperature and measuring my blood pressure. She hands me a gown and tells me to change into it after she leaves. She also gives me the remote for a little television that hovers in front of me. I don't turn it on. Instead, I struggle to put the gown on. *Which way goes in front and why do I feel so naked in this thing?*

A doctor – tall, probably in his forties – walks in. After an obligatory introduction, he tells me to lift my shirt up. I explain my symptoms as he presses on different parts of my abdomen. He asks me about my sleeping, bathroom, and eating patterns and scribbles a few notes down. He leaves without much speculation as to what my problem might be.

The nurse returns and tells me to follow her to an x-ray room. In a dark room full of machinery, the technician snaps shots of me while lying on my back, lying on my stomach, and standing up. Then, the nurse leads me back to my room and leaves me there. I try to sleep. The doctor comes back in and tells me the x-rays didn't show much and that a CAT scan is the next logical step. I've never had a CAT scan, but I have had several MRIs for knee injuries, so I get the basic idea: lie still in a small tube that's shooting toxic rays into your body to figure out what the hell's going on.

The nurse pulls out a needle to inject me with dye that will make my insides more visible during the scan. I make sure to announce that I hate needles, then I look away while she pierces my lower arm. It's been hours since I parked my car at the hospital, and in just a few hours, I'll be greeting my fifth graders. I decide that someone needs to invent fast-medical-care so we can get diagnosed as quickly as we can get a Big Mac.

The nurse leads me to where I'll get the CAT scan. This room is larger and better-lit than the x-ray room. More medical personnel introduce themselves to me, but I quickly forget all of their names. Someone tells me to lie down on my back on top of a shiny surface. I place my feet near a daunting cylinder-like machine that's barely larger than my body. They hand me a set of headphones and tell me I'll hear music during the scan. They push me forward and tell me to be as still as possible for a half hour. With my hands at my side, and only my head emerged from the tight-fitting tube, I lie there, bored and so tired. I'd rather be in my own bed, sleeping. While I'm at it, I want the school year to be over already and for my kids to have learned how to read on my watch.

After the scan, I'm sent back to my little room. The nurse comes back in and admits they still have no idea what is wrong with me. "We've decided it's best to admit you for the day."

Panic grips me. I have no plans in place for a substitute, and I strongly prefer to plan for my misses. "I can't do that," I inform her. "I have to teach in a few hours."

She looks at me. "You can't miss a day?"

"Not right now," I tell her.

"Okay, suit yourself. The doctor will be in to talk to you soon, then maybe we'll release you."

The doctor comes in and suggests I try a combination of laxatives, probiotics, and more fruits and vegetables. The lack of clarity after a night of tests is exasperating, but at least the doctor finally lets me leave. I glance at my phone: it's about 5 a.m.

At school, I bump into Danica. Things had been a little awkward since our dinner conversation, but she doesn't act like she hates me, and I consider that a victory. I explain how I'd spent my night.

"Chris, you're probably just stressed," she says.

"I'm not stressed," I say, annoyed at any sort of suggestion that this whole thing might actually be getting to me.

I'm a zombie for most of the school day, but I make it through. After school, I have a follow-up meeting with Betsy to conclude our co-investigation cycle. I drive downtown to meet her at our corporate Teach For America office. I find a place to park that doesn't require me to pay. I'm running a few minutes late, though, and as I'm trying to grab all the appropriate paperwork, I leave the keys in the ignition. I get out of the car and realize what I've done just after I flip the lock up and shut the door. I have no choice but to go inside and deal with this new crisis later. When Betsy asks me how I'm doing, I don't say anything about my worries about the FCAT or my physical health concerns – I still don't want her to think I'm anything but the first-year corps member who has his shit together – but I do tell her I just locked my keys in the car. She doesn't let us continue until I've found a staff member in the offices who has Triple-A and lets me use her account to get someone who can help heading our way.

Then Betsy and I dive into conversation about her observation and the data I have for how my students are going. We talk specifically about the skill of "checking my students' understanding." The right questions to ask and who, when, and why to ask them. She gives me a few resources to look at and suggests I start scripting some questions out for my lessons. Her suggestion seems doable. We get a call that the Triple-

A guy is here to unlock my car. Before I go, Betsy reminds me about a dinner with potential Teach For America donors the following week and asks if I'd be willing to give a speech. I agree to it, even as I know this will be just one more thing to do. I ask her what, exactly, should I talk about?

“I don't want to be too specific in telling you what to say,” she answers. “I know you're a writer, and you'll come up with something good. Just tell them your story, how you got here, what you've seen so far. Send me a draft when it's ready.”

I say goodbye, and the Triple A guy helps me break into my car. It's finally the weekend. With any wisdom or self-care, I would spend a lot of time in my bed, trying to get healthy, and mix in some speech-writing breaks. Instead, I drive six hours one way to Charlotte, North Carolina, to spend the next forty-eight hours with Neal, my friend and former roommate in D.C. The same Neal who wanted to know why I was applying to Teach For America. He's on leave from his Naval term in Japan. We tour downtown, hit the batting cages, play H-O-R-S-E in his driveway, and eat at Bojangles. All I want is to feel good for just a few hours, but I still can't sleep at night, and my body has no idea what to do with the grease I've just fed it. Is this what heartburn feels like? Do I have an ulcer? Whatever the problem is, I just want to know!

## Chapter 13: Testing

Back in Jacksonville, I have a speech to write. I sit at my dining-room table and hammer away on my laptop. In this speech, I want to do what Beth suggested, which is show how I found my way to Jacksonville as a Teach For America corps member, leaving out the part about trying to prove myself to an ex-girlfriend. But I also want to be honest about how hard this work is, that I have moments of despair, and yet, I keep going because it still feels important, because my students deserve teachers who don't give up on them. I say that our training had been rigorous, but that nothing externally can really prepare you for the first time a ten-year-old cusses you out in class. I frame my message with song lyrics from The Fray: "Sometimes the hardest thing and the right thing are the same." The words come freely because they accurately represent what I think and feel.

I type my last sentence, save my work, and e-mail the draft to Betsy. She replies quickly, saying she loves it but needs to pass it on to her supervisor before she can give the official thumbs up. I don't hear anything further about the speech until the day of the event.

When I check my phone after school, I have a voicemail from Betsy. "Hi Chris," she says. "I just wanted to talk to you about your speech. There's one thing I'm concerned about. Let's have a quick conversation before dinner tonight, okay?"

I call Betsy back, but she doesn't answer. I leave a voicemail asking what we need to talk about. I'm wondering why this conversation has to happen so last minute. And why do we have to talk about this when everyone else is around?

I shower and throw on some dress pants, a shirt, and a tie. I'm running late. I drive by myself, with Mapquest directions in hand, to a better-than-chain-but-not-quite-luxury hotel. I look for and find a spot in a parking garage. I ask a man in the hotel lobby where the Teach For America event is, and he points me in the direction of a ballroom. I'm relieved when I see friends and colleagues standing in line at a check-in table outside the room. Betsy sees me approach and comes toward me.

I ignore her warm greeting and launch in. "So what's the concern?" I ask.

"Well, there's one line," she says.

"Let me guess," I say. "The line about getting cussed out?"

"Yes," she says.

I shake my head. I'm exaggerating everything in my head, deciding I've going to have to resort to playing used-car salesman, which I hadn't signed up for. Why hadn't Betsy said this a few days ago so we could have a real conversation about it? This will be my only time in two years that I get upset with Betsy, the consummate professional, more an expert than almost anyone I work with, in or outside of Teach For America. She cares about kids, and she makes an effort to get to know the corps members under her supervision. She also senses my anger, and she seems far from her comfort zone, like this is about the last conversation in the world she wants to be having at this very moment. Best I can tell, this stance is almost surely coming from above her anyway.

Still, I can't resist getting on the high road for just a couple more minutes before I submit because it's my only option. "So we just go around telling half-truths?" I say.

Oh how quickly I've forgotten about my own "tidying up" for Betsy during the co-investigation process. Anything to look good, to hide the uglier parts, to make her

think I had things all figured out. And come to think of it, maybe that's really why I'm angry anyway. I've heard it said that when we react negatively toward other people, it's often because they've reminded us about parts of ourselves that we don't like. Maybe this is why I write memoir because I *do* think the whole, messy truth is more compelling than marketing copy. But that doesn't make me beyond my own performing and posturing.

As she always seems to be, Betsy's response is gentle and disarming, vulnerable even. "I've got mixed feelings about this," she says. "We've got to be careful that people don't walk away hearing and seeing only one image of our kids."

I wonder why we have such low expectations of people that we expect them to be unable to hold onto the paradox that a child can misbehave and even blatantly disrespect an adult at times and still be worthy of love and a quality education? It's an important nuance, it seems to me, about the teaching life. I don't say any of this to Betsy in the moment, though. I just tell her that my speech – as written – is fair to and even honors my students.

She nods but doesn't say anything else.

"So bottom line, I get rid of that line?" I ask.

"Yes," she says.

Just like that, the conversation is over. I check in and walk into the ballroom. The floor has maroon carpeting and a chandelier hangs from the ceiling. Round tables are spread around the room with a speaker's podium and microphone near one of the walls. Silverware, plates, glasses, bread, and nametags wait for us on tables. I sit down at an assigned table with corps members I know, and a few school administrators and business types I don't. I guess who people are by the racial dynamics: corps members, some mix,

but more white; school administrators, mostly black; and donors, mostly white. We try to make polite small talk with each other. I say hello to the others at my table, then I glance down at my speech. I cross out the line in question and write down a weaker replacement. We eat a fine meal of salad, chicken, vegetables, and cake.

After dinner, Crysta, Teach For America Jacksonville's 26-year-old Executive Director, welcomes everyone and introduces another corps member who goes up to the podium and gives a short but charged speech about working with her students. Then Betsy introduces me, and I making my way to the front of the room. My knees shake as all eyes in the room focus on me. I start talking. It's like I'm back in a higher-stakes college speech class. Read the words, look up, find some friendly eyes, keep reading. Annunciate, try not to be monotone, act like you mean what you're saying. Like a good soldier, I leave out the line I'm supposed to, and I look directly at Betsy as I delivered the new line. I can only hope that she and I are the only ones in the room who know a part of me is seething. The speech seems to be well-received because afterwards, several people I don't even know come up to me, introduce themselves and thank me for my words.

A couple weeks after the speech, FCAT week arrives. No more practice testing or warnings sent home or lectures from me; it's time for the real thing. The test is a week-long affair during which little else got accomplished. At least that means I get a break from lesson planning. The state requires testing from third-through-sixth grades, so Northern enacts a policy of complete silence in the upstairs hallway for the week. Dr. Smith assigns other members of the faculty to help the teachers, like me, administer the test. I hope she sends Danica to my room because I know she would be a huge help and would help make this drudgery more tolerable.

Instead, Ms. Wesley, the school's art teacher, shows up at my door. *Of course.* Ms. Wesley is *that teacher*. You know, the one who never stops yelling at kids, the one who knows the answer to every problem and is never wrong, the one who argues with the principle during faculty meetings. Maybe she reminds me a little too much of what I could become. She has taught at a bunch of places, is probably in her fifties or sixties, and the word around school is that she's National-board-certified. That means different things depending on who you talk to, but at the very least she gets paid more than the rest of us. I do know that she *is* a talented artist because I've seen her touching up her students' work – *who does that?* – while displaying it on the hallway bulletin board. Would she rather be making and selling her own art as a career than she would be teaching elementary students? Come to think of it, would I rather be writing than teaching writing? I think about Sean Connery's character in *Finding Forrester*; his observation that a disappointed artist can be a dangerous teacher.

I don't really deal with many behavior problems on the first day of testing, though Charlie is noticeably absent. The other students wait quietly at their desks while Ms. Wesley and I pass out tests and pencils. I'm just about to start reading the script when Kayla raises her hand. I look in her direction and stop what I'm doing.

“Yeah, Kayla?”

“Mista Schuma, I didn't get a pencil,” she says.

I look over at Ms. Wesley, who has the pencils. She starts walking in the direction of Kayla. As she passes me, she says, “It's just as well she doesn't have one. She's probably one of the stupid ones anyway, and maybe it would help if she didn't take the test.”

I repeat what I heard in my head just to make sure I didn't get it wrong. Something is happening inside me, something building, though I don't exactly possess the words. I've been forced into a moment in which I hear the most extreme conclusion of cynicism and it's so disturbing. I'm also terrified that at least a few students *had* to have heard what Ms. Wesley said. Do I confront her in front of the class? Do I say something about it later? But I just watch Ms. Wesley hand Kayla a pencil. Neither I nor anyone else says anything. I start reading from the script.

This moment will be added to the dozens of actions and non-actions I would love to get back and do over during my time in Teach For America. When I get that chance again – with Ms. Wesley or some other version of her – I will defend Kayla because she deserves my advocacy. She's drawn a helluva deck of cards in this life, but she is *not* stupid, and she gives her best every day. How could anyone *not* see that?

## Chapter 14: Grades

A few days later, I'm in Starbucks with Betsy again. "How are you feeling about our conversation and your speech the other day?" she asks, sounding like a therapist. She appears more comfortable, like she has given this some thought, and now she's more ready to talk about the situation.

And I think I have, too. But I still say I don't think organizations or individuals have to run and hide from the whole truth, and when it seems like they're trying to, I get pretty flustered. I want us to own *all of it*, and I actually think it's more powerful and compelling that way. I admit that I wish our conversation had started in a venue and at a time when we could actually talk about the issues at stake rather than right before I headed on stage. She listens and nods, listens and nods.

"I mean, what do you think?" I ask, throwing the conversation back at her.

"Well," she says, "Sometimes I would choose to communicate things a little differently than a marketing team would."

Hearing her admission is enough. She's taking me seriously, which is, I suppose, what I really want more than anything else. I can be full of angst in situations like this one, but I know Betsy is on my side. So she had to mediate in a really tense spot at the last minute; I can't blame her for that. We talk about my classroom for a while, then I finish my chai and leave Betsy behind with a laptop and stack of papers, presumably data she would be pouring over before she met with her next corps member.

There's less than a month left in the school year, and I'm crawling to the finish line. I roll out of bed a little later each morning, push the boundaries on showing up for work on time, and get the hell outta my classroom as soon as I can after school ends.

On one particular Wednesday, we have another early-dismissal faculty meeting, and I'm sitting with other colleagues in the library per usual, but not in a social mood. I open up my laptop and check my e-mail. I do my usual browsing: delete a few e-mails without reading them, skim a few others, reply to ones that need a response. One e-mail in particular grabs my attention:

Dear Chris--

I am SO sorry I have not replied. This is a business account, and people write to me at another address! You are important. Please send me a phone number and good times to call you and I will do so at your convenience. Chris, let me make up the delay for you. I'll help you all I can.

Best wishes,  
Rafe Esquith

*This is the same man whose book I read!* It has been *months* since I e-mailed Rafe, and I had given up on hearing back from him. I send him an e-mail back to thank him for writing me and also to send him my phone number. For some reason, I still doubt that he'll actually call me.

The sound of Dr. Smith's voice jolts me back to the present. "It's our recommendation that you pursue every option besides failing a student," she's saying. This is her latest, rather than first, stern warning of this variety. And if one looks at the problems in urban education, one can understand why she's saying this. Education plays a significant role in determining the path of a child's life, and those who fail early grades often become dropouts and eventually delinquents. It's an uncomfortable reality, and I can't deny any of it. But I still can't wrap my head around students who refuse to turn in

work. Somewhere along the way they have received the message that this is okay, that they will get passed on anyway. Lazaar is my most extreme but hardly my only example who continues to showcase this disturbing habit. There are a few others, from both genders, white and black. Charles is in this same category but not Franklin, who is still my hardest worker in the fifth grade.

“For those of you who insist,” Dr. Smith says, “grab a packet of information from the pile on the way out.”

Several teachers stand up and reach for their bags before she even finishes the sentence. Almost no one picks up the packet on their way out the door, and a few that do toss it in a trashcan by the time they’ve reached the hallway. Teachers really aren’t that different from their students when it comes to completing “extra” work. Nevertheless, I grab the documents, intent on filling them out for a few of my students. Maybe this is my last grab for any semblance of control over my classroom. After walking out of the library, I follow the crowd. I take a sharp right in the direction of the parking lot. I catch Kim’s eyes. She wears a maroon fleece. I stop and step to my left, letting the exodus escape in front of me.

“What are you going to do about our students?” I ask as she catches up with me. I really hope she will fill out the paperwork, too, so it looks like we’re a united front. I don’t want to fight this battle alone, but I’m prepared to, if necessary. Since we teach different subjects to the same students, we talk and collaborate enough to know that many of our problems are consistent across subjects. In other words, with the occasional exception, the students who misbehave and struggle in my class tend to do the same in her class.

“Dr. Smith clearly doesn’t want us to fail students,” Kim says.

“I think I’m going to fill out the paperwork, anyway,” I say.

“I don’t know, Chris. It’s a lot of work. I don’t blame you for doing it, but it hardly seems worth it if it’s just going to get vetoed anyway. And I don’t know if it’s really the best thing for our kids anyway. But if you need documentation or grades or anything from me, let me know, and I’ll give you what you need.”

“Okay,” I say, disappointed.

She gives me her standard “Thank you kindly” and the conversation is over.

That weekend, I spread all the relevant paperwork out in front of me in my living room. I have my laptop open to my online grade book and each of the students’ file folders in front of me. The folders contain records of communication with parents, including signed (or absent) report cards, dates and times of phone calls, and notes from parents.

Rick wanders out of his room wearing blue swim trunks and a t-shirt. “Are you really going to try that?” he asks. “No way that’s going to work.”

“Yeah, maybe not,” I concede. “But I’m going to see what happens at least.”

He grabs a twelve pack of Miller Lite out of the refrigerator and offers me one, which I decline. “Well, we’re going to the beach if you change your mind,” he says.

Maybe I *should* go to the beach, take life a little less seriously. Instead, I spend the next several hours meticulously checking documents against each other, recording a percentage here, providing a qualitative description there, reading the small print, finding the next relevant piece of evidence.

On Monday morning, I drop the documents off in Dr. Smith's office, knowing an uncomfortable conversation will follow. And sure enough, after dismissal that day, I hear "Mr. Schumerth, please report to the front office" from the intercom. I swear there's the slightest bit of annoyance in Dr. Smith's voice, but maybe that's just my own paranoia.

I want to be prepared for the discussion, so I grab my laptop and open up my grades. I wish I had worn a tie today or at least a better shirt than my tattered yellow polo. On the trek to her office, I rehearse my talking points. The old appeal to individual responsibility. These students, I tell myself, didn't do enough work to demonstrate that they are ready for the sixth grade. The data doesn't lie, and I would be doing them a disservice in life by just pushing them on.

Dr. Smith greets me in a friendly tone. She stands up – holding my amateur submissions in her hand – and gestures toward the conference room. "We've gotta talk about these babies," she says, stating the obvious.

"Sure," I say.

As we sit down at the table, I notice Dr. Smith's fourth-grade son, Dennis. He's sitting on the floor in the corner of the room and playing a hand-held video game. "Hi Mr. Schumerth!" he says, beaming. I know him from his after-school meandering. Every once in a while, the two of us have tossed a football back-and-forth outside.

"Dennis, I need you to go find somewhere else to play for right now," Dr. Smith commands.

"Yes, Ma'am." He obediently stands up and walks out, taking the game with him.

Dr. Smith flips through the stack of documents I submitted to her. She leans forward and looks at me. “Okay,” she starts. “Tell me why you think these students need another year of fifth grade.”

“Well they hardly did any work,” I tell her. “I’ll show you the grades if you want to see them.

She looks unconvinced, and her smile is gone. “I’ve already seen the data,” she says. “Do you think keeping these students in the fifth grade will benefit them in the long-term?”

“I have no idea,” I confess. “That’s sorta up to them, don’t you think? Hopefully somewhere along the way they learn that schoolwork isn’t optional.”

“Do you think these kids are operating on an equal playing field?”

I’m as unmoved by her nod to sympathy as she was by my wanting data to make the decision for us. We really can’t get beyond the messy processes of thinking and decision-making, can we? We all draw our conclusions from a place of imperfect knowledge, from our own flawed process of discernment.

“Obviously,” I say, “our students grew up in poverty. But I don’t think our pity does them any favors. It’s almost insulting.”

She changes directions. “Mr. Schumerth, don’t you think any of this is on you? You’re a first-year teacher.”

Now I feel accused, and my face flushes, my heart beats faster. I’m sort of beyond the ability to look inward in this moment, so I shrug. “I’m sure I made plenty of mistakes. But I never refused to try.”

“I don’t think you’re being very fair. They’re ten years old!”

“So are their classmates who did the work.”

“Well, I noticed that there were a few mistakes on what you turned in. I doubt those gaps will be allowed to stand.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Have you looked into summer school options? Have you communicated those options to the students’ parents?”

“I’ll be glad to send to send any available summer school paperwork home with the students.”

Finally, she says, “Well, as you probably know, this decision is ultimately yours. I cannot make it for you. If you stick with your decision, we’re going to be hearing from some angry parents in June. And it’s going to be me that has to deal with them, not you. Frankly, I doubt my supervisor is going to let any of this fly, anyway.”

“My decision was made when I turned in the paperwork,” I say, like a lawyer in negotiations.

“Okay, Mr. Schumerth,” she says. “Sorry this turned into a bit of a debate. I feel strongly about this as you know.”

“I understand,” I say. Then, I stand up, avert my eyes, and walk out.

Dr. Smith certainly has a point about my own failures as a first-year teacher. They were many and easy to identify. The relationships with students, colleagues, and parents that I butchered out of my own defensiveness. The window I left open during the storm and the technology that got ruined because of it. The classroom line stand-off. The season of yelling myself hoarse before Christmas break. Those mornings of waking up at three or four to create lesson plans after procrastination and poor prioritizing and an inability to

sleep. The days for which I skipped lesson-planning altogether and just winged it. All those behavior referrals I'd written because I couldn't yet manage a classroom of fifth-grade students. That time and energy I spent focusing on students who misbehaved, while virtually ignoring the ones who were willing to learn. Maybe even choosing to coach baseball at the expense of after-school time with my students.

So what's fair? He doesn't and maybe can't answer that question for me, but Rafe Esquith calls me that weekend. His voice is gruff but kind. He doesn't condescend me or act like I'm a burden on his time. We talk for a half-hour, and I tell him about my first year. He gives me the space to fire questions at him. He validates rather than dismisses my frustrations. And he knows those frustrations well because he's lived so many of them. I appreciate that any answers he offers to my questions seem devoid of public-relations tactics, and instead he speaks like one who has learned which battles to fight and which ones to avoid. I could use some of that wisdom in my own professional life.

Finally, I get to my main point: "May I fly out and visit your class sometime?"

"Sure," he says. "We have visitors regularly. You're welcome to come. Our Shakespeare performances are coming up in June. That'd be a great time for you to come out. We can work out the details over e-mail."

And so we exchange a few more e-mails and set an exact day for a visit. His school year goes longer than mine, so the timing is perfect. I'll go out to Los Angeles right after our school year concludes. My brother, Shane, wants to come too, so we both book flights.

## Chapter 15: Hot'lanta

Northern's lower-grades math coach, Angelica, is also the advisor of a student leadership group called "The Patrols." She and I have barely spoken a word to each other all school year, but for some reason she asks me if I will be the male chaperone for an end-of-the-year trip to Atlanta. The trip is only for thirteen students, and it's during the school week, so it feels like a no-brainer. Of course I will go, and although I have missed most of the fund-raising for the trip, I show my commitment by agreeing to help raise the final thousand dollars the group needs in order to take the trip. I send out a few fundraising letters to friends and family members, and just like that, a few checks show up in the mail. It's almost too easy, a gift after the difficulty of my first year of teaching. It feels good to have contributed.

On the afternoon before our trip, I'm alone in my classroom, printing, copying, and stapling tests and plans for the substitute who will be in charge of my classroom while I'm gone. I've been trying to "differentiate my instruction" lately, which means teaching to where students are on an individual level. One of my strategies was to split my reading classes into two. Post-FCAT, we're reading novels, a valiant if less-than-perfect attempt. We've finished the books, or at least the students who are still showing up to school this late in the year have. The question, though, is did any of them understand what we read? Thus, the need for an assessment, to find that answer. When I'm in Atlanta, half of my students will take a test on one book that they read, and the other half will be tested on another book that they read. I make neat piles of the various

documents on my desk, leave my note to the substitute on top, and shut off the lights to my classroom.

I have dinner and drinks planned back in Riverside with the other six members of the Northern fifth-grade teaching staff. It's technically a school night, but the school year is winding down, and we all want to celebrate together before things get really crazy and people start dispersing for the summer. What were we celebrating, exactly? We haven't seen FCAT scores yet, so it certainly isn't that. There's still a lot we don't know about how much our students have learned on our watches. Since the test and with the help of the doctor's suggestions, my digestion and sleeplessness problems have gotten better, and I suppose all of us are close enough to realize that we're actually going to make it through this school year. We can consider ourselves initiated into the professional life of educators. Somehow finishing feels like an accomplishment in and of itself. We didn't quit, and that was *something*, although I'm not exactly sure what.

The seven of us meet at a pub down the street from our apartment complex. The weather is perfect, warm but with a breeze, and we eat chicken wings and fried pickles. We suck beer and shots down freely, while looking back and reminiscing about the work we've done together. We play a few rousing games of corn hole. Rick, Kim, Shivaun, and I are the last ones to leave.

As we stumble home, it occurs to me that I'm definitely the drunkest. "You guys have to work tomorrow," I slur. "I'm going to Hot-lanta!"

In my apartment and bedroom, I collapse into bed, only to wake before 5 a.m. to the piercing sound of an alarm. I stab at it, and when it's done torturing me, I sit up. My head aches, and I'm desperate need of a shower. In the sink, I see something I don't have

any recollection from the night before: green vomit, the remains of fried pickles. I don't have the time or desire to clean it up, so I just gargle some mouthwash in the shower instead of brushing my teeth. I throw on some clothes, grab my packed duffle bag, and drive to Northern in the dark. I may still be a little drunk, so it's probably best not to say much until the other side of a nap.

On the bus, I sit by myself and try to sleep. At best, I doze in and out, but not much more than that. I've never slept well when alcohol is in my system.

At a little after 8 a.m., I feel the buzz of a phone call from Kim, back at Northern. She's teaching today per usual. "What's up?" I ask.

"Chris, the sub is really confused. Both piles of tests are the same. Is there another one somewhere?"

Impossible, I think. I couldn't possibly have screwed this up. I tried to be so careful! But this is exactly the kind of detail I historically mess up. Kim insists again that I printed not the two separate tests I thought I had, but rather two piles of the same test. I have no option but to believe her.

"Is there anything else the kids can do?" she asks. From the sound of her voice, it seems like my negligence has just guaranteed a shitty day for her. Which, come to think of it, would be exactly how I felt if the situations were reversed.

I have zero good ideas. Usually, I'm quite good at detaching from my classroom when I'm not in it, but now I will spend the rest of the day scolding myself for this mistake. The job of a substitute teacher is already hard enough, and I hate that I've put someone I don't know in such an impossible situation. I tell Kim my students can read books or write stories or play board games or play on the computer. The truth is, it may

not matter much what my students end up doing. If they've sensed a lack of structure, the results will probably not be good.

For the next few days, our group of fifth and sixth-grade leaders wanders through Atlanta's main tourist destinations: the Coca-Cola plant, CNN, Stone Mountain, and the home in which the Reverend and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. grew up in. We laugh and take pictures and even spend a day playing in a Six Flags theme park, where I ride all the roller coasters not because I enjoy them but because I don't want to be shown up by children. For some of our students, this is the farthest north they've been in their entire lives. And for a few days, it really feels to me like the ideal educational setting: a good faculty-to-student ratio, experiential learning that also happens to be fun, and students demonstrating the curiosity we want them to have every day in our classrooms. It barely even feels like I'm working, which is exactly what I had hoped for when I committed to the trip.

Then I get another call from Kim. "What else did I screw up?" I asked her, (mostly) joking.

She doesn't even try to reassure me. "Well, we got our FCAT scores."

"And?" I ask, not sure if I really want to hear the verdict.

"Not good," she said, her voice quivering. "The whole fifth grade did terribly. Check your email; I'll send you the data."

I'm not sure what to say, so I ask her how she's taking it.

"It seems like we wasted a year of these kids' lives," she says.

Her statement seems a bit drastic, but I don't argue with her. "That bad, huh?"

"Yes," she said. "Like ten percent passed in science."

I'm not too surprised with that result, since our whole grade had poured their focus into reading and math, often to the exclusion of other subjects. I'm a lot more concerned with reading scores, and I end the call so I can check the data for my own students specifically. The news isn't any better than Kim's pessimistic report. The percentage of the students I'm responsible who passed the reading test is in the twenties. Of the kids who "failed," *some* students, like Franklin, significantly improved upon their score from the previous year, which is better than nothing. As I look at Northern's macro data, I can tell that the fifth graders performed worse than all the other grades, but that doesn't mean the other grades performed well. The dire results won't necessarily affect our students' abilities to move on to a new grade, but what it does do is put everyone – teachers and administrators alike – on edge about job security.

On the morning of our bus trip from Atlanta back to Jacksonville, I join Angelica for breakfast in the hotel dining room. She has done almost all the trip's planning and coordinating. I had just been along for the ride and to make sure the boys didn't burn anything down.

This morning, though, she looks pissed. "You hear the news about FCAT?" I ask her.

She nods. "Not good. But I have more bad news for you."

"Yeah?"

She puts a receipt from the hotel on the table, and I inspect it. Over two hundred dollars in phone calls. I look up. "Who?"

"The girls. I don't know who all they called, but at least one teacher back at Northern texted me to tell me they were pranking her."

“Shit. So what do we do?”

“Well, I paid the bill with money from our budget. But it’s going to be a quiet ride home, and the girls will meet with Dr. Smith when we get back.”

It’s disappointing to be leaving on such a sour note, but let’s be honest, prank calls certainly aren’t unique to “inner-city kids.” In fact, I can remember having a birthday party as an early adolescent for which several of my friends came over. We slept in my family’s tent in the yard. Late at night, we went running around in our neighbors’ yards, ringing doorbells and all that. A little less costly than hotel phone calls, maybe, but just as annoying. The same idea. In Atlanta, my biggest disappointment is that this is “one more thing.” We’re leaving our hosts with a bad taste in their mouths, and we’re coming back to a school that just received terrible news about our testing performance. I’m glad I’m not the one who has to dole out consequences for the girls.

The bus ride home *is* quiet. Most of the girls are asleep by the time our bus pulls back into Northern’s parking lot, where Dr. Smith is waiting for us. I grab my bags and ask if they need me for the conversation, but I’m so glad when she waves me off. I go into the building and upstairs to see what kind of state my classroom is in. It’s clean, probably from a combination of Kayla and the custodian. But I find a note waiting for me on my desk. It reads:

Mr. Schumerth,

I found your class very disrespectful. They ate candy and argued with me for almost the entire time I had them. I tried my best to control them. I’d much rather sub for any other class in this school.

-Mr. Johnson

P.S. Lamaar was the worst.

None of the note’s content is surprising to me, of course, but by now, I’m growing a bit numb to this kind of thing. For a moment, I contemplate whether or not I should say

anything about the note to my students the next time I see them, but I land pretty quickly on the side of just apologizing for screwing up the tests and trying to start fresh. I feel bad for the sub, but whatever ensued had been at least as much my fault as it had been the kids. I file the note and go home.

## Chapter 16: Last Week of School

Back at school, Dr. Badger, the math coach, consoles our fifth grade team about our students' test results. She has us over to her house for a cookout, where she says we worked harder than any group she's ever been around. We were given an impossible task, she tells us, hung out to dry. She won't stand for anyone blaming us, and neither should we. It feels good to be affirmed, to have an advocate, someone who at least recognizes the work we tried to do. But the tests and how other people perceive our teaching are far from our most pressing concern, at least for now.

By this point in the school year, Northern is desperate for ways to keep kids engaged. We schedule a field day on the track and football field. The fourth, fifth, and sixth grades trudge out for an afternoon of egg tosses, tug-of-wars, and relay races. It has to mean something that I'm once again thrilled with the prospect of time *outside* the classroom, doing something other than explicitly teaching. I'm probably not alone in feeling that, but I still feel guilty for how much it dominates my thinking and attitude. Early on in the event, I notice Dr. Smith's absence, which makes me nervous. My class doesn't exactly steal the show competitively, but we fill our spots, and there are plenty of smiles and laughs.

We sit together in the stands for the final race, 100-yard dash. The mood is light-hearted and fun, but fragile. There's an anxiety that comes with any significant change, including summer. Maybe that's why I'm sensitive to the commotion when it starts. A few students from other classes, apparently upset that they hadn't been chosen for the

final race, make their escape in the direction of the track, determined to run anyway. The onslaught of extra potential runners persuades a couple of my own students to follow suit. Teachers are screaming instructions, classes are getting split up, and rebellion is spreading like a gossipy note.

A few concerned teachers decide to take immediate action before this gets out of hand. They order their classes to stand up; it's time to go back to the school building, where they will finish the day in their classrooms. I ultimately decide to do the same, leaving a few of my runners behind, hoping they'll catch up. With faculty and staff members down on the track trying to referee the too-many-runners problem, I have my doubts that this final race is going to take place at all. But the first problem pales in comparison to the new one. Suddenly, several classes of students are pouring out of the bleachers and into a small opening between the baseball and softball field. *Too many* students for such a small amount of space. Bodies bump against bodies, voices curse just to be heard. Naturally, one student shoves another, and then punches are flying. One student has another pinned to the ground, and one sparring match offers permission to others. Soon, little pockets of two and three and four square off against each other. The scene is just like I imagine a riot would be, except everyone is five-feet tall. You would think that fact would make this nightmare easier to break up, but I'm not so sure.

My own students join in, of course, partially out of self-defense. No one can really hear my commands let alone listen to them. When I catch other teachers' eyes, they communicate the same emotion as I'm feeling: fear. Maybe even terror. We've really screwed this up by making one unplanned rash decision, and now everything's going to hell. We don't know how to clean up the mess. How can we get this group of students

inside before our school gets anymore humiliated? I try pulling students off of each other, but with so little space, I'm only contributing to the domino effect. One small but ambitious sixth-grade teacher gets knocked to the ground as she tries to break up two of her students who are fighting. Perhaps out of habit, I latch on to Franklin and don't let go. I drag him in the direction of the building, knowing several fights are still ensuing behind me. This has become a bit of a routine for us anyway, and there's an odd, unspoken trust that pervades the exchange. We will give off the appearance that we're in opposition to each other, but really we want the same thing: safety. Just like that first fight I'd seen him in earlier in the school year, we're trying to get to a space outside of the influence of peers, so Franklin's rage can ultimately turn to tears and then calm.

We sit down outside Dr. Smith's office, and I listen to Franklin's pain and frustration for a couple minutes. I let him vent. He promises to stay behind so I can go back outside. But by the time I get there, I've passed several of my students who are gracefully headed to the classroom without any adults to guide them. They look spooked, and the space that is our classroom is peaceful compared to what they've just experienced. Before joining them upstairs, I glance outside, and see that the whole environment has quieted. One teacher is engaged in a stern talking-to with a student, and another class is trying to form a line. Most of the area had been vacated.

Just like *most* of my students have made it back to my classroom, Charlie excepted. I can only hope he's with a teacher or principal somewhere. Lazaar is narrating and reliving the fight, his voice filled with excitement. The rest of class looks at me for guidance, solemnly. If what I had just experienced was traumatic, how much more had it been for a fifth-grader?

We breathe and let some silence settle. “Is everybody okay?” I ask.

They nod. I have no lecture to offer in this moment. I look around with almost admiration. Not because my students have participated in a fight, but because they’ve endured it as just another part of their day-to-day existence. By some kind of miracle, they’ve all made it through and will live another day. Kids can be so resilient. This moment is one of those moments, all too rare, when I feel *with* rather than opposed to my students. They were affected, and so was I.

An unplanned, faculty meeting is called after school. I file into my usual spot in the library and sit down with the fifth grade team. I’m expecting a discussion and maybe even scolding for the mob fight that just occurred. But the fight isn’t even mentioned. Instead, Dr. Smith stands in the front of the room and tells us, on the verge of tears, that she’s being removed as principal of Northern. The district will place her somewhere else next year. She says she doesn’t think it’s fair, that we deserve another year to get this thing figured out, and she admits that she’s still pretty angry about the decisions that have been made. She thanks us for being a hardworking and supportive faculty and assures us that our own jobs are safe. She’s confident that we’ll do great things next year.

When she finishes talking, no one moves or speaks. I look around, and a few of my colleagues are crying. Dr. Smith has probably been under pressure all year, and given recent events, this announcement shouldn’t be all that surprising. But somehow in this moment, it is. Rumors have become reality. No matter what anyone can say about Dr. Smith, she’d given her soul to Northern during the past year. She’s well-liked around the building. She had been our leader. Several teachers approach her with hugs and words of consolation. I still feel the tension of her and my conversation about retaining fifth

graders, so in the end, I choose not to join the line, opting instead to write her a thank-you card for her service to Northern.

The last day of school is a half-day. Kim and I plan to combine our classes for the last half hour for a dance party. Yet another brilliant idea, I think. Our kids will have to love us now and admit that we've been great all along. But like so many other parts of the school year, it doesn't go as planned. Because of the day's schedule, lunch is served earlier than usual. Apparently, the cafeteria staff isn't quite ready for that because we keep getting announcements that lunch has been delayed. When it's finally our turn, it's at least an hour later than the scheduled time. We go downstairs where the cafeteria is either out of hot food or unwilling to prepare it. My students eat cold sandwiches and milk.

"Mista Schuma, this gross," Kayla informs me.

I have no desire to try what she's eating. Even worse, the late lunch gives us almost no time for our intended dance party. When we all get back upstairs, I take my students over to Kim's classroom. My group lines across the white board in front of the room, while her students sit in their seats. I'm feeling a little sentimental. *Now* I want hugs and tears and thank you's and "You changed my life; I'm so much wiser now!" I guess maybe what I really want is any sort of validating that the past ten months were worth the struggle I put in.

"We just wanted to say th—" I start, but I'm interrupted by the bell. Students move toward the door.

"Don't leave before taking your report card!" Kim shouts.

We distribute the cards, and I brace myself for the response. Just like the previous times we've done this, students pause long enough to rip their envelopes open and have a look. Most of them see they've passed, maybe offer up a shrug, and gallop out the door. For a few of them, though, this moment marks the official communication that they'll be returning to fifth grade in the fall unless they complete the expected summer-school requirements. Of course I have given these particular students warnings that this is coming, but I suspect that they've heard that kind of thing before; they think I'm giving just another idle threat in an effort to get them to do things they don't want to do.

I hand Lazaar's envelope to him, expecting aggression after he checks his fate. But he throws me off by bursting into tears. Kim consoles him with a hug. For maybe the first time all year, I see him as just a frail kid. Which is what I feel like, too. I almost second-guess my conversation with Dr. Smith as he walks out without meeting my eyes. No argument, no goodbye.

What just happened? My first year of teaching just finished. Shouldn't I feel a sense of accomplishment or excitement or even sadness? Mostly I feel numb.

That night, Kim, Rick, Danica, and I host a pool party at our apartment building. Next year's Teach For America cohort has arrived in the city for orientation and training. A few of us who are completing our first year have been assigned as mentors. I can't help but notice that the new cohort was *not* brought into our classrooms for a look. We invite a few of the new teachers to the party and also our students and their parents, although only a few of them take us up on the invitation. We only live ten minutes from school, but we didn't have the resources to offer transportation.

Mr. James is there and his usual, jovial self, monologuing as life of the party. “Schume, where are the brewskis?” he says. And: “What are you up to for the summer? Goin’ back to see the family? Ya know, you and Kim had a tough group this year. It’ll be better next year.”

“Thanks,” I say, not so sure.

During a quiet moment, Danica pulls me away from Mr. James and the rest of the group. She and I have tried to navigated the awkwardness of post-define-the-relationship-talk, which is to say we’ve stayed friends, but probably hung out less. “Sit down,” she says. “I need to tell you something.

*What now, I think. Haven’t we already been through this?* But my assumptions are wrong.

“I’m done,” she says. “Not coming back next year. No more Teach For America. I’m leaving later this month.”

“What?” I say. Like many others in the corps, I had known Danica was unhappy and had even heard her talk about quitting at times. But I’d never taken that kind of talk very seriously.

She informs me she’s taking a job on a cruise ship. I hadn’t even known she was looking for other jobs.

“How am I going to make it through year two?” I ask. It’s a serious question. Even though I had decided not to date her, she was still a big reason why I had made it through my first year of teaching. I depended heavily on her to help organize my life.

I notice some pain in her expression when she says, “You’ll be fine, Chris.”

I ask her if she has communicated her decision to Teach For America yet, if she has turned in a resignation letter. She tells me she has, that the staff tried to “quit-save” her, and that after she refused, her program director de-friended her on Facebook.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“Well, we’re going to miss you around here,” I say, giving her a hug.

I don’t know yet that that same program director who de-friended Danica on Facebook will also seek me out in a couple days and tell me I can’t let Danica leave. It’s a brief conversation. I tell her I’m not in the habit of making decisions for other people; I can barely make them for myself. What I don’t tell her is that I’m a little jealous of Danica, that leaving sounds a little bit like liberation. Why *don’t* I just leave? That question again. But the truth is, there’s a part of me that could never do it. To leave would feel like admitting failure. Whether it’s my stupidity, stubbornness, virtue, or a combination of the three, I’m going to stick this thing out and see what happens. *Bring on year two.*

## Chapter 17: Summer

Long after baseball season ended, I still haven't been paid the \$1,200 my coaching contract guaranteed me. I contact the district athletic office, and they tell me the process is being held up because they're waiting for a signature from the school's principal. I've never met the woman. I call her a couple times, leave messages, hear nothing back. And I get it: my petty little concern doesn't make the priority list. But I still deserve to get paid for my labor. I show up in person only to get brushed off again. "Come back later," I'm told. But there isn't much "later" left at this point.

I need the money to keep me afloat over the summer, and especially for this trip to Los Angeles. I'm ready to take desperate measures. So I e-mail the principal with a request for the signature, mention my previous attempts at communication, and carbon copy the district athletic office *and the superintendent*, who had showed up to a few Teach For America events and told us to let him know if he can ever do anything to help. Well, now he can do something.

It sorta feels like a dick move, but it works. In response to my e-mail, I receive a reply full of frantic promises. The money comes through on the next payday.

Shane and I fly to California as planned. Robin, a friend of mine from my time in D.C., lives in Los Angeles and sets us up with a place to stay. The morning of our visit to Rafe's classroom, Shane and I amble out to the street early in the morning and hail a cab. We tell our driver to take us to Hobart Boulevard Elementary. The driver nods and takes us to a part of the city that looks unkempt and commercially bare. A fence surrounds the

school and seems to scream, “Stay out!” I fumble around with my wallet and pull out a twenty and a ten. I hand them to the cab driver and tell him to keep the change.

Rafe had instructed us, via e-mail, to meet him and a few students at his classroom at seven o’clock in the morning, before the school day officially begins. We are going to spend basically the whole day with him and his class. The school consists basically of an outdoor campus with multiple buildings, appearing almost like a community college or a cheap hotel. I have a classroom number written down, but I’m not exactly sure how to get there. Almost no one is around yet, except a couple petite Asian girls. They look to be about the right age as Rafe’s students, so I tell them we’re looking for Mr. Esquith and ask if they knew where I can find him. They smile, tell me he is their teacher, and gesture for us to follow. They lead us through campus, up a set of stairs, and into a double classroom where all the magic happens.

I walk in to the sound of guitars, drums, and a fifth-grade boy’s singing voice, belting out Neil Young lyrics:

I want to live,  
I want to give  
I’ve been a miner  
for a heart of gold.  
It’s these expressions  
I never give  
That keep me searching  
for a heart of gold

The classroom intimidates me. College pennants hang on the wall from places like Harvard, Yale, Notre Dame, the Universities of Virginia and Michigan, and all the California schools. The pennants have all been given or sent to Rafe from alums who have gone on to attend those schools. On one desk, there are copies of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Science equipment and bins of DVDs are scattered

throughout the room. The room seems so lived in, and I suppose that's what Rafe and his students do, really, is live together from eight to three (or maybe more like seven to five) for ten months of the year. For those who chose to come back, the time extends for years of devoted SAT prep and college visits on weekends.

Rafe, who's directing the ensemble, looks up, smiles, and greets us. "You must be Chris and Shane."

He wears a corduroy sports jacket and a beard. He looks more like my stereotype of a professor than an elementary school teacher. After we greet him, he launches right into teaching mode with us: "There are three things I love," he tells me. "Shakespeare, baseball, and rock-and-roll. Those three things are a part of every day in my classroom. The classroom is a menu, and we need to give kids more options."

I'm already a puppy dog, hanging on every word. When Rafe speaks, his kids listen, too. More classmates arrive, the bell rings, and they start class with a math lesson. Rafe tells them to "Put your pencil down; pencils don't solve problems." He wants them to think before writing, and even to discuss this particular problem with their classmates before writing anything down.

As the discussions begin, an administrator interrupts the lesson by knocking on the door. She brings in a box of generic readers for the following year. Rafe receives the box with a smile and then puts it in a corner of the classroom. One of his students turns to me and explains, "We read *real* literature."

Right on cue, after math, the class dives into a reading lesson for which the text is a short story from *The New Yorker*. And what innovative strategies does he use to teach reading? It's incredible: they read the story, and then they talk about it. No more, no less.

At lunchtime, a few of his former students come by to say hi. Their school year, like mine, has already ended. Rafe shows Shane and me a menu for a Chinese place down the street, takes down our order and gives his former students some money – so much trust! – and asks if they would be willing pick up lunch for Shane and me. They agree to, and we get fed without an ounce of effort or much as a penny spent. I suspect Rafe’s kindness is out of the understanding that Shane and I are young teachers, don’t have a lot of money, and just spent hundreds of dollars to fly out to see his classroom.

That afternoon, students groan when Rafe explains that they won’t have be able to play baseball today. They are required, instead, to attend a “graduation practice” and a school-wide cultural festival. At the festival, while we watch costumed dancers from another class perform somewhat out-of-rhythm choreography, Rafe whispers to me: “I don’t mind stuff like this. It has its place. But the problem is, way too many of these kids can’t read. We need to take care of first things first, ya know?”

The truth is, the rest of Rafe’s school has plenty in common with Northern: students who live in poverty, the surrounding temptation of gangs and drugs, and a reputation of underperformance.

Shane and I pepper Rafe with questions every chance we get, and he isn’t shy about editorializing. I suppose he’s earned that right with the success of his career. He tells us about Kid 1, Kid 2, and Kid 3. He says Kid 1 worships the teacher before he or she walks in the door. Kid 2 is on the fence, probably quiet, and often overlooked. Kid 3 will cuss you out for no fault of your own. Rafe says most of the attention in schools goes toward Kid 1 and 3, but he tells us not to forget about the Kid 2s, that they are often his favorites by the end of the year. He admits to having two Kid 3’s in his current class who

he feels like he hasn't really reached, one for which he offered to pay for counseling sessions. The child's parents rejected his offer, believing instead that "God will heal him."

Even Rafe's behavior management techniques seem super advanced and mature for fifth graders. His philosophy comes from Lawrence Kohlberg's six stages of moral development. At the low end of the scale are behaviors motivated by an effort to avoid punishment or models of performance, i.e. actions taken with the expectation that you're going to get something good if you act in a certain way. A middling level of behavior would be that which is motivated by the desire for conformity. The goal, according to Rafe and Kohlberg, is behavior that comes from one's own sense of ethics or conscience. In other words, doing "the right thing" because you know it's the right thing to do. As I watch Rafe's students, there seems to be a lot of level six behavior going on, and I'm actually having a hard time identifying who the Kid 3s supposedly are. I conclude that Rafe has probably reached them more than he gives himself credit for.

At the end of the school day, students simply switch modes. They become a flurry of activity, setting up for a *Merchant of Venice* performance. The chance to watch this play is one of the main reasons I came. The students line chairs up on one side of the room and clear away a small stage space on the other side. Fourth graders come in to help, too. Rafe recruits them as a way to hook them into his classroom culture before they're officially part of his class. The whole crew must have spent countless hours preparing for this day. The actors and actresses make their way to the makeshift stage, where they practice their lines.

“Everyone now,” Rafe commands, and I watch and listen as the whole group recites the lines in unison. *Every student in the room has the play memorized.* As guests start coming in, a couple students stand at the door and hand out programs. The performance is a sell-out. When the lights dim, students perform flawlessly. In between sets, a small band of students perform a Nirvana song that I recognize. Antonio’s character doesn’t shy away from the homosexual suggestiveness that his character is known for.

As I watch, I can’t help but think about how disastrous it would have been if I had tried to orchestrate my own students’ performance of a Shakespeare play. Oh, the chaos that would have ensued! I have a hard enough time *reading* a Shakespeare play, but I guess that just means Shakespeare isn’t one of my three things.

After the play ends, I congratulate the leads for their performance, and I enjoy cookies and juice with the rest of the audience. Even this part has been carefully thought-out and planned. I say goodbye and thanks to Rafe. I wish I were coming back for another day, but there isn’t time. I depart with a new sense of what’s actually possible in a classroom with students. Obviously I can’t be Rafe this early (or ever), but I do have a renewed hope for my second year of teaching. Like my last conversation with Betsy, I also leave feeling taken seriously by someone who has won awards and been on Opera. Rafe has confirmed my suspicion that in order to escape a culture of mediocrity, sometimes I will have to go take risks and even go against the grain. I also can’t help but think about the nature of commitment itself, and what it means to build something, to be “all in” with a job, a community of relationships, and a place.

A couple weeks later, I'm in Jacksonville and preparing to take another trip. This time, I'm going on a road trip with Kim to Atlanta. Kim and I are going to Georgia Tech to encourage a few of our new corps members who are struggling their way through Institute. We figure maybe we can also reconnect with a few familiar faces from last summer. Kim volunteers to drive. I leave my own car behind with Danica, whose car is in the shop. The morning of our departure, I cross the street and go in a Publix grocery store, where I pick up a copy of the *Florida Times-Union*. It's an overcast day, and on my way back to the apartment building, I noticed a few people I don't recognize gathering in the street, holding phones to the sky. I wander over.

"What's going on?" I ask them.

"The cloud!" one girl exclaims, pointing.

It's not even so much as raining or thundering, but when I look up, I see a big, gray funnel cloud swirling in the sky. It's not that uncommon for a half-hour storm to interrupt a perfectly-sunny summer day in Jacksonville, but this appears a little more serious. The cloud doesn't look that close to the ground, but who am I to decide that? Especially when I hear sirens ringing. My dad has always been fascinated by storms back in Indiana, enough so that we learned to count on him heading out for a drive when everyone else was going to the basement. But even though I'm from tornado country, this is the only live funnel cloud I've ever seen. It feels like some kind of judgment. I started my first year of teaching with a tropical storm, and now I'm ending it with a tornado.

Kim and I need to get out of here fast, or we'll have to find cover and stay a while. We throw our bags in her car, snap a couple pictures of the cloud, and drive northwest. Thankfully, the storm seems to be moving in the opposite direction. In the

passenger's seat, I pick up the newspaper. Michael Jackson has died, and the state of Florida is intervening in several struggling city schools. I learn that the process is called "reconstitution." Jackson's death is more interesting to me, but just in case, I check to see which schools are in trouble. Three Jacksonville schools in total will be reconstituted, two of which I know very well.

"Holy shit, Kim!" I say. "The state's taking over our school!"

Thomas Jefferson is also on the list.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"I don't really know what it means," I say, "but I'm sure it's because we did so shitty on those tests."

My phone buzzes. It's Danica. I open the phone up and say hello. Danica is saying something back, but it's difficult to understand. Mostly hysterics: "Chris-oh-my-God, you're-going-to-hate-me, I-just-rear-ended-someone-with-your-car, we-were-in-the-middle-of-an-intersection-and, oh-my-God, what-do-I-do? Please-don't-hate-me! I-didn't-see-her-stop, and-now-your-car-is-ruined, man-I-hope-it's-not-totaled, I-wish-you-were-here, I'm-so-sorry-Chris, please-don't-hate-me!"

"Are you hurt?" I ask.

She isn't. I tell her where my insurance information is, and I stay on the phone long enough for her to calm down. I tell her I don't hate her and that my car has had tough times before. Maybe my own response would be more extreme if I was actually looking at my car. Truthfully, without seeing it, my car's damage is only theoretical; it feels so far away.

"Teach For America drivers in Jacksonville are cursed," I tell Kim after I hang up.

The two of us make it to Atlanta without further incident, and I spend the weekend around Georgia Tech, trying not to think about my wrecked car back in Jacksonville or the fact that the state is taking over Northern. A group of us catch a Braves' game, and we dance in one of Atlanta's notable nightclubs, while the D.J. plays about every Michael Jackson song there is. It feels like I'm at Institute again, except this time we're only hanging out with people who have been working their asses off, rather than doing it ourselves. Our new friends look scared and tired and uncertain of themselves, but many of them are trying to stay optimistic, at least in front of "veterans" like Kim and me. I withheld the information we've just learned about Northern.

Being around the newbies makes me think back to Institute a year ago and how things have changed since then. Sure, there have been moments in my first year of teaching that seemed to confirm any cynicism that was alive within me, but by now, I've realized that both Cynics and Kool-Aid drinkers possess something I can no longer claim: the presumption of knowledge and expertise. The idea that we somehow know how to fix this mess, how to make up for decades and even centuries of racism, injustice, and illiteracy. If nothing else, the last year of my life has done a nice job of destroying my own confidence that I know what I'm doing. My attitude has become something more like: *You probably don't know the answer, and neither do I.* The best I can conjure up in myself at this point is to show up to work every day with a willingness to try things. Not exactly Kool-Aid drinking, but this movement within me does feel both more honest and a bit like progress. On my best days, I want to keep looking for better ways of doing what I'm doing. Who knows, they may be out there somewhere.

From Atlanta, I catch a flight back to the Midwest. My four siblings and I are going to spend the fourth of July at a music festival in Western Illinois. This the first time we have all been in one place together, just us, in a long time. We set up a tent at a rural campsite. The closest town has a few fast-food restaurants and gas stations, but that's about it. We survive on granola bars, bottled water, and festival food.

Apparently I have enough cellphone service to receive a text from Kim: "Check your email!"

But if phone service is spotty, the Internet is impossible. I didn't even bring a laptop with me. So instead I find a spot in an open field that seems to have a bar or two of cellphone service. I call Kim, knowing full well that our phone conversations rarely lead to good news.

"Chris, we have to interview to keep our jobs," she tells me.

"Wait, what?" I say. "What does that even mean?"

"There's a meeting about it this week. You need to get back down here!"

This trip up north was supposed to be time spent away from teaching or even thinking about teaching. But here is my chosen profession, reaching out again and asserting its dominance over my life.

"There's no way I'm going to be patronized by a bunch of people who weren't around for what actually happened," I say.

Kim tells me that the e-mail says if you can't make it to the meeting, you need to call the new principal and explain why. This is a woman I've seen once, never spoken to, and has a reputation of being a hardass.

"Okay, how do I get a hold of her?" I ask.

“Just call the school.”

So I call and introduce myself to the new principal. In the middle of the conversation, the service cuts out. I call back and tell her who I am again and why I’m calling. “I’m really sorry, but I can’t make the meeting,” I inform her. “I’m in Illinois.”

She doesn’t seem to possess a lot of sympathy for me. “We’ll post interview times,” she says. “Make sure you get to your interview.”

That’s how I end up back at Northern in the middle of July, nervously awaiting my fate with all the other teachers who taught FCAT grades or subjects. I wait in the front-office with other fifth-grade teachers. We’ve each been given a ten-minute slot to prove we deserve our job for the upcoming school year. Mine is the very last scheduled spot, which means lots of time for uncomfortable small talk and a wandering mind. Kim comes out of her interview in tears, marching straight to her car without saying a word. Rick goes immediately before my interview. I sit there, waiting and thinking. On the one hand, I dread the possibility of having to re-navigate my way around in a completely-new environment. On the other hand, I fantasize about what life *could* be like at some “other” school. You know, students who soak up everything I say. An administration that consults me for every important decision. Parents who assure me I’m the best teacher their son or daughter has ever had. Stunning test scores. Media attention and probably a book deal.

When Rick returns, he isn’t sure how his interview went. “What did they ask?” I say.

“Not much, really,” he says. “They just wanted to know what happened.”

What *had* happened, though? I mean, besides my not really knowing how to teach? And the switching around of classrooms and students, behavior problems, clashes with parents, my decision to recommend that several students spend another year in the fifth grade, the poor test results. What can I say to defend myself?

I can't dwell on these thoughts very long because someone is calling my name. I walk into the school library and sit at the head of a table with about ten other adults. I recognize two faces: our assistant principal, who has managed to keep her job, and the new principal. She's in her early forties and sits to my immediate left, a glare on her face already. I suspect that her opinion will be the most important one in the room, but I have no way of knowing or proving that.

To my right, a middle-aged, African-American man with glasses on speaks up first. "Hi, Mr. Schumerth, thanks for coming in today. It's concerning to us that you taught this year on a team full of first-year teachers. Can you tell us about the kind of support you received? And what professional development did you seek out?"

His tone is professional but warm. It puts me somewhat at ease. I don't feel blamed. I tell him that Dr. Badger had been accessible and helpful when she could be. She had really invested in our group of teachers, but math was much more her thing. Then, I tell them about flying out to meet Rafe Esquith and some of the things I'd seen out there.

"You paid for that out of your own pocket?" someone asks.

Yes," I say.

"Thank you," the man to my right says. "You've done very well here, Mr. Schumerth. We'll be in touch in a few days."

*Really? That's it?* I thank the committee and walk out, almost sure I'll be returning to Northern in the fall.

## Chapter 18: Marriage?

I've always scoffed at things like this. I'm seeking answers for the struggles, failures, and anxieties of my first year of teaching from a psychologist. Someone has recommended a woman to me who has a practice across the river, so I set up a visit. I go in and describe my frustrations and the way my body has responded. She asks me a few questions and hands me a questionnaire. I fill out all kinds answers about my preferences and patterns of behavior, and just like that, we wrap up our first session.

We only have one more session. The woman tells me I'm definitely ADHD. I don't know what to think. Never once in my own schooling has anyone mentioned anything like this, and frankly I had never found school as a student to be that difficult. But at the same time, I do identify with some of the known symptoms for ADHD: hyperactivity, a short attention span, easily bored, in constant need of motion and stimulation. I don't argue with the counselor, who refers me to a medical doctor. When I see the doctor, he barely asks any questions at all before scribbling me a prescription for Strattera. When I conduct my own research on the pills, I don't love the possible side affect of sexual dysfunction among other things, but I decide to pick the pills at a drugstore anyway. I'm willing to try them for a season, especially if they will help me get work done more efficiently during my second year of teaching for America.

Despite my uncertain status at Northern, I decide to act as if I will be back there. I have lots to do re-familiarizing myself with the state standards; breaking the them down into smaller, scaffolded steps; planning an initial calendar that helps us works toward the

our goals, and creating benchmark assessments. I do my work downtown at the Teach For America corporate office. Corps members don't have to work here, and in fact, there isn't a lot of room for us, but sometimes during the year I came in for the printing and copying access. Today, I come as way to, in addition to the Straterra pills, help me focus, to keep myself accountable and on track. I've literally just laid my materials out in front of me when I get a phone call. It's a local number, one my phone doesn't recognize. I usually don't answer calls like this, but I have a suspicion about what it might be, so I break my own rule.

It's Northern's assistant principal. She's direct and short. "Mr. Schumerth, I'm sorry but there won't be a position for you at Northern this year. The district will be in touch with a new assignment."

I'm stunned. I wonder if the decision was made because I chose to recommend that those students repeat the fifth grade. Or if it was just a straight data decision, based on how my kids did on the state test. Or if it was because I communicated to the committee that I had sought out help from a teacher who openly advocates situational resisting of school administrators. The possibilities are endless, and of course I'll never know. What I do know is that the decision was *not* made because of my performance in the interview. It had been short and insignificant, a mere formality, and it seems quite possible that the decision may have been made before I ever entered the room and opened my mouth.

I also wonder how long it will take to get my placement and if I'll be teaching something completely different than fifth-grade literacy. I can only hope I don't have to

teach any math or science. My planning work now seems useless until I have more information.

I text Rick and Kim. Have they heard anything from Northern? Both have. Rick gets to stay; Kim, like me, has been let go. I find out that in addition to Kim and me, one more of our fifth grade team members, Diana, won't be back at Northern either. I feel slightly better knowing I won't be the only one heading into uncertain terrain. It also occurs to me that this is a built-in excuse if my second year goes to shit: *Well, what did you expect? The district shifted me to a new school at the last second!*

Before leaving the office, I tell Betsy the news. I wonder if she already knows, but if she does, she doesn't let on. Her response is empathetic, and she encourages me to be patient. She'll be playing the role of liaison between Teach For America and the school district, which still has an obligation to place the three of us *somewhere* for the upcoming school year. Betsy assures me she'll work hard to make sure I get placed soon and even hints that it might be possible for the three of us who have been let go to land in the same place.

In the meantime, it's not like I don't have anything to do. Rick, Kim, and another Teach For America friend of ours, a guy named Matt from Philadelphia, move from our apartments downtown to a beautiful home in Jacksonville Beach. We can walk to the ocean from our new place, but it will mean more of a commute in year two. The place has four bedrooms, three full bathrooms, and a sheltered outdoor kitchen (and shower!) in the backyard. It feels like we're really living large now, and the guys and I plan to purchase and put a ping-pong table in the garage. When we talk about who will take which room, I opt out of the discussion, saying I'll take whatever's left. That gives me one of the rooms

upstairs with the shared bathroom. Kim thinks as the lone woman in the arrangement that she should get one of the rooms downstairs, but Matt's not having it. Kim may have found this house for us (and she did!), but she will be treated as "an equal" with no special privileges. My three housemates draw for the rooms, and Kim loses. It will be her and me who will be upstairs and sharing a bathroom for the year.

We find out that we'll also be teaching at the same school again, as will Diana. We get that confirmation from Betsy about three weeks after our firing. Am I allowed to use the term "firing"? The school district uses more politically-correct words like "surplused." When the film *Waiting for Superman* comes out in 2010, former Milwaukee schools superintendent Howard Fuller has his own name for it: "the dance of the lemons."

Nevertheless, I'll be teaching my second year at Harrison K-5, a school about ten miles north of Northern. I still have a couple weeks until teachers have to be back at work. Just enough time to get some plans in place. I'll be teaching fourth grade writing and social studies, or so I'm told. The catch is that I, and all three of the Teach For America transplants, will be working with co-teachers. No one says this outright, but I have the sense that Teach For America tries to avoid situations like ours' because of a concern about agency and accountability for your class's results. In other words, the organization wants us to own what happens, positive or negative, in our classroom. Asset-based thinking, we call it. No, "Well, my co-teacher did/didn't..." excuses. Teach For America aside, I'm nervous about working things out with a co-teacher, but at least I have a job, and the grade and subject change aren't as drastic as they could have been.

Betsy has set us up with an opportunity at the new school to meet our principal and co-teachers.

Kim and I carpool, the first of many more times, to the new school. The building is on top of a hill and across the street from a K-Mart. When we get there, there are only a few cars in the parking lot. The building is made of old bricks, and appears to be much smaller than Northern. Harrison had received an “A” grade from the state for its performance the previous year. This fact makes for another reason we’ve been given an odd Teach For America placement, but Harrison is more than eighty percent free-or-reduced lunch, and it will be transitioning to a new principal. The former principal will be taking over at a new charter school in town.

The new principal, Mrs. Jamison, meets us at the door. She’s tall, athletic, articulate, and probably in her early or mid-thirties. She leads us into a conference room where we meet our co-teachers, who sit on the opposite side of the table as us.

“Why don’t you each tell us a little bit about yourself?” Mrs. Jamison says.

The question makes me feel like we’re in a bit of a disguised interview. Kim, Diana, and I each stumbled through a response: where we were from, accolades, what we had taught the previous year.

After we finish, Mrs. Jamison explains our new teaching situations. “Co-teaching is like a marriage,” she says.

I’ve never been married, but I’ve failed at enough dating relationships to *not* be comforted by those words. My co-teacher will be a woman named Amanda: 36, pretty, Irish-Catholic, divorced, and coming from a “gifted” program that was just hacked by

district budget cuts. Above all, I wonder: *have I been assigned a babysitter for my second year?*

After the “meeting,” we’re given some time to spend with our new “spouses.” Amanda and I don’t get off to a good start. I tell her about the plans I’ve been working on, but she brushes me off. “Let’s get this bulletin board ready before we leave today,” she says.

I had noticed several other bulletin boards looking new and shiny in the hallway. I feel like anything but an equal as Amanda orders me to staple a border across the top, while she works on the bottom half. It’s actually a great relief to me that she has an idea and materials ready to go. I care so little about bulletin boards, but maybe I’ve lucked into a partner who will take care of this part of the job. When I feel done with my task, we stand back to evaluate the work. *Looks fine to me.* I’m ready to move on to “more important things.”

Amanda shakes her head. “Your part is crooked,” she says. “That won’t do. We have to take it down and do it over again.”

I shake my head and resist my urge to lash back. *What is with these people and their damn bulletin boards?*

## Chapter 19: First Day, Revisited

Without talking to the doctor or psychologist, I've already quit taking the Strattera pills by the time the students show up for their first day of school school. Okay, so I haven't really given the medicine much of a chance, but when I did, I hated the way those pills made my heart beat faster and my head pound and how they worsened my insomnia tendencies. None of this is to say the medicine didn't do its job because I show up to Harrison for the first day of school with a whole unit plan completed and a week ahead in lesson plans. Last year at this time, I barely knew what those things were.

On our first of teaching together, I let Amanda take the instructional lead. She knows the kids, so I figure it makes sense. On their way into our classroom, students smile and hug Amanda. This benefit of easing in, trying to get a feel for the place before having to take charge, is a luxury I didn't have at Northern. I feel even more comfortable when Mr. James surprises me by walking through the door. He introduces his nephew, who's in our class. What are the chances?

"Is you really our teacher?" one girl is asking me.

I tell Jada, who will become my favorite student this year, that she'll have two homeroom teachers this year. Jada is almost inseparable from Nina, the smallest and fieriest student in the class.

I'm not sure what to make of it when one boy tells me that I "look like someone who hunts raccoons." It won't not be the last time Anthony makes me laugh and wonder what the heck he's talking about.

When class starts and Amanda begins her introduction, our students sit up straight and listen. For a lesson, we invite them to come sit on the carpet in front of the class, a normal elementary-school tactic, but certainly not anything I would have tried at Northern, for fear of the terror that would have erupted. Nevertheless, my new students – one group of four at a time – make their way to the carpet peacefully. When we do our first writing exercise, I notice that most of our students write complete sentences. Periods at the end and everything. It's not Rafe's classroom, but Harrison seems to at least possess a basic functionality that could allow for learning to take place.

Maybe I'm too impressed because at lunch with the other two teachers on our team, Amanda warns me, "Don't get used to this."

The others agree. "Our old principal was crazy," one of them says. "Our kids are still terrified, but it won't last. They'll feel out the new principal and things will loosen up."

By Rafe and Kohlberg's understanding of things, what we have going for us at Harrison is a morality of fear. Our students act in a certain way because they're scared of the adults, one in particular, as opposed to making choices from an authentic, personal ethic. I think about Northern and how at home I get to hear Rick tell me about how they're making the opposite transition as we are at the moment: from lax administration to tougher one. My new colleagues go on to tell me of their suspicion that our school may even have cheated on last year's tests.

The warning is well-timed because the four of us hear a commotion out in the hallway. Students are on their way back to the classroom from lunch. We get up and go out in time to see Nina wailing on a larger girl. Weave all over the floor. Amanda grabs

Nina and leads her to the principal's office, leaving me in charge of our students for the first time. I lead them, now giggling and gossiping and reenacting, into the classroom.

"Mista Schuma," Anthony asks me, "have you ever been in a fight?"

I decide to try something. I'll tell my own story. When I was an antsy seventh grader, the same year I had problems with Mrs. Jacobson and Mr. Sefcheck, I chose Steve as the object of my trash-talking, probably because he seemed easy to incite. My friends would giggle at me when I stared at him across the hall, found his eyes, and called him names I barely knew the meaning of. The more I said, the angrier Steve got.

"You don't know who you're messing with!" he shouted at me one day.

*Right, right.* I was invincible. I messed with him for about a week. On Friday night, my posse and I walked out of our town's one-screen movie theater and there he was, his back to me, smoking with his girlfriend.

The audience was in tow, and I couldn't resist. "Watch this, guys," I said.

I strutted toward Steve, and as I approached him, I leaned in just far enough to give him a bump in the shoulder. After the initial contact, I kept walking without saying a thing.

I heard footsteps coming behind me. I turned my head just in time to catch a fist to my jaw. My neck rotated, exposing my other cheek. Bam, another punch. I staggered backwards. My friends stood back, the game no longer funny. Steve kept coming. His third strike split his previous ones, landing right on my mouth. A ringing sound pierced my ears. I couldn't stop my eyes from blinking. Through the fog, I heard Steve's girlfriend screaming at him to stop, the ultimate humiliation. As she pulled him away, I tried to get the last word, although I cannot imagine what there was left to say.

My friends and I knew not to stick around at the scene of a fight. So I walked away, berating myself. Why hadn't I protected my face? Why hadn't I swung back? Why hadn't my friends protected me? Everything but remorse.

Once home, I snuck in a side door and headed to the bathroom. I looked in the mirror and scanned for blood. After wiping my face, I went out to the living room and told my parents about the movie. That was the last physical fight I've ever been in, if I can even call it that. It was also enough to get me to shut up. I never bothered Steve again.

Before I can hammer this "lesson" home to my class, Jada beats me to it with her own interpretation. "So you got beat up?"

The class bursts out laughing. Amanda walks back in the door, and I fear that I've already lost control on a day that started out so promising.

But for the first time in a while, the worst part of my day has nothing to do with teaching. Kim and I decide to work out at the YMCA after school. The company has kindly given Teach For America corps members memberships when we arrived in Jacksonville. In the men's locker room, I change out of my teaching clothes and toss them in a locker. There are no locks on the locker, but I leave my stuff in one anyway.

Am I *still* this naïve? Apparently so. After an hour of lifting weights and riding a stationary bike, I return, ready for a shower. Just to make sure, I check to make sure all my stuff is still in the locker. And it is...except my wallet, which had been full of fifty dollars in cash, half a dozen gift cards, and of course my debit and credit cards.

As soon as I know I have been robbed, I remember a man – white, tall, blond hair, half-naked – who'd been sitting several feet to my left when I changed clothes and left

them in the locker. What was weird was that *he was sitting there*. Not getting undressed, not getting dressed, not drying off, nothing. Was this a ritual of his? To stake out a locker room until some idiot leaves their shit in an unlocked locker? If he had been the thief, how many other times had he done this? I vow to confront him if I ever see him at this gym again, which of course I never do.

I tell a YMCA staff member about the incident, and we fill out a report, but of course there's nothing that can really be done except cancel and reorder my cards. When I do that, I learn that the man who took off with my stuff apparently made a \$16.00 purchase at nearby gas station. Why he didn't spend any more than that, I have no idea. I tell the credit card company that that purchase hadn't been mine, I count the gift cards and cash as a loss, and I move on with my life. Live and learn; obviously, I'll never make *that* mistake again.

## Chapter 20: Year Two

Amanda asks me if I'll co-chaperone a spring trip with the Harrison patrols. Similar to last year except this time to D.C. As I consider her offer, I think about how much I loved living in D.C. and how I still have friends there. I think back to that trip to Atlanta, both the fun we'd had and our disappointing ending. I also think about Rafe, and how he takes his students on trips all over the place. *That must be what you're supposed to do.* I accept Amanda's offer. *I'm in.*

The amount of money we'll need to pull off this trip is sizable enough for Mrs. Jamison to raise her eyebrows. My thought is: we don't have that much to lose by trying, do we? Worse comes to worse, we don't raise enough and we go somewhere closer. An old problem of mine: obliviousness on the front end. Many of the students get right to work raising the funds, though. In the morning or at the end of the school day, they bring me their earnings from selling chocolate bars and Gator Bowl tickets. I faithfully record the amounts in an Excel document, and I turn the money in to our school accountant.

This systematic process is only one of the ways that my second year in Teach For America is easier than my first had been. Amanda and I are opposites, but that works for our "marriage." We flock to tasks at which we are better or enjoy more. She calculates the grades, makes copies, develops classroom procedures that work for our students, and handles most of the communication with administration and parents. She's uncomfortable with writing, though, and wants very little to do with teaching it. Amanda's focus in other

areas frees me to do what *I* want to do: plan and deliver lessons, read papers and write comments on them, conference with students, and track data toward a class goal.

At the end of especially-frustrating days, Amanda and I drink a Coke together or consume some other food that satisfies our sugar cravings. We talk about the day and find a lot of freedom in laughing about it. Kids of any color can be quite funny. It's nice to have a partner now; everything feels less overwhelming.

Our students benefit from the arrangement, too. They know what to expect from us, and they respond by writing essay after essay, story after story. The whole operation is disciplined enough that when our students take the writing portion of the FCAT in February, I'm confident – unlike last year – that they have performed well. We're told that we'll get the results sometime in May.

Even without the Straterra, I'm getting most of my work done during reasonable hours. Rick makes several comments about how he can't believe I'm the same person. I even enjoy living and hanging out at the beach with friends. I pay off my college credit card. There are moments during which I seem to have found what I never found at Northern: some rhythm. Routine. Sanity. But I should also admit that sometimes the calm *bore*s me. *I miss the constant chaos*. I need stress the way we need water. When everything around me is crazy, then I can direct all my energy outwardly. But having two feet on the ground and living a stable life? I have no idea how to do that, or why anyone would want to. When life feels manageable, I don't know how to channel my restlessness or even understand why I *still* feel so restless.

Just because I found some routine doesn't necessarily mean my colleagues were completely wrong about things unraveling at Harrison. When I'm looking for it, there's

enough drama to go around. One day Amanda marches Anthony to the principal's office after he calls her a bitch. Later that afternoon, Anthony's grandmother sticks up for him and wants him moved to a different classroom. Meanwhile, Nina fights most of the girls in the grade and some of the boys, too. Jada stays on Nina's good side, but seems to have a knack for instigating the disputes and then vacating right before her classmates get caught.

Just like at Northern, we have a gun scare. Nina comes in one morning bursting with energy, telling Amanda and me that there's a gun hidden on her walking route to school. She didn't touch it, she tells us, but it's definitely there. Amanda takes Nina to Mrs. Jamison, and the three of them go on a gun hunt. They come back empty-handed, leaving us all to wonder if Nina was mistaken or if someone had taken the gun from its spot.

Worst of all, one day our music teacher, a not-quite-good-enough, aging musician who usually acts like a sweet, old grandpa, flips out on our students. He calls them stupid, tells them their futures will be horrible if they don't shape up and start listening. I don't see any of this happen, but my students tell me about it after they come back to the classroom. The man gets fired for the incident, or maybe he just doesn't come back, and substitutes handle his class for the rest of the school year.

The thing about these incidents is that some of their shock value has worn off. When I hear about them, I hardly blink anymore. Maybe I've even come to expect them. If I've internalized this kind of conflict and trauma as normal, to what degree have my students done the same thing? And in what ways does this lack of a "safe" school

environment subsequently stunt the development of students (and their teachers!) who come here to educate and learn?

I've begun to notice familiar roles that people slide into, coping mechanisms of choice. Nina, as I've already said, is the fighter. Anthony is a lot like Lazaar: funny at times, but acting out in all kinds of creative ways. His grandmother is the angry parent, waiting to pounce every time Anthony gets in trouble. Despite the fact that she, Amanda, Mrs. Jamison, and I hold several conferences about what needs to be done, little progress is made. It gets so bad that Amanda and I try to push the task of communicating Anthony's behavior onto the other because neither of us wants to deal with Grandma's wrath.

I play a role, too, and it's consistent with last year's. I'm the grade's most rigid disciplinarian. Before I arrived at Harrison, the other teachers on my team created a behavior system whereby we pass a clipboard on with each class to their next teacher. The clipboard tracks student misbehavior – talking in the hallway, chewing gum or eating candy, showing up to class without homework, using inappropriate language, fighting – over the course of a school day. I mark down more infractions than the three other team teachers combined.

My marks become a joke to the kids: "Mista Schuma be givin' out marks again."

I guess I still have such a hard time with *any* system we say we're using but in reality aren't following that closely. Part of the "dog-and-pony show," I guess, but what's the point? If we don't like or believe in a system, can't we just be honest and scrap it? Why pretend? Why go through the motions at all?

One incident in particular exposes some of the limitations of the way I see and enact discipline in a classroom of students. It helps me see a little more of the bigger picture. A school day is almost over, and I sit in the back of our classroom at a table in the shape of a half circle. It's my turn to stamp agendas and, if necessary, write notes home to parents. This is Amanda and my way of communicating on a daily basis. When it's Nina's turn to come back, I scribble a note about another fight she's been in. After handing the little book back, I wait for the usual protest and argument. Instead, she looks down and pauses. Tears fill her eyes.

Then she quietly says, "Mista Schuma, it seems like everything we do makes you mad. You used to be fun."

Nina has acted contrary to the role I expected her to play, and her honesty is disarming. Her words reach into me and bring *my* shame to surface. I *can* be that person who communicates only criticism, negativity, and disapproval. But as she has said, I can also be the one who is *alive*, the one people want to be around. I'm *that* teacher, too, who, more often than not, joins right into the madness of recess: swinging on swings, chasing kids, or playing kickball. If I can sometimes be too harsh, perhaps that trait comes from a place of *giving a shit*. On the other hand, nothing triggers me like passivity.

Disengagement, I think, is about the worst way to live and work.

I'm not one or the other of these characteristics that Nina has pointed out; both of them are a part of who I am as a person and teacher. This paradox seems like an important and basic truth about human beings: the best parts of ourselves coexist, often intimately, with our worst. It shouldn't need to be said that the Teach For America program embodies this same tension. It has both flaws and strengths. It is neither "the

cause” nor “the solution” of educational inequity, and it isn’t fair to treat an organization as either a panacea or scapegoat, even if the organization has brought some of that criticism on itself by being ambitious and trying too hard to justify it’s own existence.

It’s during one of those playful recesses that I break one of my black dress shoes. When my sole comes completely off, I do what any self-respecting teacher would do: I kick my shoes off and teach in socks for the rest of the afternoon. Of course fate would have it that Mrs. Jamison walks through the door of our classroom on this day of all days. The lesson halts, and I look over at her, trying to hide my feet *and* my embarrassment.

She glances down and says: “You look comfortable.”

I try to explain, but she isn’t really interested. Instead, she says: “I’ve also been wondering if you lost your iron?”

A couple kids snicker. I look down at my shirt and pants, knowing they’re wrinkled. Nothing new there. I don’t even know *how* to iron clothes, and it’s been a while since I’ve taken my work clothes to a dry cleaner. Mrs. Jamison switches gears and goes on to tell me about a conference in Vancouver that she and a few others are going to in the spring. Do I want to come? It’ll involve missing a few days in the classroom. I tell her of course I want to go to Vancouver in the spring. Who wouldn’t? Something else to look forward to.

Outside of school, a few personal aspects of life threaten any sense of calm and stability I might be experiencing. My brother, Shane, is having a far-worse second year than his first had been. He’s constantly anxious and pounds Nyquil pills in order to fall asleep. He’s had a harder time making friends in Jacksonville than I have, a pattern that is typical in our lives. Sometimes he expresses a deep and concerning paranoia. His

coworkers are united against him, he tells me, and in fact the organizing efforts go all the way up to the Jacksonville mayor. He informs me that everything started to go sour when, as a part of his Concerned Taxpayer group, he put his signature on a lawsuit against the city.

I somewhat believe him about the signature, but the conspiracy part sounds crazy to me. I decide to visit one of the group's meetings. They're small, only a few middle-aged men who don't like the government very much. The meeting employs the Robert Rules of order and bores me to tears. Afterwards, we eat lunch together and make small talk in a bland café. I'm almost disappointed when no conspiracy or lawsuit talk comes up.

I keep going with my investigation, though. Sometimes I worry that Shane misses a lot of work, so one day I neglect my own job at Harrison to visit Shane's classroom. His school isn't far from mine, and his students come from a similar demographic as Harrison's. I don't see any of Shane's colleagues harassing him, but what I do see is equally painful to watch, partially because it's so familiar. Shane has an elaborate power point presentation prepared, a Jeopardy game, but hardly any of his students listen to him. He's timid in his delivery, and his middle schoolers run a lot more of the show than he does. They're all having a great time without learning a thing. Shane tells me he likes his students, but I see a lot more frustration than connection taking place. I share my observations with my parents, and my dad flies down to check on Shane and to visit his classroom, like I had.

When trying to manage Shane isn't enough of a distraction, I create my own mess. One Friday night, I have a few drinks and take Kim out to the bars at Jacksonville

Beach. I pull her body close to mine, crossing boundaries I've never crossed before. It seems so long since I've been with a woman. I invite her to take a walk down to the beach with me, where I kiss her for the first time.

She kisses back, but then she stops and asks me, "Is this for real or are you just drunk and horny?"

I stumble through an answer, try to offer some assurances, but by the time she's sleeping next to me in my bed that night, I'm wondering the same thing she asked. Between carpooling, working, and living together, we spend *so much* time together. The arrangement is convenient, but do I really want romance? *Why is it so hard to know what I want?* And if I don't really know what I want, am I being fair to Kim?

We try a relationship for a while and even tell our housemates. But pretty soon the whole thing starts to feel suffocating to me, like she and I are *always* together, and I have no time for myself. I don't know how to communicate this to her without feeling like an asshole. I back out of the relationship and then listen to her wail in her room for hours. After a few days of barely speaking to each other, we go back to carpooling together, like nothing ever happened. One of my coworkers tells me my life is like the MTV show, *Real World*. I laugh, but her comment doesn't seem like compliment.

## Chapter 21: Adult Field Trips

The Harrison patrols keep bringing me money. The first glitch in the trip-to-D.C. plan is on the adults. The school district won't approve the trip unless we move it to the summer. The obvious concern is about students missing school. I can understand that perspective to a degree, although it seems to assume that our students wouldn't learn and have their worlds broadened by visiting our nation's capitol for the first time. That kind of thinking seems misguided at best.

The larger problem is that once the dates get moved to the week after school ends, the involved faculty members are suddenly less interested. Amanda and Mrs. Jamison agree on a date by which our students need to have raised half the trip's funds. To me, it seems like a cowardice ploy to put the canceling of the trip on the students. The problem, though, is that they respond by raising the right amount of funds by the deadline. I still want the trip to happen, and everyone around me knows it, so I'm not surprised when the decision gets made to cancel the trip anyway at a meeting to which I wasn't invited. This probably isn't the first time in their lives that our students have been promised something and met their end of the bargain, only to have adults not come through for them. The whole situation makes me angry, but there's nothing I can do about it. Just another day in the life. Even worse, I get tasked with communicating and handling the refunds that have to go out to parents. How is it that I always get roped into these things? *And why do I agree to the work without any of the power?*

I'm bitching about the whole thing on Saturday night at the bar. Kim and I are out with two first-year corps members: Tim and Caitlin. Tim is from Colorado, and Caitlin from Vermont. Kim and I suspect they're a couple, but things are pretty vague, so maybe the four of us are a perfect fit. We've gotten into the habit of hanging out and drinking together, and have even started a book club. When J.D. Salinger dies, for example, we all reread *Catcher in the Rye*, and I can't help but notice that Holden Caulfield is a helluva lot more annoying to me at 25 than he was at 15. The book club devolves into about one-third analysis of the book, one-third arguing about philosophy and politics, and one-third therapy. Usually in that order. Tim and Caitlin are unapologetically intellectuals, and that's some of why I like them. Neither of them will make it to their second year in Teach For America.

On this particular night, we're at Pete's Bar, a grungy, smoke-filled dive in Neptune Beach. Josh Grisham described the place in his novel, *The Brethren*. An older crowd hangs there, mostly men trying to prove themselves at ping-pong, pool, or foosball. Tim and I are no exception, with Tim's game being foosball and mine ping-pong. I benefit from lots of good practice back at the house with Rick and Mike but also grew up playing the game with Shane in our family's basement. In between games at Pete's, Caitlin mentions to me that the four of us should drive tonight to Cape Canaveral – about three hours south of Jacksonville – to watch what is supposed to be the last space shuttle take-off at night. *Endeavour*, manned with six astronauts, is set to start its equipment delivery to a space station before the sun comes up.

By the time the four of us leave the bar after midnight, we've agreed to pursue this thrill together. We set off in Kim's four-door black Toyota in search of a town called

Titusville. We've all been listening to a young folk singer named Joe Purdy, and his whiny tunes serenade my drifting in and out of sleep:

Honey you can burn me down  
If I don't hang before  
I just don't care anymore  
No I just don't care anymore  
No I just don't care anymore  
School teachers blues

We arrive at said location, evidenced by bumper-to-bumper traffic at 4:00 a.m. We find a parking spot and follow the crowd to a place by the water. Across a bay, we see a vertical light: presumably the launch pad. If I hadn't known what I was looking at, I would have been convinced the light was a UFO.

We wait patiently in the cold, convinced that this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity will be worth the sacrifice. A few minutes before the allotted time, a group of people in front of us pack up their blankets and walk back in the direction of their cars. "It's been scrubbed," someone says, looking at his iPhone.

I can only infer that "scrubbed" means cancelled or postponed. But why?

We hear the reason on the radio. Apparently, experts decided the sky was "too cloudy." Twenty-four hours later, *Endeavour* will launch upwards into outer space when I'm back in Jacksonville, sleeping comfortably in my bed.

After the decision that was made about the D.C. trip at Harrison, somehow the space-shuttle experience seems cosmic. Some kind of sign or karma or divine judgment. Here we are, working to enlighten minds, to transform lives, to offer children the gift of literacy. So noble, what we're doing, isn't it? But too much of the time, it feels a lot like driving three hours both ways in the middle of the night for a cancelled blast-off.

What does take off, though, is my plane a couple months later. I'm with five faculty members from my school, and we're going to Vancouver for a conference that our school's magnet program, International Baccalaureate, is putting on. We've just gotten back from spring break, so it seems like a second vacation. Plane tickets, three meals a day, and individual rooms in the Hilton, all paid for and approved by the school or district or magnet program or whoever funds these things. I miss three days of school to boot, leaving Amanda behind to handle our students.

"Don't treat me like the principal on this trip," Mrs. Jamison says to us. She even tells us to call her by her first name.

On the first day of the conference, I sit through the bore of core-values discussions and small-group activities that insult my intelligence. Our presenters don't seem any more interested in being in this room than we are. And why would they be? With mountains to the east, water to the west, an immaculate skyline, and greenery everywhere – including on roofs – Vancouver is stunning. An urban planner's dream.

By our third day in the city, it's Mrs. Jamison who first suggests that we opt out of conference sessions. "Let's rent some bikes and see the city," she says.

So that's exactly what we do. Kim and I separate from the others, riding into a huge wooded park, where we spend our day exercising, exploring, and taking pictures. For dinner that night, we meet back up with the others at a Mexican restaurant. We drink. A couple beers in, Mrs. Jamison asks me directly whether I plan to return to Harrison the following year. I guess it's a good sign that she seems to think my coming back is even an option?

But I surprise myself with how quickly I answer. "No," I say.

This conversation is the first I've admitted out loud that I'm done teaching elementary school in Jacksonville. I've applied to and been offered a spot working on staff at Teach For America's summer Institute in Houston. I'll be a Corps Member Advisor, training new corps members. The pay will be decent, but the gig is less than six weeks long, and I have no idea where I'll be or what I'll be doing after that. My next personal and professional crisis is looming, but I'm trying not to think about it.

If the knowledge that I won't be returning upsets Mrs. Jamison at all, she doesn't show it. I doubt it surprises her. Our no-work-and-all-play day keeps right on going. After dinner, Kim and I talk the others, all of whom are older than us, into joining us for an evening out at a nightclub. Instead of dancing among the swarm of people on the first level, we go up to the balcony for more drinks and lean over the railing to watch the more uninhibited people below us.

By the end of the night, it takes very little persuasion from my colleagues in order for me to jump into the hotel fountain. Mrs. Jamison invites us all into her room, where I take a picture on my phone of her falling asleep. Then Kim comes by my room, and I pull her into bed and kiss her, my first advance in several weeks. She'll be working at Institute in Houston, too, so it sounds good in my head to give the relationship another shot. But we're just as doomed the second time around as we had been the first, mostly because I won't let the relationship go anywhere. I'm *still* in no position to know what I want, let alone love a woman well.

## Chapter 22: Leaving Jacksonville

After the FCAT, Amanda and I are free to teach whatever we want. Despite the fact that neither of us really writes poetry, we decide to teach a poetry unit. I introduce the unit to our students by pulling a common lesson plan that uses George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From" poem:

I am from clothespins,  
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.  
I am from the dirt under the back porch.  
(Black, glistening,  
it tasted like beets.)  
I am from the forsythia bush  
the Dutch elm  
whose long-gone limbs I remember  
as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,  
from Imogene and Alafair.  
I'm from the know-it-alls  
and the pass-it-ons,  
from Perk up! and Pipe down!  
I'm from He restoreth my soul  
with a cottonball lamb  
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,  
fried corn and strong coffee.  
From the finger my grandfather lost  
to the auger,  
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box  
spilling old pictures,  
a sift of lost faces  
to drift beneath my dreams.  
I am from those moments--  
snapped before I budded --

leaf-fall from the family tree.

After our class reads the poem together, students write their own poem, based on the model, about where they're "from." We talk about sensory details, and students seemed to especially latch on to poetry that rhymes. I'm blown away by Jada's poem, in particular, full as it is of the smells and sounds and sights and textures of her family and neighborhood. I learn that her "nose ran from (her) uncle's hot spicy shrimp" and that she "slept with a stuffed bear named Teddy Tickles." She "road across the bumpy road seeing mailboxes all in a straight line" and listened "to the rhythm of R&B music playing as (her) folks dance around the fire." With Jada's permission, Amanda and I enter the poem in a district-wide poetry contest for elementary students.

"Did I win?" Jada asks me each morning afterward.

Usually I smile and say I don't know yet. But one morning before school starts, Mrs. Jamison comes by our classroom and tells me Jada received second place among fourth graders in the Duval County school system. The winner came from a Teach For America colleague's class at a different school. The district invites both students to an evening reading in front of parents and teachers. At the reading, I watch Jada stand tall in her black dress as she announces her thoughtfully-chosen lines. It's a moment I'll remember with pride for a long time, and I (objectively) decide that her poem is better than the girl's who won first place.

I've always felt insulted and pitied by the people who told me I will have done my job "if I can just reach one student." What bullshit. We need to reach more than one. And besides, while Jada is brilliant up on that stage, I know she is, in Rafe's language, a "kid 1." She was curious and driven before I ever met her. Amanda and I recognized her talent

and encouraged it, and I guess that counts for something. By not getting too in the way, *we did our job*.

Another school year is winding down, and I've decided not only that I won't be returning to Harrison, but also that I won't be returning to Jacksonville after working Institute in Houston. I still don't know where I'll go after that, but I expect it to be somewhere back in Indiana. On Memorial Day weekend, I drive twenty hours to my parents' house and then fly back to Jacksonville, leaving my car behind, full of boxes of my shit. Shane, who has been offered and has accepted a job teaching Spanish at one of Jacksonville's best private schools, has renewed professional hope. As such, he's begging me to reconsider my decision to leave and even brings job postings over to my house for me to look at. I stand firm in my decision, though, and even enlist Shane's help in putting my bed and a few other furniture items in a storage unit for him. I also mail a few boxes ahead of me to Houston. I finish my time in Jacksonville the way I started it: sleeping on the floor of a bare bedroom.

Shane and I talk my situation through with an older military man at a church we attend. The man advises me to make sure I'm running *to something* and not just away from something. I nod my head but have no idea what he's talking about.

By my last day at Harrison, we still haven't gotten our students' FCAT results. We hear that there's been some kind of hang-up with the scoring. The median score had been too high, or something, so the essays are getting a second look. When our students run out of our classroom for the last time, I have less than twenty-four hours to celebrate and fly to Houston. The last-minute, rushed nature of my goodbye feels familiar. I could

probably use some time to breathe and reflect, but that will have to wait at least another five weeks.

Following an afternoon and night out partying, I return to our house a little tipsy. I don't really have time to sleep. In my bedroom, I throw clothes, toiletries, and a pillow into the biggest suitcase I have. Every few minutes, I run downstairs with a load of old paperwork and Jacksonville souvenirs and unimportant articles of clothing that weren't going to fit. I feel a little like Jack in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: managing my stress by getting rid of things. When life gets heavy, lighten the load. It hasn't yet occurred to me that I also do this with relationships.

Stepping out into the muggy, late-night air, I throw my items that don't make the cut into a trashcan, which spills over with pizza boxes, empty beer cans, and half-filled condiment containers. Upstairs, I muster all the strength I can into zipping my suitcase up. Just as the two sides are about to come together, I hear the dreaded and ever-so-slight *pop!* An unzipping sound follows, and I know I'm fucked. The zipper has broken like a pair of pants bursting from extra flab. I pull off dress shirt off and wipe my face. I have to act quickly.

Rick and Matt are still around for a couple more weeks before they move, to Houston and Dallas, respectively, for long-term positions on staff with Teach For America. My housemates hadn't planned to all go to Texas, but that's the way the chips fell. Rick and Matt are still out at an after-party or drunk and bike-wrecked on the beach or wherever they'll call it a night tonight. I bolt down the steps and toward Matt's room. I go straight for the closet. I open the door. Multiple suitcases sit empty on the floor. One of them looks larger than what I've been working with, so I snag it and dash back

upstairs. I take everything out of the old suitcase and throw it into Matt's. I put a clean shirt on. Kim is my ride to the airport for an early-morning flight, and we have to hurry. I join her in her car and text Matt an apology for stealing his suitcase.

When we board the plane, I become aware of how much I need a shower. I feel sorry for the person sitting next to me, but I drift asleep with my head against the window before the plane even leaves the runway. I don't wake up until the wheels of the plane are grinding against concrete at the Houston airport. Kim and I pick up our luggage and board a shuttle that drives us to Rice University, our home for the summer. We pick up keys for our rooms. I only want to collapse in my twin bed with no sheets, but instead I shower and join my new team of seven recent Teach For America alums from other regions. In the previous months, I had exchanged emails with my supervisor, attended a weekend of training, and completed some written work in preparation for my role. I still wonder how convincing I'll be as a trainer of other teachers. Do *I* even know how to teach yet? No matter what the answer to that question is, on Monday morning I'll trudge into Denting Middle School with my coworkers and fifty green Teach For America teachers-in-training who will be looking to me for help.

## Chapter 23: Institute, Round III

Denting immediately reminds me of Northern. The school's yearly test scores were so abysmal that the state is intervening. Twenty teachers have just been fired. So as you can imagine, by the time we – a bunch of early-twenties types – arrive on the scene, there's a lot of unhappy people around. In fact, some of the fired teachers are even in the building, cleaning up their classrooms and daring *these bunch of kids* to improve the situation.

“Good luck,” someone says to me as I walk by.

“This is insulting,” another one mutters.

Our staff team scouts out the land. The whole place is damp and smells like mildew. Dozens of students roam the halls. Unlike my elementary students in Jacksonville, many of these middle-school students are taller than I am. Of the four schools I have worked at in just over two years, Denting is the most diverse, which is to say that about half of the student population is African-American and the other half Hispanic. It's uncomfortable, bumping up against this inconvenient but undeniable fact again, that minorities get the educational scraps. The cafeteria is sheer chaos: students grouped together by race, coming in and going out of the room at will, almost everyone out of their seats, little games of chase breaking out, laughing and cursing, uneaten food left on tables. If I've just had a bit of a cushy second year at Harrison, I already have the feeling that my summer at Denting will make up for that. This will *not* be the chill Teach For America farewell tour that I was hoping for.

Our first task as a staff – we leave the teaching trainees out of this, lest they lose heart this early in the game – is to address the students at an assembly in the auditorium. We have this whole plan of introductions and role-play and clever interaction, but we quickly abandon all that when we walk in and hear the jeering and deafening noise. The room is much larger than what we need, and the acoustics are terrible. Everything echoes. Like in the cafeteria, students are out of their seats, running around, smacking classmates. Some of the local teachers slip in and sit in the back of the room. Even if we may all want the same thing, the atmosphere feels very us versus them.

Like good Teach For America corps members, we spring into action around the room, saying hi and faking smiles and telling students to sit down. Once again, our humanitarian instincts don't perfectly translate. At best, the students ignore us; at worst, they laugh at us.

“My teacha says we don't have to listen to you!” one pronounces.

Our school director, Dave, is literally a former gangster from New York. He has a bald head, thick arms, and stands over six-feet tall. After earning his GED, he played basketball at an elite-liberal-arts school in the Northeast. A few years later, he quit his investment-banking career to join Teach For America. Quite literally a redemption-story-in-the-flesh. He grabs the microphone and speaks boldly, expecting the students to listen.

He starts spitting black-preacher style. “I know what it's like to be where you are, to think you don't have a future! My name is Mr. Avery, and I'm here from Teach For America. We're going to be your teachers this summer. I know what it's like to grow up like you have, but I know you're smart! We're going to have a good time this summer, and we're going to learn!”

“You ain’t nothin’!” someone calls out.

I can’t ignore the thought: If our staff is this helpless, what will this summer be like for our corps members? They are getting thrown into a much-more-difficult situation than I had encountered in Atlanta two summers ago.

After the assembly, our staff gathers in an old band room. Pictures of famous musicians adorn the wall and black music stands have been pushed to the corners away from the door.

“This has got to change guys,” Dave says. “We’re gonna to do whatever it takes.”

He talks about phone calls and visiting homes. During-school incentives, out-of-school incentives, in-school suspension. For starters, we’ve gotta clean up the lunch room. Get some board games in there. Invest our new teachers in the process. The fact is that almost no amount of money would be large enough to get me to trade places with my eight new trainees who are in Houston for the summer to teach middle-school social studies. Though I have studied these kinds of topics, I’ve never taught social studies or middle school. Still, it will be my job to persuade any potential Cynics in the group *that the task is actually possible*. My cynicism isn’t as deeply-felt as it was when I arrived in Teach For America, but I do still have some of my own doubts. I’ve heard a lot of the rhetoric before, and these students probably have, too.

When I talk to my social studies teachers, I tell them, “I’m strong on action, and weak on sensitivity.” I also warn them that some of my peers will stay up all night with their corps members, but that won’t be me. I need sleep, I tell them, and so do they. Then, I hand my trainees keys to their own classroom, and I present our first PowerPoint training-session of the summer, not too unlike some of the ones I watched two years ago.

The first Cynic I get to persuade is a girl named Shaina, the only teacher in my group slotted for a Jacksonville placement. My initial judgment of her tells me she would outscore me on about any standardized test we could take. Like the rest of my little cohort, Shaina only teaches one class a day. Her class behaves poorly from the start. Like Shane in Jacksonville, Shaina's words, tone, and actions convey fear and distrust. She already seems to question whether or not her students will ever listen to her. Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? After teaching her class, Shaina and the others sit through sessions about teaching and are given time to create plans for upcoming lessons. I observe each of my teachers in the classroom every week.

"Can you sit down?" Shaina asks one student when I'm in the room watching.

*Ugghh, directives, not questions.*

"Lady, I don't wanna sit down!" he jeers back, followed by a chorus of laughter.

"Jordan, that's your warning for laughing," she responds.

"You not even our teacha'," someone else chimes in. "You ain't from here!"

And on and on. Shaina hardly gets through any content, a struggle I have plenty of experience with myself. I have the urge to stand up and teach the class myself. Instead, I scribble an encouraging note to Shaina, leave it in the back of the room, and walk out.

A couple weeks into Institute, I get a phone call from one of the Teach For America staff members back in Jacksonville. "We're concerned about Shaina," he says.

"We hear she's looking at flights to go home."

*What is this, Big Brother?* But he's correct that Shaina has the potential to become one of those corps members who disappear in the middle of the night, never to return. My colleague recommends that I teach Shaina's class one day while she observes.

I agree that this is worth trying, but the plan puts me under some pressure. Having stepped away from teaching mode and into critique mode, I feel nervous about the experiment. What if I, “the veteran,” try and fail while an understudy of mine watches? What if my lesson totally bombs? This is a completely plausible outcome. And if it does, what will this communicate to Shaina about Teach For America and her students and the next two years of her life?

Shaina gladly agrees to hand over her plans. I look them over: the main points aren't quite logical, and the assessment questions confuse me. I rewrite them, but I wonder if that kind of confusion had hindered my own initial attempts to teach, especially at Northern. When it's time to teach, I stand at the door and greet each student individually, telling him or her to sit down quietly and begin working on a brief assignment I've written on the board. The students look confused, but follow the instructions. They begin to test me, interrupting my teaching and insulting their classmates. I calmly but sternly correct them and issue consequences. I check every student's understanding as we progress through the lesson, and their astute answers tell me they're getting it. The lesson doesn't bomb. In fact, it's one of the best and smoothest lessons I've ever taught, probably because I put so much nervous energy into planning and executing it. The lesson goes so well that I honestly think, if only for a second, about sticking around in Houston and getting a teaching job at Denting. Is this a sign that Denting is winning me or am I just feeling a little falsely-inflated from one success? (Or maybe I'm nervous about the fact that I'm a couple weeks away from unemployment.)

I can only hope the lesson has helped Shaina believe she's capable of teaching her kids. If we can get beyond the mindset that the students won't learn, then we can start

sorting out the “how.” Back on Rice’s campus, she and I sit at a picnic table under the shade of a tree and talk about the lesson I taught and that she watched. She tells me the students averaged 100% on the assessment I gave at the end of the period. She was stunned. Were these the same kids who had given her so many problems? What was the difference?

“I was pretty surprised,” she admits to me. “But you’re a lot better teacher than I am.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ve taught for two years, and you haven’t.”

Her eyes dart down to the table, and a tear streaks down her cheek. “Don’t you think it’s different for you and me? Don’t you think they listen better to a bigger man than they do to a woman?”

“Maybe,” I say. “But many of these kids listen best to their mothers. So they can definitely listen to a woman.”

The conversation does what I want it to. From that day forward, Shaina works harder than any corps member in my group. Her class continues to challenge her, but she works through the obstacles, finishes lessons, and sees her class average shoot upward. That Shaina finishes Institute and continues on to Jacksonville is almost surely my best achievement as a staff member in Houston. As it turns out, Shaina is the least of my problems anyway.

Teach For America is obsessed with data, even at Institute. And this goes both ways. I rate my trainees’ progress every week, and they rate me. When I receive my mid-Institute data from the weekly surveys my teachers fill out about me, my scores are

among the lowest at Houston's Institute. I can't believe it. *Why do they hate me?* Dave and I talk through the numbers, and he recommends asking them directly.

So I do. "Guys, what are you not getting that you feel like you need?"

Crickets. I start again. "I see the surveys you all fill out, and I know you're not happy. What's wrong?"

"Well, we need you late at night, and you're not there," one person says.

"Sometimes other staff members help us."

I tell them I understand the frustration, but I'm not going to give up sleeping for the rest of the summer. "What else?"

"You told us you were insensitive at the start of the summer," someone else says.

"We're scared of you."

I nod my head. Wish I could get that one back. Lesson learned. But this is progress: truth is being spoken. "Sorry about that," I mumble.

"And what's this about ratings?" another person says. "Do you really rate us and send the data back to our region?"

From the facial expressions and nods around the room, I can tell this issue is a core one. I have no idea how they heard about our ratings, or even why I hadn't been upfront about what I was doing. But maybe my trainees think they can't trust me, that I'm being dishonest and secretive. I tell them if they want to see how I rated them to ask me the next time we meet one-on-one. Some of them take me up on it; others don't care to know. My relations improve with the group, but the truth is I'm not even all that confident in the ratings I'm issuing. We try so hard to make things quantifiable, but are we being helpful?

My second-to-last Friday at Denting is one of those school days from hell. It starts with a student pulling the fire alarm in the morning, which causes the better part of a whole instructional period to be wasted. The school surveillance system reveals the guilty party to us; a couple students had cut class and were hanging out in an unused upstairs hallway.

Over the course of the summer, we had improved things in the cafeteria, but after the fire alarm incident, today is a step backwards. As a staff member on duty, I spend an hour chasing students around, telling them to sit down or else I will take them to the in-school suspension room we've created. For many of them, the punishment no longer works as a deterrent. As soon as I devote my energy to putting out one "fire," two or three others erupt. When the bell for class finally rings, and most of the students empty out of the room, I can see that my work isn't finished. Students have left behind trays, half-eaten apples, chocolate-milk cartons, hamburger buns, and crumpled Coke cans on tables and even the floor. Resentfully, I pick every last piece of trash up and drop it into the garbage can.

On my way out, I notice a group of television cameras outside, interviewing people about how the school's transition with Teach For America is going. I sneak by and go to the classroom that my cohort uses as base. I'm missing World Cup games and could really use a television right about now. I settle for score updates on ESPN.com. I also check my email. Amanda has sent me a message from Jacksonville. Despite my morning, the e-mail possesses mostly good news. Our writing scores have finally arrived two months late. Our students performed adequately, scoring on grade-level for the writing portion of the test. That accomplishment seems magnified when I read that the rest of the

school and other subjects performed terribly. Our state-issued grade moved from an “A” the previous year to a “D” this year. Because our scores stick out above some of the others, Amanda has been named our school’s teacher of the year.

I’m interrupted by a text message from Dave: “Code Red!” This is our need-everyone-on-deck warning. The message goes on to explain that we’ve gotten wind of a rumor that two gangs are scheduled to brawl in front of the school at dismissal. By the time I get outside, police cars have arrived and parked. Dozens of new teachers, Teach For America staff members, police officers, and even a few parents flank a row of cars lined in front of the school. I look on as about ten Hispanic teenagers gather on one side of the street, African Americans on the other. I recognize a few faces, but most of them look considerably older than Denting students. I quiet my own inner voice of fear and stand tall, ready to put myself in harm’s way if necessary. We try to usher potential-audience members away from the scene and into their parents’ cars or in the direction of their walking route. The stare-down is probably only a few minutes, but with everyone frozen, waiting, and scared, it seems much longer than that. The whole thing is eerie. Police officers stand in between the two groups: trying to engage them in conversation, encouraging them to go home.

Finally, someone yells something in Spanish.

“Another day, Yo!” someone else yells.

The two groups scatter in opposite directions. Parents continue to pick their children up, police officers drive off without sirens, and Teach For America trainees depart on their own bus in the direction of Rice’s campus. I walk back toward the building for a scheduled staff meeting. Inside the band room, our staff restructures the

rows of desks for in-school suspension into a circle. I don't really want to think about anything right now. I have a pen and paper out only to dawdle, not to take notes. I cannot plop down fast enough in the van our staff uses for transportation. I've become the passive person that I can't stand, hoping for a go-through-the-motions, three-minute-rundown. I want a nap, some drinks, and a few girls to flirt with.

"Who meets on Friday after work?" I whine to anyone who will listen. "Only Teach For America."

"You're wrong, Chris!" someone snaps. I turn around. Dave just walked in. He and I have worked well together for most of the summer, so I sit down and shut up. To start the meeting, he lists off the usual concerns, mentions a few logistics, and congratulates us for the way we handled the not-quite-fight.

"Anything else?" Dave asks.

We close our notebooks and start to rise.

"Before we go," someone says, "I do have some concerns." It's Ayden, and I sit back down, cursing his integrity. He's the curriculum specialist at our school, which means he presents most of the training sessions to new corps members. He's an absolute machine: his wiry, African-American frame never seems tired, not in his facilitation during the day or on the dance floor late into the night. That his life's story brought him out of homelessness only adds credence to his commitment. We love and hate him for his energy. "

Today was awful," he says. And we know he's right.

“What do you mean?” Dave asks. If he’s defensive, I can understand why. He’s the boss with the final say, the one who feels most accountable for what happens at Denting.

“Sure, we’ve made a few changes,” Ayden observes, “But for too many of the students, it’s same ‘ol, same ol. Summer is almost over, but we need to send a message. Some of the students have gone through all our consequences already. One more problem and they need to be sent home for good.”

Dave looks around. “Do you guys agree?”

We squirm in silence. I’m not about to get in the middle of this. Dave continues: “You guys are doing a great job. But if you have issues with how things are going, why aren’t you speaking up?”

Still nothing.

“I don’t feel right about letting kids go,” Dave admits. “We’re supposed to reach them.”

“But a few students are still holding a lot of others back,” Ayden replies. “Our corps members deserve some backup from us.”

As I listen, I can imagine similar conversations to this one occurring in schools all over the United States. The difference, though, is that all the decisions in this room will be made by people in their twenties.

“Let me think about this over the weekend,” Dave says. “I’ll send out an e-mail with some ideas at some point.”

At the beginning of that last week at Denting, we announce a dismissal threat for those students who continue to do whatever they want. We even use it for a couple

students. But honestly, it's a quiet week, at least in part because many of our most challenging students don't bother to show up. We keep doing what we've been doing. The other staff members and I observe teachers and supervise in-school suspension; corps members plan lessons and teach. We all stand guard for our hallway duties, refereeing as necessary. We play board games with students in the cafeteria at lunch and dodge ball in the gym on the last day of class. We smile, we laugh, we hug a few students who've come to like us. Then the students are out the door for the last time, and we're finished; I'm officially done with Teach For America.

I hate that I'm becoming a two-and-done Teach For America cliché, but how was I supposed to know without having first tried the program? As much as I wanted it to, Teach For America hasn't and couldn't have answered the questions I wanted it to answer for me. What is it that I want from life? Where do I want to be? *Who am I?* I still only hear silence in response to those questions.

If I keep going without being more secure in who I am, my fear is that when things don't go the way I want them to, which will be often, I will only grow more embittered (and cynical) as I get older. Like way too many other adults, I'm at risk of taking my own disappointments out on the most vulnerable people involved: the children. I *will* teach again – probably older students – but I need to step away for a while. If I'm ever going to get to a place of life beyond mere survival, I need to learn to take care of myself and to set boundaries that prevent me from getting mulled over by how difficult and frustrating the work can be.

After that last day of classes at Denting, one of my trainees and I stroll a few blocks away from Rice to get drinks. The two of us sit down at a table outside and order

Coronas. Malcom is a Vanderbilt graduate who always wears a loose tie. He's been assigned to the Dallas region where Rick, my housemate in Jacksonville, will be working on staff. In watching Malcolm work over the summer, he reminded me a lot of myself from a couple years ago: a confident presenter but not the best planner. He didn't always embrace the craft and hard work of teaching. His performance had been average, best I could tell, but I like him. In a different setting, we probably would have been friends.

"Chris," he says, "You're done with Teach For America now. Why did you do it? You hardly seem like the type."

*What does he mean when he says I'm not "the type"? I made it to the end. Isn't that enough evidence that I belonged?* It's a question I'm not ready for, and yet it is exactly the kind of question I would have asked from where he's sitting. In fact, I'll spend a lot of time thinking about his question *after* I leave Houston.

Instead of arguing with him, I just say, "Maybe you're right."

Unsatisfied with my response, he keeps pushing, keeps trying to solve the mystery.

"You can be totally honest with me now that Institute is over. Do you think Teach For America is doing good work?"

I pause to think. *Wasn't I honest with you during Institute?*

"It's fair to ask that, isn't it?" I say, trying to take his question seriously. I go on to say I hope he keeps asking his questions as he moves through the program. I tell him I've come across a lot of Teach For America people who really care, and I think that counts for something, but that we need more. That good intentions need to be combined with competence. Of course my answer isn't the whole answer, but what answers are ever

really complete? I'm *not* lying to Malcolm, but I *am* trying to conjure up some hope for him as he stares ahead at the next two years of his life.

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