

She held the basket in the doorway as the high school seniors shuffled in, heads down and backpacks hung by one strap over a slumping shoulder. She blocked each teenager from entering until a smart phone had been relinquished. The new kids who had never had her mewled but the veterans told them to “just give it up, already.” She didn’t slide the basket under her desk until she had collected all twelve.

“And your computers,” she said as they took their seats around the three outsides of a U made with long tables. Its open top faced her and the virgin whiteboard where she stood. Like the rest of the building, everything in the classroom was nearly brand new. “You can keep them, but you can’t have them out. Only paper. You remember paper.”

Of her dozen Senior Creative Writing students, she saw that three were black and four were boys. All were privileged to attend the private high school in Upper Northwest D.C. whose college placements danced like sugarplums in the heads of their overweening parents. Room 2860 was on the top floor of the high, white-clad building. Two more floors, which included a full-sized basketball court, hid underground at the insistence of the plush homeowners in the surrounding neighborhood of 1920s Craftsman bungalows.

Each day they would discuss two original pieces of student writing, she told them, which meant that each week, over three classes, they would discuss a total of six pieces they would write. This in turn meant that each of the twelve students would be critiqued once every two weeks. The assignments would flow from well-known short stories she would give them.

“So you’re responsible for always having a piece ready. No excuses. I want them distributed in hard copy by the end of the class before. And once we critique yours, immediately start the next one. I also expect you to know how to use proper grammar. You

chose this course. It's an elective, so I expect you to know how to write."

"Calyce, are you doing the assignments too?" a black girl with long twists asked her. "John DeGroot always does. That's what my friend says."

"Yeah," a gangly boy said, "He sure doesn't care about grammar."

"Well, I do, and it's Cal-ice, like Alice with a hard C. Not Cal-lease. And be sure to spell it correctly, even though it sounds like that hard thing on the bottom of your foot." She didn't smile. No, there would be no poetry, and no non-fiction. "Use your imaginations, starting with today's assignment." She picked up some printed sheets to distribute. "Read *The Monkey's Paw* and use it to write your own piece focusing on setting, which –"

"Is that it?" A white girl named Madison cut her off. "You don't want plot?"

She waited, staring, a full beat. "We'll get to plot."

"But setting alone isn't impactful."

One of her veterans groaned.

Calyce crossed her arms. "Impactful' is not a word. It's a trendy absurdity, like 'incentivizing' and 'reach out.' He reached out to me, instead of he wrote me an email. You may not use such words in your stories. They are what? Anyone?"

Talia, the groaning veteran, had to say it when Calyce finally pointed to her, but she rolled her eyes in a display to her classmates as she did so. "Index expurgatorius."

"And that's not Harry Potter. Madison, tell us what that means at the beginning of next class and bring in a poster board so we can write words as they arise."

"Seriously?" Madison said. "A poster board?"

When they filed out at the end of class, Talia lingered, pretending to arrange things at the far bottom of her sausaged pack. Once

Calyce knew they were alone, she quietly said to the girl, “How’s your mother? Any better?”

The child didn’t look up as she shook her head.

“Do you want to talk about it? I’ve got a few minutes.”

The girl nodded.



As she tried to make her way through the throng of rushing teenagers shouting and weaving, Roger, the freckled science teacher, came abreast of her in the hallway. They maneuvered shoulder-to-shoulder to create a wedge that diverted the flow.

“I got that map for you,” he said loudly so she could hear him. “To show you the topography, remember? I’ll bring it in.”

He was gone, having stepped ahead of her as the tide took him. All she could see was his red hair that curled like peaked whipped cream, and soon even that confection was swallowed.



Twenty minutes later she was squeezed onto a chair at a small round table in a little room next to the English Department faculty office. The walk-in-closet-sized space served as storage unit, winter coat rack, book depository and conference room. If four people met the table had to be pulled away from the wall, where the whiteboard was. Its ribbed metal bottom lip poked now into her left shoulder. She waited with her papers lined up neatly on the fake wood tabletop as she squinted through her reading glasses to text on her phone, holding it with her left hand and stabbing letters with her right index finger.

John DeGroot, the head of the high school’s English Department, returned finally. “Everything okay?” he asked as he shoved a short stack of books on the floor with his foot to close the door.

“It’s my sister.” Calyce clicked the phone off. “There’s something wrong with my mother but Nina thinks I’m crazy, at least that’s what I’m getting from these texts. Three words. Why doesn’t anyone talk anymore?”

DeGroot had fine white hair in gauzy tufts and small, close-set eyes straddling the narrow bridge of a beaked nose above an edged jaw parallel to the noticeable ridges of his windpipe. “Why does Nina think you’re crazy?”

“Mom didn’t come for Labor Day and she was supposed to stay for two weeks. I went to the airport but she didn’t show up. She says she just changed her mind.”

“Has she done that before?”

She nodded. “But you know that feeling when something’s not right?”

“I do.” He scrolled on his laptop.

Calyce still had two things to discuss. First was the new teacher, a young black woman who had already sent around a multitude of emails with her “thoughts” about the curriculum. “Who is this child?” Calyce said.

“It’s Amita’s first teaching job.”

“She doesn’t understand politics.”

He smiled. “And you do? She reminds me of you all those years ago. Be nice to her.”

Last was the senior creative writing class Calyce was teaching for the first time, and she told him she was nervous because she wasn’t a writer. DeGroot told her to relax. She didn’t have to use the same short story prompts he had used for years but should find pieces that spoke to her. And yes, he confirmed, he had done the assignments along with the kids, although he hadn’t always shared them. “It kept me attuned to the process of writing.”

“I’m not a writer,” she said again. “Grammar I know but imagination eludes me.”

“Life’s not as empirical as you make it.”

He thanked her again for being willing to teach his class at the last minute and in addition to her English 9 for freshmen. He said it meant a great deal to him, that she would cover for him, particularly since he hadn’t given her a reason.

“I figured it was Steven,” she said. “And you would have done the same for me.”

He said she deserved to know why he had asked her to do it. He hadn’t been able to say before, it was all in flux, but he had finalized things that morning with the school’s Head of Academics, so he could tell her. “I’m retiring.”

Calyce blinked.

He hurried to say, “Don’t worry, I’m not leaving until June, but I can’t do it any more, not with my brother institutionalized. What Steven did really threw us and he’s alone out there.”

“But you promised,” she said.

“You’ve got Belinda.”

“She’s a history teacher. Can’t you work part-time?”

“He nearly died, Calyce.”

She finally registered the closed door. DeGroot said, “I know we promised each other another five years, but I can’t do that now. I’m here all this year but with time off whenever I need it. You’ll be head of the department next year like you’ve always wanted, and I’m asking Hank’s approval to make you Interim Head immediately, so it’ll be a *fait accompli*. You’re younger than I am. You’ll have years to run all these pain-in-the-ass people we hired.”



“Did he say what Janice is going to do?” Belinda asked as they walked into the noisy faculty lunchroom at first period lunch that same day.

“Only he’s retiring, not her. She’s staying on as Vice Principal.” Calyce lowered her voice as she talked about John’s wife. “He said they need the money.”

Not all the tables were occupied. At one, next to the double row of small windows that punched square holes in the vast white-brick outside wall, three English teachers sat talking and eating. One of them was the young black woman, Amita, who had sent all the emails. She was flanked by a white woman in an olive sweater set and a broad-cheeked white man in his thirties. The other three chairs at the table were empty.

“Is that the new teacher?” Belinda whispered.

Calyce nodded but didn’t lead them over, choosing instead an empty table by the entrance, near a row of short cabinets on which a microwave sat with its door open. Calyce smelled chicken noodle soup. “He likes her. I don’t.”

Belinda scanned the other table. “Dan?”

Calyce nodded. “Let him deal with her. I like your new ‘do.’”

Belinda was pulling plastic containers from her neoprene lunch bag. “I had to stop paying all that money.”

Calyce was doing the same, laying a place for herself perfectly with her fork on her napkin on the left and a knife and spoon on the right. “It’s shorter but I like it. The big earrings help.”

Belinda jangled them, bouncing her gray spirals. “You know the best part? I can scratch my head.”

The lunchroom’s ground-level portholes faced the school’s long entrance driveway, down which boisterous teenagers streamed like fire ants to the quick eateries they sought in their daily flight from the school cafeteria. Through a window Calyce saw a car edging its way through a mass of young people.

“All the girls have the same short shorts,” Calyce said as she peered out. “Their backsides are falling out.”

Four tables away, the three English teachers laughed as a math teacher joined them. The perky young man had curly hair and earnest brown eyes. Unlike the others, who dressed casually, he wore a short-sleeved white dress shirt and a red-striped tie. "That will wear off," Calyce said to her friend.

"Are you okay? You're in a mood today."

"It's Damion. What's he doing bartending?"

"Cut off his internet."

"What?"

"Cut it off. You know, intermittently. Turn the Wi-Fi on and off when he's home, secretly, so he doesn't know. 'Gosh, honey, I don't know what's wrong with it.' That'll make him get his own place."

"I don't want him to get his own place. I just want him to get a career. He spends money like water."

Belinda waved goodbye at a woman leaving. "So show him how much it really costs to run a household, and show him he spends more than he earns. He's a business major. He'll understand that."

"May I join you?" a deep male voice. It was Roger, the red-headed science teacher, who looked and dressed like a Brawny commercial. Belinda made eyes playfully at Calyce, but the man towered so far above them he didn't see it. When Calyce didn't answer, her friend jumped in.

"Sure." Belinda patted the seat next to Calyce, and he stepped over quickly to take it.



Two Sundays later she stood impatiently in her kitchen holding an armload of carefully folded clothes and a ceramic mug of fast-cooling coffee. She had made brunch just an hour before, but her son still had his close-cropped fade deep inside her refrigerator.

“You think if you stare long enough things will start dancing?” she asked his back. “Electricity costs money.”

But he didn’t move. Finally, he opened the crisper to select a nectarine as big as his fist. He bit and sucked at the sudden spurt of juice as he walked from the kitchen through the small brown sitting room with his mother padding behind him. “I’m glad we’re doing this,” she said. “Did you print out your bank statements and your credit card bills?”

Damion suddenly stumbled in front of her. Catching one foot behind the other, he flung out his right hand to catch the stair railing, which sent the fruit flying. She heard it thud on a step and then on the tiled floor below.

She turned back to the kitchen. “I’ll get a paper towel.”

Damion didn’t wait but kept heading down, his heavy feet thumping. “If I had a fridge in my room, I wouldn’t have to keep coming up all the time for food.”

He had gone inside already when she returned from throwing away the nectarine, and he had taken his key out of the doorknob, so she had to knock. After a minute Damion let her into his living room with its black leather two-part sectional that cornered on her right, from where a tall chrome floor lamp arced nearly to the spotlight ceiling. Under its globe a black coffee table sat on a rug whose furry white pile matched the two fake-fur throw pillows, one on each couch. Over the back of the far end diagonally away from her was a fake-chinchilla afghan she hadn’t seen before. Its long hairs riffed in the icebox breeze that fell from the ceiling vent.

The sectional’s other half, along the long right wall of the house, faced a flat-screen TV mounted on the left wall shared with the garage. The TV was on and the remote was on the couch next to where Damion usually sat. The football game cast the only colors in the monochromatic room. Even the clean clothes she was delivering were all dove grays and blacks.

Beyond the TV a short hall led to the full bath and dim bedroom, where Calyce saw the unmade edge of his queen-sized bed. On the new carpet lay a balled up and surely wet white bath towel.

"Let's start with inflow and outgo," she said as she sat. "I don't want to have to pay your car insurance again like I had to last week."

"Careful of the mug." Damion pointed, then went into his bathroom and closed the door.

She waited, eyeing the towel. When he emerged minutes later, patting his hair, she said, "It's like ice in here. And dark. Do you still have the bedroom blinds closed?"

He pinched the razor creases of his charcoal slacks as he sat.

"Where are your papers?" she asked.

"I know what happened. It was that blue suit you had me buy for Jay Jay's wedding. Plus that shirt and tie. And these shoes. Altogether, it cost me a thousand."

"A thousand dollars? That's my mortgage."

One shoulder moved. "You said you wanted me to look good."

"I told you to shop at Macy's. Where did you go?"

"You said I looked 'better than every other cousin there.' Plus I need it for interviewing."

"But a thousand dollars for a plain blue suit?"

"You haven't bought a man's clothes in twenty years. That's what a good one costs. But that's why I can't pay my minimums, and if I don't pay them by tomorrow, there'll be more late fees."

She shook her head at him. "You can't keep waiting until the last minute. What are the balances?"

He lifted his right ankle onto his left knee. She saw a matte black sock above a polished black dress shoe. "The minimums aren't much," he said. "A hundred each for the two of them."

He paused. She stared at his foot.

He said, "I could always work a day shift."

“No. No. I want you –”

“To have my days free for interviews, I know, but you can’t have it both ways. I can either be available during the days or be able to pay my credit cards.” He tilted his head.

“I want you to focus on your job search, of course.”

“Of course, but these bills distract me. I don’t need the whole thousand. I could ask for that. After all, you’re the one who wanted me to buy it. But just a couple hundred. Oh, and maybe some cash too. So make it four. Five.”

“I don’t have five hundred dollars.”

“Sure you do. Not in your checking but I went over all your bank accounts like you told me, to see how you manage your money.” He smiled. “See, I do do my homework, and you say I sleep all the time. You’ve got two thousand in savings, so it won’t affect your cash flow.”

She frowned as she thought about it.

“Or I could work a day shift,” he said again.

“You’ll pay me back? It’s just a loan?”

“Like I always say, I’ll pay you back as soon as I get that job you want me to find.”



Calyce was on the phone as she drove to school early the next morning. It was Maryland, and the Beltway, and she was holding the phone to her ear, which was illegal, so she was looking for cops all while she was trying to breathe. A sudden coughing fit had stolen her wind.

She gulped as she tried to speak. “I’ve got a job, Nina, an actual job. You’re the one who’s freelance.”

She forced a cough and then another. “I can’t go see Mom until Columbus Day weekend. I’ll pay for you to go if you go this month. I don’t know how, but I’ll pay.”

Driving sixty, she said, “I just talked to her. No, it does not tell her we think she can’t live on her own anymore.”

She took her foot off the gas and the van close behind her braked hard. It honked, and she turned on her flashers. Struggling to breathe, she moved right looking in her side mirror, and she couldn’t listen at the same time to what Nina was saying.

She inched into the far lane and slid onto the narrow shoulder. She hit the brakes, throwing herself forward. She came to a stop as cars whizzed by inches from her.

*Panting, her chest straining in the dry hot sun, Catherine finally reached the cutout blasted into the rock. It was a trough that slashed along the side of the mountain and curved outward to create an overhang like a tunnel sliced vertically. At the same spot, the trail's cement changed from bleached gray to rose flowerpot. Man-made ridges had been added too, running perpendicular to the canyon wall. At the path's outer edge, square-cut blocks had been brick-laid to mark the rim but they didn't barricade the lethal drop.*

*If she stood fully upright she would stumble backward, the grade had steepened so suddenly out of the last turn. The dangerous pitch was obviously the reason for the new traction lines. She focused on her feet, sure she would lose her balance as her right side baked in the sun that had risen above the soaring opposite, eastern wall of the canyon. The backpack she had been told to buy ballooned a load that tilted her frighteningly off-center.*

*She heard them before she saw them, two abreast with their arms swinging, a young couple thumping down the hill toward her in billed caps and special hiking belts that holstered their precious water.*

*"Mojave, not diamondback," the man was saying. "It was yellow."*

*"Sounded like one of those wind-up toys," the woman said.*

*"You know it's illegal to kill them here?" They nodded to her as she shuffled carefully out of their way. She got next to the wall and balanced herself by grabbing it. She slowly raised her head to look ahead, to where the mounting path turned again, left this time and out of sight.*

*"Don't worry!" the man called back to her, laughing. "I'm sure he's gone by now."*