

Caitlin Moy

“Teacher of the Year”

The thing about nine-year olds is, you never know who to trust. And in my two years and four months at Bradley J. Moore Elementary, my students have shown that they have no problem strolling up to me in their sequin-studded backpacks and lying straight through their teeth about who took Tommy Hillman’s Fruit Roll-up.

Now, do I enjoy teaching? Of course—there’s something fulfilling about passing down knowledge from a curriculum so perfect it hasn’t been changed in twenty-five years. The issue is the clear lack of respect these children show for a system that’s been around longer than they’ve been wiping their noses on their sleeves. The students watch a few YouTube videos on the water cycle and think they can undermine my twenty-four months in the education field *and* my six months as a camp counselor.

“Ms. Thrulip?” My eyes snap up from my copy of *National Geographic Kids* to a little girl with pigtails sitting in the front row.

“Suzy, I said there’s no talking for at least another half hour. Reflect on what you did.”

“But there’s only fourteen more minutes of recess.” I glance at the wall clock. 12:16.

“Well... then you get to spend the beginning of our multiplication lesson in silence, okay?” She slumps down in her chair with a visible pout.

“I didn’t even do anything,” I hear her grumble from under her breath. I direct my gaze to a small basket of push-pins on my desk. On the contrary, this little girl was solely responsible for today’s trainwreck of a Tuesday. Tears were shed, voices were raised, and parents were *almost* called, all in the course of a single morning.

Setting the magazine down, I slide the basket in front of me and sift through the different colors. Suzy swears that she didn't take Clarissa's "Star Student of the Month" poster off the board, but she was the last one in the classroom before lunch. And if there's anything my two summers at Camp Bumbletree as head junior counselor taught me in my teen years, it's that kids are like Tootsie Pops: sweet at first, but full of unpleasant surprises.

With a sigh, I smooth out the wrinkles in my blouse and start my spiel, "Suzy, you see this basket of push-pins?" I give the small plastic container on my desk a light rattle. "I was collecting these from the 'Amazing and Astounding Accomplishments' board earlier today. At that time, Clarissa's poster was still there. But when we all came back in from lunch, the poster was gone." As I'm talking, she burrows her face in her arms out of anger, leaving only a single eye peeking out to glare at me.

"Do you know where it could be?"

"...No."

*Yeah right*, is what almost slips out of my mouth, but instead, I clear my throat, straighten my top, and explain. "Suzy, you went back to the classroom during lunch to grab your water bottle, which makes you the last one in the classroom. Who else could have taken the poster?"

"I'm *telling* you. I didn't take it. It was gone already," she mumbles. I close my eyes, reclining in my chair and stretching out my arms. In these sorts of situations, it's nearly impossible to tell a skilled fibber from an honest girl or guy who was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, but Suzy seems insistent on her side of the story. Analyzing the situation, I remind myself: *She did win third place in the school spelling bee three months ago, so I suppose her academic virtues increase her credibility...*

“Alright, Suzy,” I say, clasping my hands together and resting my elbows on my desk. “I’ll take your word that you didn’t take down Clarissa’s Star Student of the Month poster,” Suzy raises her head slightly, both eyes warily peeking out from the crook of her elbow. “...If you go out to the playground, and bring me back whoever is really responsible.” My statement lingers in the air for a bit, both of us processing what I just said, before Suzy slowly nods her head and squirms out of her seat.

As she slinks out of the room, I almost think to myself, *Was that the right thing to do?*, but before I let a moment’s hesitation give way to an onslaught of second-guessing, I brush the dandruff off my shoulders and shake off any feelings of self-doubt. I’m a great teacher. Not only have I been told that my decision-making process resembles that of a third-grader, which is no doubt a testament to comprehensive understanding of my students’ thoughts and feelings, but I truly believe that my life experiences make me a suitable leader and role-model for these children.

Before long, I hear a pair of squeaky sneakers shuffle their way into the classroom. At the doorway is Nikos, one of my quieter students. “Hi, Nikos, do you know why you’re here?” He walks into the room, stopping a few feet away from my desk.

Playing with his fingers and staring at his shoelaces, he responds, “Suzy told me there was a prize.” Shaking my head, I lay down the facts.

“No, Nikos. A little birdy told me you took Clarissa’s Star Student of the Month poster.” His lack of a reply that follows is either the typical response of a shy child, or rather, the tell of someone guilty caught in the act.

“...And I believe them,” I say, embarking on a good cop/bad cop routine, starting with the bad cop. When I see his bottom lip begin to quiver, and a mass of tears welling up in his eyes, I quickly realize that this was the wrong course of action. “Wait, Nikos, don’t cry—” I start to say, dropping the act immediately, scrambling for a box of tissues. But as I’m shoving wads of Kleenexes toward Nikos’s trembling hands, I hear the distinct chatter of twenty-two little nine and ten-year olds filling the hallway, getting closer and closer.

“Clarissa, are you feeling better?”

“A little.”

“I wonder what happened to your poster.”

In less than a minute, sweaty foreheads and beet red cheeks are filing into the crime scene, worn-out from several rounds of freeze-tag in eighty-five degree weather; Their apparent weariness almost fools me into believing that they’ll take their seats without any obstacles. Nevertheless, with a few revitalizing blasts of A/C, my students spring into action.

“Hey, Nikos is crying!” calls out one of the kids.

“That’s two criers in one day!”

I try ushering the kids away from my desk before they have the chance to gather in a circle around me and Nikos, as if they’re spectators watching a pair of gladiators duke it out in an arena.

“That’s enough everybody. It’s time for math,” I announce, herding the kids into their seats. Making my way over to the whiteboard, juggling my lesson plans, whiteboard markers, and a wavering confidence, I feel the gaze of two-dozen Fruit-Loop-fueled students resting on my back as I draw math equations on the board—and I can tell it’s not yesterday’s word

problems that's on their minds. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Suzy sneaking glances at the bulletin board where a blank space the size of a poster remains. My attention shifts to the left side of the room, where Timmy Feldman's legs are erratically swinging back and forth under his desk, like a defective metronome. In the front row, Molly Crenshaw is furiously scribbling her pencil back and forth, but there's no paper in front of her, only dark pencil markings etched into a wooden surface. And Robert Wu is leaning so far forward in his chair, he could slip and chip a tooth on his desk at any moment. Then there's the odor of a half-eaten ham and cheese sandwich that someone left in their lunchbox one day too many filling every crevice of this stuffy little room. I write the first equation on the board.

*Two. Times. Three. Equals. Si—*

"So is Nikos crying because he took the poster?"

And a wave of chatter is unleashed.

"I knew it!" cries out Jonathon, jolting up from his seat and slamming his hands on his desk. Meanwhile, Julie is repeatedly hitting the side of her pink plastic water bottle with an uncapped Sharpie. In the front of the room, Sarah snaps a pencil in half just for the heck of it.

"Now, class, settle down. Who remembers their multiplication rules?" I say, summoning my Camp Bumbletree counselor training, trying to maintain control.

"I hope justice is served!" proclaims Chloe, pumping her fist up in the air like a superhero. I take a ruler from my desk and anxiously tap the whiteboard like I'm the maid of honor giving a toast at a wedding, except no one will pay attention to what I have to say and I only have five seconds to get my speech out.

“Okay... Suzy! What’s five times three?” I reach out to my straight-A student, confident that she’ll set a good example.

“You told me fifteen minutes ago that I couldn’t talk,” she grumbles in reply, arms crossed.

“Wow, and what a *great* listener you are, Suzy.” Twisting my face in frustration, my eyes dart around the room, looking for a better candidate.

“Alright, Nikos!” I call out. “Do you know—” With puffy, bloodshot eyes, he looks up at me from behind a pile of tissues on his desk, a glob of snot dangling from his nose. I grimace at my mistake.

“Ms. Thrulip!” My head swings in the direction of a tiny, yet shrill voice. Sitting straight up in her chair, arms dramatically flailing about, Clarissa cries out, “Have you seen my poster?”

I take a step backwards, away from the class. With a sigh so deep I’m sure I’ve sucked the pungent day-old lunch meat smell out of the air entirely, I rest my hands on my knees and shake my head.

“That’s enough multiplication for today, everybody. I’m putting on a Bill Nye video until the bell rings.”

Amidst a round of cheers from the class, always pleased to stare at an electronic projection for a few hours, I make my way over to my computer, leaving my students’ education in the hands of a man whose job description falls somewhere between that of Albert Einstein and Steve from *Blue’s Clues*.

With the lights dimmed and everyone’s attention trained on Mr. Nye cutting a wheel of cheese in half for the sake of science, I shrink down into my cushiony desk chair. Behind a wall

of ungraded math tests, picture books, and a “World’s Best Teacher” mug that I picked up at a dollar store, I hide my face from my students.

In all my years as a teacher at Bradley J. Moore Elementary, I’ve taken the wrong class back from a field trip to the Turtleback Zoo, offered homemade peanut butter sandwiches to a kid suffering from an extreme nut allergy, and punished the class with one-minute planks when they all forgot to wish me a happy birthday, but I have *never* falsely accused kids of theft, provoked two emotional outbursts, and lost control of an entire classroom all in the course of a single morning.

Tracing the stains around the rim of my coffee mug, I can feel the pressure of the day slowly nibbling away at everything that I’ve worked for these past few years. A flattering message painted on a cheap ceramic cup will mean nothing to me the second the school gets a single complaint from one of my kids’ parents.

Like a slap in the face, the sound of my phone ringing breaks my train of thought, making my whole body jolt in panic. With my career on the line, all I can do is grab a hold of the receiver and nod along to the message from the school secretary.

“Clarissa, it’s for you. You’re leaving early,” I announce, talking over the audio from the movie.

Picking her head up from her desk, she responds with a simple “okay,” proceeding to grab her backpack from the corner of the room. Sliding her arms through the pink-sequined straps of her bag, I watch as the catalyst of today’s chain of events strolls out of the room, leaving a mass of destruction in her wake. When I see the end of a large, rolled-up, laminated

piece of paper covered in gold stars sticking out from the outermost pocket of her bag, I remember—when it comes to nine-year-olds, you truly never know who to trust.