

Teaching the world to say please

You finally decide to stand up. It's a small classroom, but somehow there are over thirty-five students seated in front of you, staring. You look at all of their faces. You try not to judge why they're here, where they're coming from, or where they're headed. But it's impossible not to judge after this many years. You sift through the pretty smiles, the well-dressed, the bad teeth, the eager, and look for the apathetic — a kid who'll pull out a folded one-subject spiral notebook from his back pocket forty-five minutes into every lecture. There's always one. You used to learn his name first. Call on him. Ignoring the fact that he probably hadn't answered a question since the third grade, the last time a teacher told him he'd done good in anything. You'd like to think you know better now.

— Good evening, I'm Professor . . .

You introduce yourself and pass out the syllabus. You wonder how a classroom can smell like sweat, popcorn, lavender and coffee all at once. You wonder how there can be so many different faces and styles, the absolutes of Black and White and at least thirty different shades in between. Hair from free-flowing to dread, lips from non-existent to prominent, eyes from almonds to half-dollars. Back when you were a student, every one of your classmates always seemed so similar, the fades, the bangs, the kids in socks and sandals, the kids in black trench coats. And you in plaids, jeans, and boots. The only one in that classroom who was definitely not Black, definitely not White. Maybe a little red, but maybe a little yellow, too. And it wasn't like all of your classmates were blonde-haired and blue-eyed, but you knew each and everyone of them had a perfect Aryan sibling at home. So you, an island in that class, couldn't do a thing about the colors in your skin and the accent that reared its head every time you used the word “estrange” or “estrawberry.” And to make things worse, for some reason you had a knack for always picking a seat next to the quietest and angriest White boy. The sort of kid who, along with a diet low in fiber, ate three bowls of hate for breakfast every morning. In every class, you'd turn to Angry White Boy, just in case it was all a front. You've known down White boys all your life.

Hey, do you know this teacher?

Hey, I'm —.

Hey, did you understand the homework?

Yo, you know what time it is?

And every time he'd just look at you like he wanted to chew you up and spit you out for being a faggot. Of course, you'd sit in that seat for the entire semester — like everyone does when they get to college — and look around at your classmates and see lifelong friendships start from a beginning as simple as, 'hey.' You've tried not to carry the past with you, but you can't help it. You know it's not what you know, but who you know. That's how you got this job. And you've got no idea where the next one is coming from.

— These are the required books for this class.

You hold five trade paperbacks in your hand, like you're holding onto half a deli-style sandwich. You wonder why so many of them look like they've been holding onto a fart since Labor Day. Don't they know that they would have to be a certain kind of asshole to fail freshman comp? Some open their notebooks to a clean page and write down your name, the date, and the name of the class. Others start to take notes. You thought about making it easy for them, for yourself, by picking out texts you've memorized. Or even a textbook! But at the last minute, you thought it might be fun to do something different. You tell them how you've read each and every one of those books. You don't tell them that you've only read a few of them cover-to-cover, and the others, you've only read what's *on* their covers. It comes out so good even you believe yourself. You tell them you had them in mind when you chose them. A girl in the front smiles at you.

— This is what I expect from you.

You put the ten-page syllabus down. You talk to them from the heart. That this isn't a hard class, that you could make it easy for them, but that you care about their future. That life's hard. A few of the older students nod in agreement. That life's going to give them shit one day. Might as well get used to it. Some let out sighs. You pause. Then continue. That they have to learn how to deal with adversity.

— *And knowing is half the battle.*

Students haven't gotten your jokes in years.

— But I will work with you.

You've learned that things go smoother when you empower your students. When they think you care. You've tried berating students, telling them they're disrespecting their ancestors by not handing in that essay analyzing hills that only look like white elephants if you have no idea what an elephant

looks like. You know better now. So you tell them that you run this class as if it were the most important thing in your life. You tell them that they should take this class that seriously. There isn't a student in the world that can argue with logic like that.

— You are expected to attend every class.

You can feel their bodies stiffen. Yes, they registered for your class. But that doesn't mean you can assume they understand that they are required to attend class. You know the sorts of schools they're coming from. Eighteen-year-olds walking down hallways grabbing at the nearest ass. Sex taking place in stairways, in bathroom stalls, on the floor of the janitor's closet. Thirteen-year-olds getting smacked in the head daily because their moms don't understand the power of Nike. Teachers counting down the days until they retire. Those same teachers calling their students monkeys and savages. You know what they've been through.

— Four absences and you will automatically fail this course.

They listen. You've never failed anyone for absences. Not even when that kid missed twelve weeks and begged for the opportunity to make it up to you. Nothing in the world like a grown kid with everything going for him telling you that he has to take care of his mother, grandmother, baby sister and work forty hours a week to help out with the rent. It wasn't your fault he failed anyway. He was the one who never turned in his final portfolio. You know you haven't come across as serious as you'd like. You've heard your colleagues tell you to give them hell on the first day, to scare the shit out of them — so the ones you don't want there drop your class. But it never seems to work out that way.

— And three latenesses equal one absence.

You notice a few of them start to blink slower, taking time in between to imagine themselves somewhere else. You know how hard it must be for some of them — not the kids who stroll in late without a care in the world — but the ones in polyester suits and nylon stockings, the ones who haven't loosened their ties, the ones who forgot to change into the white sneakers underneath their desks at work. Many of them will fall asleep at some point during the semester. You remember when you used to take that personally. You'd talk louder. Slam books shut. Even call on them. Till one day when

you realized you can't blame them for being bored. Sometimes you're bored.

— Any questions?

The silence makes your mind wander. You've always believed that the first day of class should be a slow day. A day where everyone gets to know each other. They'll get to know you, and you'll make pretend you've gotten to know them. You tell them a story about yourself. How you're one of them. Public school to public school to public school, where you finally made sense of the world in a classroom much like this one, how you hit a home run that landed you in a fancy graduate school. You always repeat the same exact speech. That if you could make that leap, they could too! Then you go around the room and ask everyone to tell you their name, what borough they're from, and their favorite song lyric. The rest you do without much thinking.

You remember you used to experiment with “alternative” attendance policies. When you thought you could motivate the public college student to attend class on his own. You brought in pictures, the one of Washington crossing the Delaware, the one of that girl pouring milk into a bowl, and Van Gogh's “Starry Night.”

— Professor, that's Washington! I bet his ass was cold with his jacket open like that. Shit, look at all that ice in the water!

— Professor, why is that girl so pale? She sick? She supposed to be a zombie? What's up with the milk? Does it mean what I think it means?

— Professor, this shit is worth how much? Please.

You made them listen to Miles' “I could write a book.” And asked them how they thought he came up with that title.

— Professor, titles don't mean a thing.

You made them write about it all. Told them to move the pen on the paper. You didn't care if they drew pictures. If they repeated words. If they wrote a letter to their dead grandmother, wrote out some favorite lyrics, or the worst poem ever. You just told them to write, while you walked around the class, looking over their shoulders, telling them what incredible stuff they were writing.

Back then, you thought you could run a writer's workshop in a freshman composition classroom. In all of your

freshman composition classes. That they could all be writers if only they applied themselves! You made classwork ninety percent of their grade. And they showed up for a few weeks. If nothing else, you were different from every other teacher they'd had before. You thought you were being like Michelle Pfeiffer or Edward James Olmos. Instead, you were more like Robin Williams trying to be Joe Clark. Except you weren't funny. And you're about as strict as your ninety-year-old grandmother. But that's what watching the Sunday afternoon movie on WPIX taught you: you alone could change the world. One student at a time. And in the process, one student would call you her hero, another would say you were like a father to him. It's been ten years and nothing like this has ever happened. Once you got a Christmas card.

It took everything out of you. You took home a ton of grading. But as long as you handed back work from one class to the next, brought in more pictures and songs to class, everything ran smoothly. But then life happened. Or seven classes at three different campuses, three shifts a week in the tutoring lab, *and* life happened. Students started coming to class with expectations for the first time since they were in grammar school and their third grade teacher promised them a pizza party if they behaved during her class observation. But you couldn't keep up.

Add up two and a half months of four hours of sleep a night; letting your novel slowly move from urgent to afterthought to idea; enough money left over after rent, child support, student loans, Metrocard fare, and bananas — so many bananas — to take your daughter on walks and only walks around Flushing Meadow Park (when she asks about the zoo, all you can think of is to tell her that the animals are very, very, very sick); a girlfriend who little-by-little starts to leave you out of her plans because she's tired of hearing you say, “I can't because I have to work,” which even she knows really means, “I can't because I've got no money;” the paunch; the smell of popcorn emanating from your shoes as if they were extra large buckets of popcorn behind the concession stand at the movies; and the extra responsibility the tenured and the tenure-track *give* you — that you take in the hopes of an extra class or two the following semester. Add all of this up, the fact that you always try your best to take it all with a smile, and you should be proud of the fact you kept it together as long as you did. You're fucking Superman.

Of course, you can't see that. And worse, no one can either. New York City gives out pity the way she gives out affordable housing. And students have no pity in them for yet another teacher that has let them down. This is why you don't have any more experiments in you now.

They *know* you. You should know them a little, but you can't recall a single name, or where anyone is from. They'll be a bunch of faces for a while — the people you stand next to on the E train from Van Wyck to 7th Avenue. You don't learn names till December. When you'll suddenly realize you're going to miss them after all these weeks. It's always like that.

There's nothing left to cover on the syllabus. You reread the college's policy on plagiarism. And that's it. You almost laugh when you realize you've read aloud the same typo you've had for the past five years. You make a mental note to fix it as soon as you get home, again.

— Any more questions?

Someone asks what book they'll need first. Another starts to complain about his financial aid. The girl who smiled at you earlier, asks you if the daily schedule on the syllabus is the homework, or what is due that day. You've always wanted to respond with, read the syllabus. But you don't. Instead, you tell them what they need first. You tell them not to worry about their financial aid. You explain how to read the syllabus. Again. Then you smile at them and let them out fifteen minutes early. Fourteen and a half weeks left. You tell yourself you're not going to count down the nights. Not this semester.

You sit there. Three no shows. You decide to wait. In that empty room, tiny pieces of chalk hang out on the blackboard ledge like the molars of all the students who've left a bit of their soul in that windowless classroom. The whirr and the click of the exhaust fan above you will have you screaming the entire semester. Cough drops. You rub your eyes. The bright white florescents remind you that classrooms and hospital waiting areas are really the same thing. Then it's the thought you try not to have, but can't escape. It always comes to you in an empty classroom: you don't want to turn into the lifetime adjunct, the toothache like a tuning fork wedged in your teeth, the blazer dotted with mustard and ketchup stains, shoes that couldn't be resoled with all the Shoe

Goo in the world, and the hunched shoulders that tell everyone how successful you've been at what you do.

So you'll try harder this semester, you tell yourself.

That this will be your year. It's easy to have a positive outlook on the first day of classes. You like to think you know how the semester will turn out, but no two semesters are ever the same. You look up just in time to see a kid walk in. You welcome him. He walks in with that look: lips pulled to one side of his face in a half-pucker, half-smile. No book-bag. No pen. You hand him a syllabus, and show him the books he'll need for class. He asks you if you've taken attendance. You ask him his name. You mark him present. Then he walks right out. This is the kid you will try to save this semester.