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EDUCATING ESMÉ
DIARY OF A TEACHER'S FIRST YEAR

Esme Raji Codell

Afterword by Jim Trelease

"Hilarious." —People

"Generation X's answer to Bel Kaufman and Frank McCourt." —NEA Today

"Codell is no ordinary teacher." —Chicago Tribune
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Diary
of a Teacher’s
First Year

Esmé Raji Codell

ALGONQUIN BOOKS
OF CHAPEL HILL
2001
All of the names of students, teachers, and administrators herein have been changed.

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To: fifth-grade beginners  
From: Melanie, fifth-grader  

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that going to the fifth grade is going to be fun and not hard well I got something to tell you. You got to know everything. You have to know your division, your time tables, know how to do the.dowy dowy decimal sistem. There are a lot of book she have read this year like *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes, *Greek Myths*, *Helen Keller*, *The Bat-Poet* by Randall Jarrell and . . . and . . . you would find out the rest when you get here. You can not say shut up and you must follow the golden rule and you can not talk in the hall and you must not talk back at the teacher well I think that is enough to let you know about the 5th grade life. Ta ta . . .
June 21

Ismene died. That’s where I’ll start, because it’s with Ismene that my real teaching started.

I cried when I found out. I tried to go to her memorial—I mean, I went—but it was all in Greek, and everybody crossing themselves made me nervous. I couldn’t really concentrate on remembering Ismene, her sharp eyes, like a sparrow. She was my guide. I would not be a teacher without her.

I’m not quite a teacher yet—that is, I haven’t had a class of my own. That’s in September, if I last and if the new school opens on time. I’m surprised Mr. Turner hired me, only twenty-four years old, to help him open a brand-new public school. You would
think he would want someone more experienced. The interview was very brief. He asked, “How would you describe your classroom discipline style?”

I answered, “Assertive.”

He said, “What does that mean?”

“It means I say what I mean and I mean what I say,” I replied.

“Well, say you’re having a problem with a student, how would you deal with it?”

“I would document the child’s behavior and then try interventions such as using successive approximations toward our goal or home involvement, depending on the individual situation,” I explained. After a silence, I added, “I wouldn’t call the office every five minutes.”

He closed the little notebook on his lap and announced, “You’re hired.”

I had to go through a perfunctory interview with a panel that asked silly questions like, “What would you do if a child were to say ‘fuck’ in your classroom?”

“Faint dead away!” I put my hand to my forehead.

“What kind of classroom environment will you create?”

“Do you mean the physical, emotional, or educational environment?”

“I guess I don’t know.”

“Then I guess I don’t know how to answer you,” I confessed, “but I’ll offer examples of each . . .”

I was teary-eyed the whole cab ride home, thinking that I must not really want the job, to answer questions in such a cavalier manner! Why wasn’t I more polite? Me and my big mouth! etc. But when I got home, there was a message from Mr. Turner: “They loved you!”

So now here I am, typing, copying, answering phones, “being flexible,” as Mr. Turner calls it. I think that means doing things you’re not supposed to do for longer than you ever thought you’d have to do them.

Tomorrow Mr. Turner says I should come see the graduation ceremonies at the school where he was vice-principal. They must be planning to make a hot dog out of him—I can’t imagine why he’d let me stop typing for a minute, unless it was to bear witness to his glory.

. . .
July 7

I was right about the ceremony. There was another assembly, with all of the children who were coming to the new school. I approached Mr. Turner. "If you have an intention of introducing me, would you please call me Ms. Esmé rather than Mrs. Codell?"

I was surprised at how my request surprised him. He said, "That's against board policy."

Not having been born yesterday, I replied that in all the other classrooms I had worked in, that is what the children called me.

He seemed bemused. "But it's not your legal name."

He smiled helplessly.

"Certainly it is."

"Your last name."

"Let's pretend... I haven't got a last name. I'll be like... Sade."

He laughed heartily at this, and I laughed too, but then he said, "Well, I think we'll call you Mrs. Cordell." The way he mispronounces my last name makes me wince.

"You can call me what you like." I smiled and tried to maintain a pleasant tone. "But we will see what name I answer to." We made eye contact. He turned away and mumbled something about "women's libbers."

He introduced me as Ms. Esmé. I felt uncomfortable. I didn't mean to be confrontational, but I think I should be able to decide what name I answer to. Mr. Turner is well-intentioned, but it is not enough. He is not clever, he is not intelligent. At least not to me.

I wrote a proposal for a schoolwide Fairy Tale Festival. Mr. Turner approved it, but he said the idea has to first go through administrators, teachers, and community members. I showed my idea to the librarian-to-be. She was skeptical. That's typical. If you give people an idea these days, they just think you are sharing it with them so they can critique it, play devil's advocate, and so on. It doesn't occur to them that they might help or get enthused or at least have the courtesy to get out of your way. Sometimes this frustrates me, but I try deep inside to move beyond it. Sometimes I think, Why invent projects? What is the point? How will I ever accomplish what I set out to do, what I imagine? Then I think
of the past, even before I was born, the great small feats people accomplished. I think of things like Mary Martin washing her hair onstage in South Pacific, or the Kungsholm puppet operas with sixty puppets onstage at once, or the palace built by the postman in France, or the circus I saw in Copenhagen where a woman wore a coat of live minks, or any of the things I enjoy and value, and I think: Those people had to work to accomplish those things, they thought of details, they followed through. Even if I come off as naive and zealous, even if I get on everyone’s nerves, I have to follow these examples. Even if I fail, I have to try and try and try. It may be exhausting, but that is beside the point. The goal is not necessarily to succeed but to keep trying, to be the kind of person who has ideas and see them through.

We’ll see. I aim too high, probably. But if I don’t aim, how will I hit anywhere near the target?

July 8

I hereby attach a copy of what I expect to be a most interesting curiosity, the crowning jewel of my naiveté: my Fairy Tale Festival proposal. Perhaps I will look back on this and think, as I was most condescendingly informed yesterday at the Friends of the School Library Committee meeting (which I organized, by the way, after it was explained to me that a committee needed to be invented because a committee needs to exist to approve a proposal), that it was not realistic to do, as I would surely have known had I been teaching awhile. I said everything I proposed I was willing to coordinate, that I just needed help on the actual day of the festival to supervise for the children’s safety. The vice-principal, Ms. Coil, said no, everything should be a group effort. Then, as a group, they decided they didn’t want to put forth the effort. So, the end. Some of my favorite sections:

FAIRY TALE FASHION SHOW

Is fur still “in” for the Three Bears? What is Cinderella wearing to the ball this season? Miss Riding Hood still sizzles in red (ask any wolf), and Sleeping Beauty is a cutie in her pj’s. The Paper Bag Princess makes a statement without saying a word, while less is more for the
Emperor's New Clothes (boxer shorts)! The possibilities are only as limited as local theaters, closet costumers, good sport volunteer models (adults and children), and our collective imaginations!

Carnival Games
Some ideas:
• Ugly Duckling Match. Find the numbers that match on the bottoms of bobbing plastic ducks in a "pond" (plastic tub).
• Three Billy Goats Gruff Toss. Three beanbags through holes in a thematically painted board wins.

Bookmarks make good inexpensive prizes. What else? Let's brainstorm!

Bake Sale/Book Sale
How about Frog Prince cupcakes (with green food-colored frosting), Thumbelina finger sandwiches, Giant's magic rings (doughnuts) or cookies from Red Riding Hood's basket? Again, volunteerism and imagination are our only limitations.

I only meant that last line to be cheerleading. I was carried away with the idea of infinite possibility. The same sense of infinite possibility, from the sour expressions on the faces of my cohorts, that would compel someone to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel. All that is really necessary, after all, is a little "volunteerism and imagination."

Another gross thing at the meeting: Lillia, a teacher from Italy, about fifty-five years old, was chatting along and came to the word "conspicuous," which she pronounced "copiscuous." Big deal!

But no. Ms. Coil made a hand gesture of a cascading waterfall beneath her chin and enunciated, "Con-SPICK-you-us."

Lillia just looked.
"Con-SPICK-you-us," the vice-principal repeated, clearly wanting Lillia to follow. Wow! Isn't that audacious! I could have smacked her across the nose!
"Yes," Lillia nodded and continued what she was saying. When she came to that word again, she said, "Co-PISS-cue-us."

Congratulate me—I didn't laugh out loud.
What's so hard about saying thank you? Mr. Turner never says it.

He tells me to come in early and tells me to stay hours late. Then he calls me up at 11:30 at night. "I have a principal's meeting tomorrow. What do I think?"

I hardly know what I think when it's nearly midnight, let alone what he thinks. Since he's my boss, I spew off some educational theory that's still fresh in my mind from college. The next day, I go to the meeting with him. When he gets up to speak, it's the exact words of a twenty-four-year-old coming out of a fifty-year-old mouth. Everyone claps. P. T. Barnum would have been proud of such a fraud.

This calling me up late at night has happened more than it should. Sometimes he calls to say, "So, I did a pretty good job today, huh?" Other times he calls to tell me how stupid he thinks the other teacher he hired is, asking, "Why can't she be more like you, Cordell?" (Of course mispronouncing my name.) I don't take this as a compliment at all. Who's to say he's not calling her when he's done calling me, saying how stupid I am?

If he were the sort of person who ever said thank you for anything, I would say, poor man, lonely man. People who don't say thank you, people who ask "What do I think?" people who call people on the phone after a twelve-hour workday, people who talk behind people's backs, well, maybe there's a reason they are lonely. But I think I cured his late-night hellos.

When the phone rang at 11:30 the night before last, I let it ring. The machine answered it, he left his name. I set my alarm clock.

At 3:00 a.m. my alarm clock rang. I called Mr. Turner.

"Oooh! Did I wake you up?"

He grunted in reply.

"I'm so sorry. It's just that you called me so late. I knew you wouldn't call me so late if it wasn't terribly important. So I thought I had better call you back."

Last night I had a phone-free evening.

Mr. Turner keeps asking this woman in her twenties to type stuff for him. Really big stuff, like school improvement plans that are as thick as the width of my thumb, and always at the last minute. She kept coming
in and doing it, but finally she said, "Mr. Turner, I've got two kids at home. I had to leave a pot of macaroni and cheese on the burner. If you're going to keep calling me in to do these big projects, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask to be compensated."

"That's all right." He snatched the pile of papers out of her hand.

"I don't mind doing it, Mr. Turner, but you've got to understand, it's very difficult for me to drop everything and . . ."

"I understand." His voice was even, too even. "It's all right. It's fine. We don't need you. You can go ahead home."

"If that's the way you feel," she said with a shrug.

After she left, Mr. Turner flew into a rage. "Compensated! Compensated! After all I've done for her!" He went on and on about owing favors and one hand washing the other and I'll wash your back you wash mine and reciprocation and how he surely would have compensated her but now that she has asked she can just forget it. He kept asking me, didn't she have the nerve and how dare she. I wanted to ask him how dare

he, and wasn't he embarrassed to call a woman away from her family without offering to compensate her in the first place, but he was in such a fury about what she owed him for some reason that I was too nervous to speak up. So I just said, "Well, she had macaroni and cheese on the burner."

He started his tantrum at 5:30, and I didn't escape from his soliloquy until 7:30. My ears were ringing. As I lay in bed, I thought of quitting. I feel sure now that I am not working for a good person. I thought of Ismene's warning: "You are a very gifted teacher. Don't teach. Be an actress instead." I tried not to think about it.

I fell asleep remembering my last day in the class I taught with Ismene. I had made cookies for the children, brightly iced and sprinkled, in the Moravian shape of a hand with a heart in it. When the children walked down the hall to exit that day, they were all waving these cookie hands at me. Good-bye, Ms. Esmé! Good luck, Ms. Esmé!
JULY 23

Ismene Siteles. Fifth-grade teacher.

I didn’t think I would like her. She seemed so traditional.

“Are you married?” I asked after she asked me.

“No. I have enough children to take care of without a husband.”

Gaunt and graying, she pulled ears and yelled a lot. “Absorb!” she would command. She was startling to watch, and that’s what I was there to do: Watch. One hundred hours of “observation,” that’s the training requirement before student teaching.

On the second day, though, she squinted her penetrating eyes at me and crooked a finger, posing as if she were casting a spell. “You,” she accused. “You are ready.” That was the end of “observation.” For several hundreds of hours, she let me stand in front of the children and read. Ask. Count. Laugh. Yell. Do magic tricks. Teach.

She was a harsh critic. She brought me to tears. Then she dried them. She urged me to forgive myself at the end of each day, that no single thing I could say would break a child . . . or make a child. Still, she taught me not to be too flippant, that, as a doctor cures what ails the body, I must strive to diagnose the roadblocks to learning. Thanks to her generous advice and allowances, I enter my profession with excitement instead of trepidation, and the understanding that, really, I have no right to indulge in a lack of confidence. It would only interfere with the task before me.

Ismene taught me basics: Ignoring bad behavior as long as you can stand it. Maintaining quiet lines. How a soft voice can be more effective than a loud voice. Starting out with positive comments to parents before lowering the boom. Waiting patiently for children to answer questions.

She also made me laugh.

“Where’s your homework?” she asked a boy.

“Suck my dick,” the boy replied.

To everything the boy replied, “Suck my dick.” “Suck my dick.” Every day. “Suck my dick.” Ismene ignored it.

Finally, we were delivering the class to gym.

“Get in line.”

“Suck my dick.”
She pulled him out of line by his ear. “Come with me, Esmé. I need a witness.” I followed.

She dragged him into the boy’s bathroom. They faced each other. His shoulders lifted and fell in his puffy nylon jacket as he breathed forcefully, indignant about his treatment.

“Drop your pants!” She commanded.

“What? You can suck my dick!”

“That, sir, is exactly what I intend to do.”

His mouth fell open with an audible plop. They stood facing each other without moving for an eternity.

At last she spoke. “All year long I’ve been listening to you: ‘Suck my dick! Suck my dick!’ Why would you ask for something so ridiculous at school? From your teacher? Either you are completely crazy or you really want me to ‘suck your dick,’ as you have been insisting. So drop your pants.”

“No,” the mortified boy quavered.

“Then in the future,” she warned in a sinewy, deliberate, almost cheerful growl, “be careful what you ask for. Or a certain old lady just... might... give it to you.” She leaned down and opened both her eyes as wide as they would go and grinned with all her sharp teeth.

I don’t know how many weeks it was before color returned to that boy’s face. I know he didn’t say “Suck my dick” for the rest of the year.

She was my mentor.

I’m confident because I’m prepared.

I will kick pedagogical ass in her memory.

July 28

Mr. Turner got the idea that the businesses in the community should make contributions that could be used as incentives for the children when the new school opens. So we went together to the local business strip, Hollywood Avenue, to solicit donations. Most of the businesses there are pawnshops and smelly fried chicken huts, so I had my doubts about the success of the whole endeavor. Mr. Turner stood impressively over six feet tall. He had donned an elegant pinstriped suit and his hair glistened. He had a prewritten sales pitch, which he enunciated mightily to each store owner as if he were reciting from Hamlet.
None of the owners of the dilapidated stores had anything they could contribute, though the owner of one of the pawnshops liked my necklace. The hairdresser at the hair weave salon locked the door when she saw Mr. Turner coming and shook her head angrily when he knocked.

I tried to make pleasant conversation. I asked him how he came to be a principal. He said the Vietnam War was going on and he felt a black man would be stupid to fight for this country, so he went to college instead. He changed his major from drama to administration so they wouldn’t draft him. Then he asked if I was going to marry my boyfriend. I said I felt that was kind of personal, and that was the end of pleasant conversation.

All in all, a stupid day.

August 5

One great thing is that I get to see the school built from the ground up. The architects take us around. It’s so exciting to think that soon the rooms will be filled with children! I am going to teach the fifth grade.

Today I got to see my classroom for the first time. It has a nice wide window ledge and shelves beneath so I can make displays. Only two things bugged me. One, there were four bullet holes in the window perpendicular to the chalkboard. Mr. Turner says the window will be replaced by the time the kids arrive. The other thing, which is a really weird, ungrateful thing, is that it didn’t smell like a school, which is usually a kind of combination of kitchen cleanser and fish sandwiches. I love smells, and that smell in particular is one of my favorites. When I think of being a teacher, I always think of smelling that smell to my heart’s content. Some fringe benefit! It just smells like sawdust and drippy pipes right now, which has its charm but is not the karma I am looking for. It makes me think, in a secret corner of myself, that I didn’t pick the right school to work at. But that’s just silly!

August 16

There was a meeting at the community center so everyone could meet the teachers of the new school. We were introduced one by one and then stood up be-
hind Mr. Turner. When we were all assembled, it was apparent that there was a disproportionate amount of twenty-something slender white girls wearing short, albeit professional, skirts.

"Is this the fucking Miss America Pageant?" one of the teachers whispered to me out of the side of her mouth.

There were thirty-five of us, out of over eight hundred applicants. I helped Mr. Turner sort through the résumés. Some were handwritten and looked totally mediocre. Mr. Turner insisted we still contact everyone to be interviewed. "You can't tell if they have something to offer just from their résumés," he insisted. Tonight I figured out what it is that we all might have to offer.

September 18

Sorry I haven't written. A lot has been going on, as you can probably imagine.

Setting up my classroom, at long last, was very exciting. I put up a bulletin board with a big red schoolhouse shape without windows (those would come later) that said, "New School . . . You're What Makes It Special." There was a tree covered with apples. Each apple had a number on it. Thunk, thunk, thunk, it was so gratifying, stapling it to the board. Then I had to arrange the chairs. I noticed other teachers arranging the desks so children would be sitting in cooperative, small groups. I kept thinking that that was politically correct, I should do it like that. But somehow it took all the romance out of the first day of school, when you're supposed to feel very formal and alien, a day when your thoughts are very new and personal. So I decided to be more traditional and put the desks in rows. Besides, I want to seem really mean for a while. I bought black pointy lace-up boots, like a witch, to wear for the first day, to add to the dramatic effect.

I put up another bulletin board that said, "Solving Conflicts: 1. Tell person what you didn't like. 2. Tell person how it made you feel. 3. Tell person what you want in the future. 4. Person responds with what they can do. Congratulations! You are a Confident Conflict Conqueror!" I didn't make this up. I learned it from a Jewish guy my age I observed teaching at a Good News Christian private school. We are going to have
conflict resolution meetings every Friday, to be mediated eventually by the kids. I also put up a smiley-faced mobile of “Kind Words.”

The third bulletin board I made was a cutout of King Kong on top of an aluminum-foil Empire State Building, with the caption “King Kong Says Reach for the Top!” and on the floors of the Empire State it says, “Listen,” “Think,” “Work carefully;” and “Check your work.” I left space to hang their best papers.

I made a “clothesline” with four articles of fake clothing made of poster board covered with ribbons and sequins and stuff, hung on a rope with clothespins. Each article of clothing has a pocket in back that holds either a fun puzzle or artwork activity or an at-your-desk game. Across the clothes is written “If ... you ... finish ... early.”

There is a spelling center with spelling games, a typewriter, an electric wiggle pen, a box of cornmeal and sponge letters with tempera paint for kids to practice their spelling words. There is also an art center with bins of new, juicy markers, craft books and real art books with pictures of naked people (isn’t it nice to have books where the penises and breasts are already drawn in!), and goodies such as glitter, old wrapping paper, colored glues.

My pièce de résistance is my 3D papier mâché poster with five multiethnic kids’ heads sticking out that says, “Welcome to Cool School.” One of the kids is wearing a real pair of purple sunglasses. I like the girl with steel-wool red hair. I had to make the kids’ heads out of wire first. It took a lot of work to make, but it is gorgeous, if I do say so myself. If I was a kid and saw this, I would just die.

The older teachers shook their heads and told me my room looked overstimulating, which means they are totally jealous because I have the most insanely beautiful classroom ever, of all time. Oh, God! I have beautiful portraits of explorers over the chalkboard, the cloakroom has a cutout panorama of an international open-air market, and there’s a learning center with flags of all nations. I’m sorry, this room is so fun it’s sickening. I feel sorry for any kid who is not in this room.

So, first day. As they entered, they each took a numbered apple off of the bulletin board and matched it
to the numbered apples taped to the desks. This is how they were seated temporarily. I passed out my list of necessary supplies, in English and Spanish. Of the thirty kids, all were black except for about five Mexican kids and one girl who is from Pakistan and one from the Philippines. Then I looked them over and thought, This is my destiny, to have this group of children before me. As they were growing, aging to be fifth graders, I was training, and now we meet, in this unique place and time. The moment felt holy.

I gave them my speech about how mean I was and how I've taught football players and cowboys and dinosaurs and Martians, so a few fifth graders aren't too challenging, but I need the money, so I'd give it a shot. I told them that they were going to work harder than they ever have in their whole lives, so if they want extra credit, they should get a head start on sweating. I told them if they didn't have their supplies by Monday, they already will have earned a check on their report card for preparedness. I showed them my one Golden Rule: “Treat others the way you would like to be treated,” written out in gold glitter.

Then I gave them red and white paper and showed them how to make a little book that looks like a window. Inside they each wrote and illustrated a little composition, “Old School, New School,” about how they liked where they came from and how they felt coming here. Then I hung their work on the big red schoolhouse cutout on the bulletin board, so now the school had little windows you could open and read.

Here are two of my favorites:

“I was so scare I hide under the bed [drawing of two eyes under the bed]. And then I meet nice teacher [drawing of me with curly hair and pearls, smiling ear to ear—after all the trouble I went to to be nasty].”

“My name is Samantha. And I like my Old school because I liked old teachers from 0-4. When I first started school she was mean. But then when I got to know she was nice. And all the other teacher I thought was mean. But once got to know them they were nice. And now I’s the New School with a new teacher. And she says she’s the meanest teacher in the west but I know she’s not. I think just saying that to make us good, kind.”
September 20

I took a cassette-recorded sample of each of the children’s oral reading abilities. Some of them don’t have a real grasp of phonetics. They can’t really comprehend what they’re reading because they are preoccupied with guessing the sound each letter is supposed to make. It was sometimes painful to see these big kids struggling, reading from books they chose, books they felt good about. So I told them we are making an alphabet museum... for the kindergartners. Each day the kids are assigned a letter, and the following day they bring in interesting things they find beginning with that letter. Then we go through each letter as the children present their items. We go through the sounds, “rehearsing” for the little kids. We are learning an alphabet song by Carole King, “Alligators All Around,” which they are going to present. We are going to make displays for each letter on twenty-six desks, using the stuff the kids bring in. A kid will be behind each desk, and two kids will greet the children at the door, and two kids will be reading ABC books to visitors who finish viewing the displays, so every-

one will have a job. The best part is, my fifth graders are getting their needed alphabet practice without having to feel ashamed. After all, it’s not their fault.

Vanessa, who can barely read or write, really likes learning the sign-language alphabet. She is very proud that she can spell her name with it. I told her she could teach the deaf someday.

September 26

I set up a classroom library. We don’t use the reading textbook. What for? Grown-ups don’t read textbooks unless they’re forced. I told them we could read real books so long as they don’t steal any. I make a big show of counting the books at the end of the day. The kids sigh audibly when they’re all there. They look beautiful, like a bookstore, facing out in a big wooden display my uncle made for me. Plus, it covers the bullet-riddled window that never was repaired.

We don’t call the subjects the old-fashioned names in Room 211. Math is “Puzzling,” science is “Mad Scientist Time,” social studies is “T.T.W.E.,” which stands for “Time Travel and World Exploring,” language arts
is “Art of Language,” and reading is “Free Reading Time.” I did this because I figured kids at this age come to me with preconceived notions of what they are good at. This way, a kid who thinks she’s no good in math might turn out to be good at Puzzling, and so on.

In the morning, three things happen religiously. I say good morning, real chipper, to every single child and make sure they say good morning back. Then I collect “troubles” in a “Trouble Basket,” a big green basket into which the children pantomime unburdening their home worries so they can concentrate on school. Sometimes a kid has no troubles. Sometimes a kid piles it in, and I in turn pantomime bearing the burden. This way, too, I can see what disposition the child is in when he or she enters. Finally, before they can come in, they must give me a word, which I print on a piece of tagboard and they keep in an envelope. It can be any word, but preferably one that they heard and don’t really know or one that is personally meaningful. A lot of times the kids ask for Mississippi, just to make me spell it. We go over the words when we do our private reading conferences. I learned this from reading Teacher by Sylvia Ashton-Warner, who taught underprivileged Maori children in New Zealand. She says language should be an organic experience. I love her approach.

It takes a long time to get in the door this way, but by the time we are in, I know every kid has had and given a kind greeting, has had an opportunity to learn something, and has tried to leave his or her worries on the doorstep. Some kids from other classrooms sneak into our line to use the Trouble Basket or to get a word card.

Then the national anthem blares over the intercom. The kids sing with more gusto now that we shout “Play ball!” at the end. We do Puzzling until 10:30, then we alternate Mad Sciencing with T.T.W.E., lunch, reading aloud, Free Reading and journaling, and Art of Language.

At the end of the day, as the kids exit, they fill in the blanks as I call out, “See you in the _______ [morning!].” “Watch out for the _______ [cars!].” “Don’t say _______ [shut up!].” “I love _______ [you!].” This is a game I played with my father at bedtime growing up. It gives the day a nice closure.
We had our first conflict resolution meeting. I explained that I would mediate only the first two meetings, then it was their time, and that I would not interfere unless there was an emergency. I explained some ground rules: Only the mediators and people involved in the conflict could speak. The rest were there for support. We do not argue about what happened in the past but discuss what we desire for the future. We will follow the steps on the bulletin board. After conflicts are resolved, we will go around and give affirmations, that is, say something nice we noticed about each other. Ozzie raised his hand to have a conflict resolved with Ashworth.

“What happened that you didn’t like?”

“He . . .”

“No, we’re not telling on people. Tell him, ‘I didn’t like it when you . . .’”

Ozzie nodded. “Ashworth, I didn’t like it when you tried to kiss me.”

Laughter. I tried to model composure. The class collected itself.

“And how did this make you feel?”

“It made me feel gay.”

Off to a running start.

September 27

After lunch each day I read aloud to them. We push the desks out of the way, pull down the shades, and turn off all the lights, except for an antique Victorian desk lamp I have. It is a very cozy time.

I was reading them The Hundred Dresses by Eleanor Estes, about a Polish immigrant girl who is so poor that she wears the same dress to school every day but insists that she has a hundred dresses lined up in her closet. The girls tease her mercilessly until she moves away. Her antagonists discover that she really did have a hundred dresses . . . a hundred beautiful drawings of dresses. Oh, God, it took everything not to cry when I closed the book! I especially like that the story is told from the teaser’s point of view.

Well, everything was quiet at the end, but then Ashworth asked if he could whisper something in my ear. He whispered, “I have to tell the class something,” and
discreetly showed me that he was missing half of a fin-ger. It was a very macabre moment, but I didn’t flinch.

I faced him toward the class and put my hands on his shoulders. He was trembling terribly. “Ashworth has something personal to share with you. I hope you will keep in mind *The Hundred Dresses* when he tells you.”

“I . . . I only have nine and a half fingers,” he choked. “Please don’t tease me about it.” He held up his hands.

The class hummed, impressed, then was silent as Ashworth shifted on his feet. Finally, Billy called out, “I’ll kick the ass of anyone who makes fun of you!”

“Yeah, me too!” said Kirk.

“Yeah, Ash! You just tell us if anyone from another class messes with you, we’ll beat their ass up and down!”

Yeah, yeah, yeah! The class became united in the spirit of ass-kicking. Ashworth sighed and smiled at me. The power of literature!

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**September 29**

New girl, Esther, from Haiti. Dark, eyes darting, frightened. “She’s got a record of fighting from her other school,” Ms. Coil explained. Who asked her?

“Salut, mon amie!” I welcomed her. Her shoulders dropped, relaxed. Her smile is beautiful and full of mischief.

**THE KIDS LIKE** something new I made: the Thinking Cap. It’s an oversized hat made of prismatic gold paper, with a long prismatic paper tree coming out about two feet off of the top. It says THINKING CAP in black press-on letters across the front. Kids who need more time to give a good answer use it. The kids have become very thoughtful since it’s been introduced.

**September 30**

Shira is Filipino and speaks mostly Tagalog. Sometimes she goes into fetal position under her desk. She has four brothers, named Vincent I, Vincent II, Vincent III, and Vincent IV.
Today Shira was crying because she felt Twanette took her pen. Twanette said no, it was her pen, she got it for 10¢ at Walgreen's. The pen looked more expensive than that, so I didn't really believe it. Plus, I know those kind are sold in sets. And finally, Shira had work in her notebook in that pink ink.

After school, Shira's stepfather came in and told me that Shira complained that Twanette took Shira's menstrual pad out of the garbage in the bathroom and showed it to other girls.

Twanette also chews big wads of gum and took neon green glue she was not supposed to use and gooped up a whole table, almost ruining some expensive books.

So when I saw Twanette's mom had come to pick her up after school, I asked to talk with her. I started by telling her that Twanette has really been improving in completing her work and that I was proud of her efforts. Then I told her the rest, explaining that I hadn't actually seen the menstrual pad thing but that the father complained and we had to be extra sensitive because Shira had been in the country only a couple of months and had trouble speaking up for herself.

Right about then, the mom started wonking Twanette over the head with a rolled-up magazine she was holding. She assured me that she would whip Twanette with a belt at home, adding apologetically that she usually whips Twanette every six months, but she's been behind schedule.

When I suggested that perhaps a belt would not be effective in changing Twanette's attitude, the mom assured me, "Twanette's attitude's gone change after this, believe you me, you won't have no more problems with this girl."

Twanette was hysterical and denying everything. Mom called her a "big dork" and other things. It was very depressing, and I felt responsible. I acted very calm, but when they left I dry-heaved into the wastebasket. I felt like hell.

I hope Twanette doesn't shoot me tomorrow for telling on her.