Your classroom has no color. Pale walls pocked with craters where someone removed posters, desks dull under fluorescent lights, windows nonexistent. The carpet is drab and the corners are spotted with dust. It's like a sad painting. But today, students compensate. They stop whispering as you walk in and turn to face them from the front of the room. Their faces shine, prepared to express heartfelt Southern respect. You introduce yourself, unzip your shoulder bag (not a backpack, as if you're an undergraduate), pull out the English Department's First Day of Class Checklist, and write a prompt on the blackboard: for the rest of the period, the students, all freshmen, will write about their life experiences with reading and writing. They flip open notebooks, mostly spirals, and begin.

You walk down one of the aisles in an attempt to be teacherly. You hear the slow snaps of pens swirling on paper. Your lucky dress swishes around your calves. You turn and notice your handwriting on the blackboard. Your letters and words are unevenly spaced; from left to right, each line droops and seems to shrink. You feel suddenly weird and distressed. Then you don't.

Time runs out and they bring you their essays, a few students at a time: a lipsticked girl with a mole on her chin and a tiny pocketbook, an African-American girl with lanky arms and a clean gleaming notebook, a boy with bleached hair and dirty tennis shoes. As you neaten the stack of papers—upper-left corners folded together, spiraled chads torn off—the last student left in the classroom asks to speak with you. She is a large African-American woman with a high, provincial voice.

"Have you taught before?" she asks, her accent thick as syrup. Her name is Joreatha. She looks older than the other students.

"No," you say. "This is my first year." And you're grateful for it. You were lucky to get a course. Lucky to have made it into graduate school at all. You're honestly kind of a loser.

"Good." She pulls her purse further up her shoulder. Her slip is hanging below the hem of her skirt. One of her pupils is off center. "Then maybe we won't have problems."

You are suddenly aware of the papers in your hand. Sweat warms your palm. "Oh?"

She drops her voice. "I've had some trouble with the professors here."

You want to be respectful and open. You want to be her friend. "May I ask why?"

“Prejudice,” she says. The word comes out fragmented, with the stress on the wrong syllables.

“Are you saying that professors have discriminated against you?”

“That’s right.”

“Wow.” You put your hand to your chin. You’re twenty-seven; Joreatha is older. She’s black and Southern. You’re neither, you’re in the South, and it is your first day teaching. You have no idea what to say, so you say the wrong thing: “I can assure you that I would never, ever, do anything like that.”

“Good.”

“Have you gone to the English Office to report this?” She didn’t say trouble with English professors specifically, but that’s what you heard. You’re a graduate student in English. English is often all you hear.

“No,” she says. You tell her where the office is located and to whom she should speak. She pulls an envelope from her purse, holds it on her thigh, and writes down the information, her large hand slanted strangely. You think she must be hurting her wrist. She is sweating.

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After class, you walk into the courtyard between buildings, buy an orange juice, sit at one of the round tables bolted into the brick, and read Joreatha’s essay. She is thirty-five years old, with two teenaged sons, and she ends her narrative in praise of God. Her work is jammed with sentence fragments and errors; in many places, meaning is unintelligible. You put the essay down and lean back, feeling the sun on your arms, cold after the air-conditioned classroom. Is what she said possible? Could any professor be so ignorant? You wonder what might happen if you were accused of racism. You see yourself facing some kind of judicial review board, explaining how you love African-American literature, how you petitioned your undergraduate administration to require a minority literature course for completion of the English major, how reading Roots and Zora Neal Hurston and listening to Etta James and Sister Souljah brought about what you deem an awakening. Then why were you so uncomfortable with Joreatha? Have you missed something? What is it that you don’t understand?

You put Joreatha’s essay away (in your shoulder bag) and go to Writing Workshop, a tutoring program for the hundreds of students who will need extra help to pass Freshman English. The day before, you finished a training session on assessing these first-day essays, and you want to get some advice on Joreatha. When you arrive, the Writing Workshop Director, Sharon, is talking to a student. The student blinks at the sign-up schedules pinned to the wall, backpack bulking, nearly stooping him over. Sharon speaks to him in a low, warm tone as he digs his schedule from his jeans pocket and holds it up, trying to figure out which workshop to sign up for. Each one meets one hour per week, all semester long.
Over his head, Sharon smiles warmly to greet you. She’s been at the university for over twenty years. She wears loose, comfortable clothes, and she rarely seems impatient or preoccupied when you speak to her. You trusted her immediately.

After the student leaves, you tell her what happened.

“I think you should write it all down,” Sharon says, her earrings swinging as she speaks.

That distressed, grave feeling again. You see suited members of the review board reading your teaching documents, checking for traces of intolerance.

“How do you mean?” you ask.

“Narratives of exactly what she said and what you said.” The computers that line the wall behind her are old, about ten years out of date. The Workshop budget is consistently cut. In a fiscal crisis, Workshop will disappear, just like dozens of other student services—learning and counseling centers, travel programs, or language instruction for non-native English speakers.

Administrators—professors who teach either one class per year or none at all—categorize such services as non-academic.

"Just in case," she says. "You probably won't use them, but it might be a good idea to keep records of everything."

"I think she needs Workshop," you say.

"Great," Sharon says. "It can be helpful for returning students. I think she'll really like it." A few students stand awkwardly at the door, holding their books into themselves, and you watch as Sharon waves them in and welcomes them.

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Your class turns out to be responsive, lively, and interested. There is Keoji, who writes a narrative about her illiterate grandmother, a cotton farmer who insisted that Keoji go to college. She loves Workshop. She's proud of her ability to use her thesis statement to generate transitions, to rely less on the comma and more on finishing the thought. There is Kayla, who knew how to cite sources from day one and writes about fascinating topics—one of her essays debunks the notion that Indians had romantic relationships with wild animals. There is Kurt, the former high-school quarterback, who develops an argument about how the half-day privilege he used as a senior left him apathetic and unprepared for college.

But you have reluctant students, too. Alicia skips classes and tells you that the information you ask her to incorporate in her essays is "already in there." Elizabeth scowls at you from the back of the room. Tom, the boy with the bleached hair, tends to dominate discussions and you don't know how to change this dynamic. You think about your students all the time. But you're also taking an Independent Study that requires hundreds of pages of reading and five pages of writing per week, a course on modern drama, another on the teaching of college composition. You're holding office hours, meeting with students, communicating with Workshop tutors. You're busy. You often feel unhinged. You keep catching colds. But when the mid-term passes, you begin to see progress—Yolanda and Keoji are choosing their examples more precisely, Tom is questioning his own ideas, Kurt is reflecting rather than summarizing in his conclusions, and though Elizabeth still scowls, she has learned to simplify her sentences rather than load them up to "sound smart." One idealistic afternoon, as you sip a beer with a friend, you realize that watching people contemplate and discover is like watching the universe in motion, that a moment of learning is a moment of pure, natural action.

And then there is Joreatha. She misses nearly one class a week. Since she's late almost every day, she misses quizzes. You don't know how she can pass, but she's working hard, so you often remind her to meet with you, to come to class, to be on time. You have an absence and a lateness policy—you've told her about these. One day, she calls you from the hospital and says her son has been beaten up. You give her an extension on an essay that's due and ask if you can do anything to help. She says she doesn't think so. Her life is totally foreign to you. You picture it often. You wonder where she might live. In one of those tiny tract houses adjacent to the downtown area, where other African-Americans live? Or maybe in Shantytown, a huge spread of what appears to be concrete, dust, and tiny square houses? (Shantytown backs right into one of the poshest neighborhoods in the city; you know this because you jog along the wall that separates them and it is an actual wall, high and thick, made of stone and wood and vined in ivy, forming a boundary just behind the backyards of the wealthy, blocking them off.) You picture Joreatha's kids—one of whom might be involved with a gang, she's told you—and you see her cooking for them at an ancient stove, or walking with them to a bus stop, or waiting for them to come home. You think her apartment must be wrecked—packed with dusty and grungy things. You think she probably uses food stamps. You think she probably has no friends. You think—

At this point, you usually stop, feeling absurdly white and liberal. You're no longer sure what the latter is supposed to mean or how you're supposed to apply it to this situation. And since neither race nor older students have been subjects in your teacher training, you feel as unprepared for Joreatha as a Southerner for a snowstorm. You go to Dr. Stephenson, the Director of Freshman English and the professor of your college composition course. He listens,

his chin down, his eyes attentive. He's nodding. He was the first one to observe you teach, and he said you were great. A natural. He wants to nominate you for a teaching award. But praise makes you dubious. Are you truly any good? Are your skills real? You're lucky just to be there, really. Your undergrad GPA was a 2.8. And you can't explain grammar. And you still can't use a comma correctly.

You very much want Joreatha to pass, you say to Dr. Stephenson, your hands in your lap, sitting in his office. And she could, with some more work. Her writing has improved. But what about your policies? Late essays are marked down. Absences will kill her. She's already got nine. She seldom makes it to her Workshop. And she's got so much going on, such a hectic life, her son in the hospital, my god. Do you mark down her late work as you would any other student's? Subtract absences from her grade? Do you take her life into account?

"This course is about text," says Dr. Stephenson. His jacket hangs on the back of his chair. He's loosened his tie—you don't remember ever seeing it in place around his neck.

You look puzzled.

"Tell me," he says, leaning forward, his chair creaking. It's old and the green leather is cracked. "How are you supposed to assess her work if you don't have it?" He lifts his thick, wiry eyebrows.

"I don't know," you say.

He leans back, sips from a bottle of water. "You ever sit in on a Workshop?"

You shake your head.

"Well, if you do, you'll see an disproportional number of black students." He shakes his head. "And I mean the blackest of the black. The ones dark as this," he points to a textbook resting on his desk with a glossed ebony cover. "Every year." He shakes his head again. "Now that says a lot more about their prior education than it does about them. What's implicated are certain unconscious practices down here in the public school system. What put them in there."

"So you're saying—"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," he says. "But even so. This is a course about the text." He cups his hands to make a circle on his desk. "You've got personal stuff over here—race, socio-economics, problems." He moves his hands to another spot on his desk. "And over here, you've got the text. The work. They can't confound. You can't grade them on the stuff over there. Only on the text."

"Can I tell her that when she turns in another paper late?"

"Absolutely," he says.

You leave, thanking him and feeling directed. Okay. You've now had guidance from a person you respect. It's time to take a hard line with Joreatha.

The next day, she does not come to class to turn in an essay that she promised to get in on time, one that you went out of your way to meet her about. You worked with her on the idea for over an hour. You had to keep from noticing her breathing, hard and heavy and loud. You drew conjugation boxes, organizational maps, and outlines. You helped her generate a thesis statement. Joreatha is well-mannered—Southern to her crux. "I understand," she said in that high-pitch of uncertainty, in that way that meant she probably didn't. She seemed to have trouble concentrating. The meeting required a lot of mental maneuvering; by its end, you were exhausted.

So when she doesn't show up, you cannot believe it. You are furious. After class, you go to your office and pull her phone number from the class contact list and call her at home.

"You didn't come to class today," you say. Flits and rustles litter the background—a television, a voice, a shuffle.

"I have the paper," she says. "I just couldn't come." She does not apologize. You've spent so much time on her, worrying, consulting, directing, encouraging her to be more articulate in class, managing the environment her statements sometimes create. One day, she said that she preferred to use the words "male" and "female" instead of "man" and "woman" because they were words—language—she'd inherited from her slave ancestors.

"Interesting," you had said, nodding. A few girls giggled—you gave them a hard glance—and other students looked as if they'd been given a puzzle in a foreign language. "Can you elaborate a little?"

"The overseers. That's how they talked about the slaves."

The classroom was quiet as a war memorial.

"That's fascinating," you said. "How have you inherited this language?"

More quiet. You felt the white to black student ratio: four to one.

Joreatha smiled politely. "I'm not sure."

"Okay," you said, turning back to the board. "Maybe we can come back to you later."

Classes like that make you doubt yourself. You replay the ways you directed class discussion and worry that you might have done something wrong, just like you always do whenever something happens with Joreatha. She is draining your confidence, making you acutely aware of whatever you do. And now, on the phone, she won't even apologize, or concede, or anything. She just lets her life pull her down. And, you realize, she actually sounds annoyed that you've called.

You say you'll see her next class and hang up. You sit on your desk and look out the window, down into the courtyard where students sit at tables beneath umbrellas. Then one of your two office-mates comes in. It's Harriet. She's about 29, getting a doctorate in post-colonial literature. She served in the Peace Corps. She speaks Arabic. You know her fiancé.

"Hi," she says, putting a stack of papers on her desk. She wears jeans and a clean sweater.

"Hey." Your arms are crossed and you're breathing like Joreatha, heavy and noisy.

"What's wrong?"

"I just…" your eyes begin to tear. You can't believe it, your anger. "Okay, this student, right? She's 35, she's African-American, she's got two kids. I'm trying to help her but she…" you pick up a pencil. "Today she didn't even come to class!" You break the pencil. You have a twenty-page paper to write about Lillian Hellmann and Arthur Miller; twenty-five Cause and Effect papers to grade; one hundred pages of Peter Elbow (whose sensitive approach to writing instruction annoys you) to read; an inductive/deductive lesson to plan for class the following morning; a sink full of moldy dishes; a cat in need of shots; a car in need of replacement; and you're down to $15 in your checking account.

"There was an essay due today," you say. Tears are not dripping onto your cheeks, but they are blurring your vision. You are bewildered. You don't know how you got to this point.

"Anna," Harriet says. Her voice is calm, laid back, and rational like all those Peace Corps people. "I think you're taking this situation a little too seriously."

You exhale, possibly for the first time in hours. The computer screen is gray and lifeless on the desk behind her. "Really?"

She nods. “She’s older?”

You nod. The tears recede as you blink. You’re conscious of your eyelids.

“Non-traditional students are different.”

Different? You remember Dr. Stephenson. “Oh.”

“Yeah, they have kids, jobs, a lot going on. They require a…” she thinks about it for a second, lightly squeezes her chin with her thumb and index finger. “A particular approach.”

“Uh-huh.” Your voice is growing level.

“Think about it. You walk into this class, having been out of school for years, and here’s this young person that tells you what to do, who’s seen as smarter than you. It can be intimidating. Even threatening.”

You feel your shoulders relax. You’re almost floaty.

“So back off a little. If she fails, she fails. Just do the best you can.”

“I called her at home.”

“You did?”

“Was that stupid?” You’re facing the review board again. You called her at home? They look up from your file.

“Not stupid, but not really necessary. That’s just a line that you probably shouldn’t cross. But don’t worry about it. It’s not a big deal.”

Harriet’s words make a lot of sense. You thank her. “Sure,” she says. “No problem.” She turns to the computer.

Relief settles your stomach. You stare at the picture of Flannery O’Connor you tacked to your wall. From what you know, detachment was part of her nature. A friend of yours, a writer in her 60s, once had O’Connor as a master class instructor. She collected the stories her students had brought into a pile and skimmed first pages. “Slight,” she said. She picked up another. “Slight.” And another. “Slight.” Her students watched, silent. She finally read one up to page two: “At least it isn’t slight.”

Much as you might wish, you are not Flannery O’Connor. Your writing is not succinct. Your vocabulary is repetitive; you often include scenes simply because you like them; your descriptions sound the same, your similes flat; and some clichés (damn it) cannot be made concrete. And you worry far too much about the opinions of others. Just write, you tell yourself. Just write.

And teaching? Teaching requires more detachment than you think you can muster.

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You’re sitting on your bed, reading through student work. The semester is over. Graded portfolios are stacked on your right; ungraded ones are strewn into a sort of circle on your left. Your cat is on the roof catching palmetto bugs—you hear her scratching around.

Keoji managed a B. She’ll be pleased. Tom earned a B+; so did Kurt. Elizabeth and Alicia scraped by with Cs. You’re glad they passed, but you think you might have been too easy on them. You’re not sure. Grading is more difficult than you thought. The day before, your Independent Study professor had said, with a supportive smile, “Just be honest.” So you’re trying, comparing early drafts to final drafts, reviewing additions and deletions, using a calculator to total up their points. You’re frequently impressed by what the students have

managed to learn and use in one semester.

Joreatha falls into this category—her grammar has improved tremendously. She is now a coherent writer. But her ideas are one-sided, something that Freshman English pedagogy discourages. Students need to see all the possible solutions to problems, the complexity of the topics they write about, the fallacies inherent in absolutes. Joreatha's argument essay supports passing the Three Strikes law, but her evidence is merely a series of quotes from the partisan advertisement currently running on television. Then there's her review. (A badly constructed assignment, unfortunately, one you'll have to re-write, since students review their favorite movies as positively as they can. You cringe at sentences like, "Braveheart is the best movie ever," and "Armageddon is arguably one of the most well-acted movies produced in the last ten years.") Joreatha has reviewed Independence Day and her paper is awful, as bad as the movie. She must not have had the time to proofread, because the grammar in this essay is markedly worse—vague pronouns, incorrect verb tenses, comma splices and fragments in every paragraph.

You sigh. Your cat jumps in through the window and mews. You pet her. You remember those mid-term evaluations. You had asked the students to assess their grades thus far, and you picture what Joreatha wrote, the ink blue, her letters small between the lines: "I know I'm not getting an A now, but I will! I know I can do it!" A week ago, the department secretary pulled up Joreatha's grades the previous semester so you could see if your class was an exception. It wasn't. Joreatha had all Fs and Ds. You became very, very, sad. Here's this woman doing the best she can. You know this. Joreatha is doing the best she can. Her improvement makes this clear. But if Joreatha believes that she's doing her best, then she must feel like her best is a D. Or that she's being discriminated against.

Is she? You wonder. Certainly not by you. Any review board would see this. You've given her a lot of breaks. And this is permissible? Malleable course policies? You look at your gradebook. Joreatha has twelve absences, around twenty tardies, and a quiz average of 30%. There is no way she can pass, and if you do pass her, which means a C or better, you wouldn't be helping her out, since her future professors might fail her and then blame Freshman English on the poor quality of her work. Despite the fact that no professors of any rank teach the course, "How did this student pass Freshman English?" is their most frequent maxim. You do not understand how the most educated group of people in the country could demonstrate such ignorance. Freshman English is marginalized: its instructors, its students, its content and context. Freshman English is a microcosm: it embodies every form of oppression in our culture.

You picture Joreatha receiving her grades in the mail and crying, sitting heavily down on a concrete front stoop, or starting a grade appeal, or petitioning that review board that keeps you awake and makes sure you know that you're not really qualified to be doing this. You have Impostor Syndrome. You constantly navigate self-doubt. You were never qualified. Maybe your own sub-standard performance as an undergraduate was truth. And you're so self-centered! If a student doesn't do well, you're to blame. You stare at the grade sheet. You have failed Joreatha. Maybe everything has failed Joreatha. She's trying to move herself and her family out of her socio-economic class, but she can't. You wonder what will happen to her. It's not all your fault: it's racism and poverty. But who can see truth in such broad terms? People in all these victims? And they're your students. They are everybodys' students.

Just be honest, you think. And you feel that you are when you give Joreatha a D. The D that conveys everything, that changes nothing.

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