

# Teaching As Leadership

Ms. Lora's Story

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**Anthony**  
2000

**Douglas**  
2001

**Tanya**  
2002

**Roberto**  
2003

**Steven Farr**



## Preface

In the spring of 2000, when Aurora Lora accepted her assignment to Blair Elementary in the Fifth Ward of Houston, she had no idea that new corps members might someday follow her as she arrived at her school for the first time. She could not have imagined that you would someday share her sense of despair as she read her students' first essays, or question her decision to use peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to teach writing, or smile at her struggles to bring civility to the pencil-sharpening line. Aurora could not have known that the relationships she built over her four years at Blair with children like Anthony, Douglas, Tanya, and Roberto would someday help prepare new teachers for their own classrooms and students.

If and when you meet Aurora this summer at your summer training institute, she will no doubt still be incredulous that her story, of the thousands that make up the Teach For America experience, was worthy of your attention and time. She will also, no doubt, still be proud of the incredible effort and achievement of her students.

Much can and should be learned from her experiences at Blair Elementary. By sharing with us some of the inspirational successes, slogging hard work, and painful disappointments that made up her experience, Aurora offers us a first-hand view of the achievement gap and a model for closing it.

You will recognize the strategies she uses and principles she embodies as those highlighted in the Teaching As Leadership text. Our intention in sharing her story with you is to bring those strategies and principles to life—to let you experience their power as she did. We hope that you will recognize in yourself the potential to implement those strategies as successfully as (and, Aurora would insist, more successfully than) she did.

Keep in mind that the central elements of Aurora's story—her and her students' challenges, struggles, hard work, successes, and failures—are all true to Aurora's recollections. At our request, Aurora sat for dozens of hours of interviews, introduced us to some of her students, shared with us photographs, powerpoints, and e-mails, and took us on a tour of Blair Elementary and her community. These sources provided the fodder for many of the details in this story. At the same time, some details (including, for example, lost dialogue, facial expressions, lesson plans, and homework assignments) have been reconstructed or created anew. We have also changed some names to protect children's identity. The necessary reconstruction does not, we hope, compromise Aurora or her children's stories but instead bridges the inevitable gaps between soft-edged memories and the stark vividness of real-time observations. Aurora reviewed this story to help us be sure that the reconstructed elements in the story are true to her experience.

## Acknowledgments

We owe Aurora greater thanks than can be expressed here, for sitting through interminable interviews, for introducing us to Blair and her children, and for sharing even the emotionally trying memories of her experience. Above all, we appreciate her willingness to let us learn from her experience. Also, special thanks goes to Knowledge Development & Public Engagement Associate Alisa Szatrowski who transcribed those interview tapes and profoundly influenced this text with her insights and edits.

## About this Project

Aurora's story was originally developed as part of a still evolving initiative to bring to the general public both the harsh realities of the achievement gap in children's lives as well as the great optimism we have that strong classroom leaders can close that gap for their children. We expect this story to be published more broadly eventually, but we wanted to capture its value as a training tool in the meantime.

## About the Author

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# Teaching As Leadership

## Ms. Lora's Story

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## Prologue

### Meeting Blair

It took a few moments for Aurora to find a way inside.

Most students arrived each morning on foot, so Blair Elementary had no need for a showy bus circle that would indicate some central entrance, and the “front doors” of the school were almost impossible to decipher from the dozens of other intermittent entryways into the low, wide, red-brick, blue-trim buildings. Of course, once she saw them, Aurora realized that she could distinguish the “front doors” from all of the others by the “No Drugs Zone” signs that flanked them. A box of her own childhood books on her hip, she wondered to herself whether the young men she had seen leaning in and out of car windows on the next block this morning were outside of that “zone.” She pushed through the front doors, box first, and took a right into the more prominently marked “Main Office.”

The room was empty and silent, and the medicinal smells of the summer’s cleaning were overwhelming, but Aurora’s crinkled nose had no effect on her nervous smile. Before calling out, she studied the space for a moment. It was small, windowless, and, with very few exceptions, was composed of a narrow range of beige hues. Aurora’s brown eyes involuntarily scanned the exceptions—the wet-shiny porcelain apple pencil holder on the high counter in front of her, the pink zinnias on the desk beyond that, and the two, sad, blue balloons that apparently once floated in the room but now hung by a thin ribbon from the back of one of the two office chairs.

Notwithstanding the number of chairs, the number of computers indicated that three people inhabited the small area behind the counter. Two of several doors on the back wall were labeled “Principal’s Office,” and “Nurse.”

“Hello?” she said tentatively, but louder than she meant to. Her nose was still being tickled by the smell of lemon-veiled ammonia.

After a moment, she set the box of books down on the bench by the door and stepped back into the hall. She looked up and down the hall and pulled her shoulder-length brown hair into a pony-tail, deftly securing it in place with a black band. Despite the early hour, her olive-shaped and toned face shone with the thinnest veneer of perspiration. She could hear the drone of air conditioners, but they all seemed to be working behind closed classroom doors, conceding the hall to the Houston heat. She wandered down the hall, her usual smile uncharacteristically replaced by a open-mouthed, wide-eyed concentration on her new setting.

Relative to some other urban schools, Blair was actually not in bad shape. Its original core was built in the 1950’s, and almost fifty years later it was like almost every other old campus in the country—a jumbled conglomeration of add-on wings, tin-covered walkways, and seemingly extraneous double metal doors. It even had the requisite, permanent, “temporary” trailer-classroom plopped down in one of the nooks created by the spokes of add-ons. The teachers’ parking lot was also inside the fence, carved out of the space created between the school’s original building and its only two-story addition. Aurora had been told on the phone that her classroom would be on that second floor.

Aurora wandered up and down the shiny-floored hall, peering out of the occasional door and window. The classrooms on this hall seemed to be for kids that were younger than Aurora’s would be. She felt her stomach jump again at the thought of having her own students. As she peeked in each window, she felt the cool air of the classrooms escaping at her feet.

A tiny microcosm of Houston’s infamous zoning-free urban sprawl, Blair Elementary seemed to lack any symmetry at all. Aurora found that any given corner was just as likely to surprise her with a dumpster as with a classroom.

The basics, however, were all there. With little effort, she found the small, window-walled library, its décor dominated by glossy, big-font posters of inspirational sayings and kittens, its low-top

shelves loaded with books organized not by author or the Dewey Decimal System but by an education corporation's assessment of each book's level of difficulty. She also found the green-tiled, sour-milkish cafeteria that was cheered not by windows but by hand-me-downs from the library's poster series. A plywood podium accentuated the small size of the low, curtained stage on one wall, and a rolling, stainless-steel cafeteria buffet dominated the opposite one.

As nervous as she was, Aurora was pleased. Blair Elementary felt welcoming. The only challenge it posed her at the moment was finding someone to let her into her new classroom.

She smiled as she headed back to the Main Office.

This time, a woman was seated at a desk behind the office counter.

"Aurora Lora? Really?" the school secretary said, with only a brief glance at Aurora and her box of materials. "You'll be in Room 210, Ms. Lora. Go to the right until you see the double doors on the left. Those will take you outside and the fourth and fifth grade classrooms are on the second floor of the building at the end of that sidewalk."

Aurora stepped back into the hall, her room key in hand.

Following the school secretary's instructions, she walked right past the "Cafetorium" sign to the two-story wing. It was only her second stroll down this hall, but she was surprised by how quickly this tangle of motley-aged buildings went from primarily confusing to primarily small. At least without children, the school felt cluttered but manageable, jumbled but cozy. And, once inside Blair Elementary's walls, she found that she did think at all about the barbed wire outside them.

Aurora climbed the yellow, glossy-paint stairs of the classroom building, her book-box rocking on her thighs with each step.

So far, the secretary was the only person she'd spoken to. Despite having had two interviews on the phone with the school's principal, Aurora had only met Dr. Werner briefly in person at the summer training institute. Dr. Werner had foregone all small talk and started the interview with "Tell me your best subject."

Aurora had decided to hedge her bets.

"Well, I really enjoy math, but I had the most success in college in my writing classes."

Dr. Werner paused, and then finally smiled and said, "Right answer. You're going to teach fourth grade." It took a moment for Ms. Lora to understand that she'd actually been hired. Except for some small talk about El Paso, that was the extent of the in-person interview.

Aurora turned right, her only choice, at the top of the stairs. Her steps echoed off of the blue lockers and shiny black floor as she made her way down the hall, monitoring the declining room numbers. She felt the gnawing nervousness in her gut return and accelerate. "There's no turning back now," she thought to herself as Room 210 came into view on her right.

There was actually no turning back months ago when she committed to teach in Houston, but Aurora drew some perverse and amused comfort from mentally labeling each new landmark the point of no return. Accepting her assignment, then reading the teaching instruction books, then observing other teachers, then arriving at the summer training institute, then her first day of supervised teaching there—each was a major milestone. Each was a discrete step that helped her parse her trepidation into manageable pieces.

As it was happening, Ms. Lora knew that this first walk down the hall to Room 210 was one of those landmark events. She deliberately looked around in hopes of remembering the moment. Yet another point of no return.

Over the past few weeks, she had struggled and failed to hang on to the fleeting flashes of confidence that she had enjoyed on a few occasions during her intense preparations over the spring and summer. As the school year neared, she had been distancing herself from the Teach For America staff members who tried to reassure her that her "proven record of academic achievement and leadership" in college was going to translate into success for her students. She was positive that no fourth grader was going to care one bit that she got some scholarships for college or that she was a National Hispanic Scholar or President of this or Vice President of that. They would have no interest in the fact that she

woke up to study at 5:30 a.m. and rarely slept before 1 a.m. in order to maintain both her grades and paycheck for the last four years. It's not that she wasn't proud of her loaded resume and varied college experiences. She just couldn't believe that a few months after graduation, she would be responsible for real children.

What confidence Aurora could muster came not from her past accomplishments but instead from the internal engine that had driven her to achieve them. She knew that she was going to make this work, somehow. Her pride would not let her quit, so she would do whatever it took to be successful. Thus, part of the trepidation she felt in the doorway of Room 210 was fear of failure, but most of it was anxiety about embarking on the most challenging adventure of her life—one that she was told by experienced teachers promised gratifying rewards and equally devastating failures.

As she stepped across the threshold into Room 210, she swallowed hard and mumbled to herself, "There's no turning back now." It was louder than she had intended, but hearing her own voice made her smile.

To her surprise and relief, she felt a wash of calm as she surveyed her classroom for the first time. Her mind methodically filled this empty space with all of the many details of her imagined classroom. She set down her box and keys, and crossed her arms, savoring the room's reality.

A white-lined chalkboard dominated the room, wrapping around two of the four walls. One other wall, the one she faced as she stood in the classroom doorway, was all windows, starting above the long, low air conditioner on the floor. The windows overlooked the small faculty parking lot, and she could see her own car parked on the street.

Curiously, several pairs of scissors stuck out from the metal frames of the windows. Aurora walked over and, with some effort, pulled one pair of scissors out of a gap in the metal frame.

The window startled Aurora by jumping open. With even more effort, she pulled the spring-loaded window shut and crammed the pair of scissors back in its place to hold the window closed.

The street below the windows was quiet, and gave the impression that it always was. Across the street in his yard, a man standing next to a shiny car shuffled back and forth as he talked on a cell phone.

The remaining wall of Room 210 was an entire wall of tall, full-door cabinets flush against a wall of large, grid-set, painted bricks. Aurora imagined her desk with its back to those cabinets. She imagined team-inspired tables and chairs clustered around the room. She imagined herself standing in front of that chalkboard with a room full of children.

The nervousness returned with a rush.

## Chapter One

### First Days

190-188 days

**Anthony (Year One)—Flush with Expectation.** His eyes never left the floor, but Ms. Lora could see his neck and ears turn deep, crimson red as Mrs. Franklin walked up and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Well, *Hello*, Anthony Vasquez,” the third-grade teacher said, more to Ms. Lora than to Anthony.

After surveying the line of her former students against the lockers, Ms. Franklin looked back at Ms. Lora. Ms. Franklin’s purple sweat suit in Blair Elementary’s drab hall gave the impression that she was some sort of mascot visiting a hospital.

“I taught this one in third grade, you know?” Ms. Franklin gave an exaggerated sigh and patted Anthony’s shoulder. “He’s dumb but he won’t give you problems, will you Anthony?”

Ms. Lora felt the red in Anthony’s face flood to her own. Mrs. Franklin, seemingly oblivious to her audience’s discomfort, studied Ms. Lora’s eyes for confirmation, for some sign that this first-day rookie was insightful enough to have discovered, and now acknowledge, Anthony’s lack of intelligence.

Finding no signs of understanding in Ms. Lora, Mrs. Franklin leaned in and assumed her best mentor voice. “He’ll probably fail, but don’t worry, he’s pretty quiet.”

She said it loud enough for Anthony, and every student in the class, to hear her.

As the third-grade teacher walked away, she said over her shoulder, “I told Dr. Werner he couldn’t handle it, but she pushed him through anyway. Ms. Lora, I’ve got some new bulletin trim in my room if you need to borrow some. Welcome to Blair. I hope you have a great first day!”

Ms. Lora never said one word.

Perhaps because it was simply unpleasant to watch, or perhaps as a collective signal of disapproval of their former teacher, or perhaps out of genuine empathy for Anthony’s distress in the glare of such unwanted adult attention, his classmates averted their eyes. Many of them appeared to search for the same spot on the floor that Anthony had already found.

As their former teacher turned a corner down the hall, their new one led them into Room 210. Anthony regained his natural color, but unsuccessfully fought back tears, using other students’ feet to navigate his way to his empty seat.

**Douglas (Year Two)—190 Days.** The acrid smell of burning summer-dust in the overhead projector was just starting to take over the room as Ms. Lora counted the names on her seating chart. The carefully drawn map of her classroom on her clipboard was now a mess of arrows, cross-outs, and scribbled names. Of the twenty-four children on the roster she had been given during “inservice” last week, only twenty-one had shown up so far; however, seven surprises had walked in the door. Not only had she been hurriedly adding names to her seating chart, she found herself sketching on her seating chart, adding the file cabinet to serve as one desk, and the homework table as another.

The room was packed with bodies and she was still missing three students, including Douglas Rogers. Ms. Lora had spent the last couple of weeks preparing for his arrival, and had mapped out a particular seat for him, surrounded by students she had heard were calming influences. At least for today that seat was filled by an unexpected member of her class. She wondered if all of her preparation for Douglas would turn out to have been in vain.

Ms. Lora asked the students to set aside their first journal entry on “important people in their lives.” Few of them had noticed her turn on the overhead, but now every pair of eyes was staring at the giant number Ms. Lora had projected on the screen hanging in front of one wall of the classroom.

190 DAYS.

Several students, consciously or not, read it out loud.

Ms. Lora stood in the glare, her arms folded across her chest, part of the “S” in “DAYS” across her face. She waited, letting the room’s interest build.

Several students had called out “what’s that?” or “what’s in 190 days?” before Ms. Lora finally spoke.

“One-hundred and ninety days,” she said loudly and matter-of-factly. And then she waited again. Sensing Ms. Lora’s determination to build drama, and puzzled by her behavior, the students were silent. Their eyes went back and forth from the giant digits to Ms. Lora’s face. After a full minute, Ms. Lora spoke in a hushed voice.

“One-hundred and ninety days. From right this minute, we only have 190 days until you get to prove to me, to the class, to Dr. Werner, to your families, to the state of Texas, and to YOU, what good writers you are.”

Ms. Lora was deliberately talking just loudly enough for students to hear.

“In 190 days, we are going to get to take the Fourth Grade writing test. And you know what?”

The class was perfectly quiet.

“We’re going to ace it,” she said with hushed excitement. Students smiled. Some fidgeted. All of them were watching Ms. Lora to see what she would do next.

“One-hundred and ninety days!” she yelled suddenly. The entire class giggled at having been startled.

Ms. Lora let the pace and volume of her voice rise. “That’s all we have. One-hundred and ninety days. That includes school days, and weekends. And holidays. But that’s all we have until we take that test. And you know what?”

“We’re going to ace it,” an unidentifiable voice said.

“YES!” Ms. Lora said with a smile.

“And do you know why?”

The room was silent, adding intensity to Ms. Lora’s hushed excitement.

“Because you are the smartest scholars this school has ever seen. Because you are going to be great writers!”

She continued, building the energy of her delivery. “But it is going to be a lot of work. You are not ready yet and it is going to be a lot of work to get ready. You’re going to have to focus and improve every single day between now and then to be ready. Because we are going to. . .”

“Ace it!” a small number of voices in the room yelled out.

Ms. Lora took the “190 Days” transparency off the overhead and replaced it with a blank one. She then walked over to a small dry-erase board mounted on the wall below a red cardboard sign that said “COUNTDOWN.” She wrote “190” on the board.

“So, let’s get started,” she said as she began to write on the transparency and the students watched the words form on the screen in front of the room. This would be the first of hundreds of rallying moments, but she was pleased that she had grabbed the room’s interest.

“My name is Aurora Lora,” she wrote and read slowly out loud. “I teach the smartest fourth graders in the world at Blair Elementary School. My mother and father are very important to me. They live in El Paso, Texas. My sister. . .”

**Tanya (Year Three)—Missed Fits.** “Good morning. Welcome to the fourth grade. My name is Ms. Lora. What’s your name?”

Ms. Lora stood in the doorway of Room 210 stretching her hand out to each new arrival. With all ranges of volume, anxiety, and grip-strength, one by one her students told her their name and shook her hand. Even those children who could not bring themselves to look her in the eyes during this grown-up greeting would grin at its formality.

"I'm so glad you're here, Beatrice," Ms. Lora would say once she got a response. Looking down at her clipboard, she would continue. "Beatrice, you will be sitting in seat C-3. That is at the table over by the window. Please go to your seat now and complete the assignment that is waiting for you there. This morning, we will be writing and drawing about important people in our lives."

Most children, at that point, received a hug from their adult escort and said goodbye, or, if they didn't have a chaperone with them, just shuffled sheepishly to their seat before digging through their backpacks. That was the moment that Ms. Lora introduced herself to her students' guardians and handed out invitations to the Family and Friends Night meeting in a couple of weeks.

Just like it had in her first two years, this overdone preparation was working. It was just minutes into the new school year and, for the most part, her students were already writing at their desks. Finding it silly and maybe impossible, Ms. Lora did not believe in the "do not smile until Christmas" adage, but she did believe in setting a productive tone from the first moment of the first day.

Ms. Lora was just appreciating this first-hour productivity when it all came to a sudden halt. Every head in the room popped up as Tanya Law called from halfway down the hall, "Hey Ms. Lora! I'm back!" The class watched as Tanya burst through the door mid-handshake.

Ms. Lora smiled and reciprocated Tanya's hug before directing her to seat "D-3." Tanya, not recognizing, or acknowledging, Ms. Lora's almost inaudible voice as an indication to lower her own, plopped into her seat and called back over her shoulder "Did you miss me?"

Ms. Lora knew from last year that on the first day of each year, fourth graders who had a previous relationship with Ms. Lora liked to ostentatiously flaunt that relationship in front of other students. Those who had been in Ms. Lora's summer school class, or who had had a sibling or cousin in her class the year before, or who had played games with Ms. Lora during the post-test carnival last spring, would respond to Ms. Lora's first-day handshake at the door with a big hug, or an overdone exclamation of how much they had missed her, or a too-loud observation about how the room had changed. In the fourth grade, the appearance of familiarity with the teacher was a badge of honor.

As was her style, Tanya saw no reason to merely imply her previous relationship with her new teacher. "Ms. Lora was my summer school teacher," she announced to the entire class from her seat. "Right, Ms. Lora?" she yelled, more as a declaration than a question.

Summer school was actually designed for students who were, or were at risk of, being "held back" a year, but it attracted children for any number of reasons. Some had shown up at Ms. Lora's door holding hands with a hurried working parent who was drawn by the structure, safety, and skills provided by the four-week, half-day classes. Other students came for the easy social scene in an otherwise lonely summer. Still others just liked the air conditioning in an otherwise hot one. Ms. Lora even had one summer school student who came because he had a younger sibling whom he had to walk to the campus anyway. Of course, some handful of Ms. Lora's summer school students had shown up because they really did not want to be in third grade again in August.

Over the course of their summer together, Ms. Lora had begun to suspect that Tanya Law came to summer school to avoid being anywhere else.

All summer, Tanya had been a volatile amalgam of intelligence and impatience.

Time and time again, early in a lesson she would jump straight to the conclusory idea or skill that Ms. Lora was trying to incrementally teach the class. Despite Ms. Lora's tempered reprimands, Tanya's insights were often announced from a sudden standing position next to her chair, her teacher-sized height giving extra weight to her pronouncements. Tanya would unselfconsciously blurt out the next idea of the lesson and break into a huge smile that turned her cheeks into taut, spherical knobs. Her obvious intelligence, along with the production value of its expression, often made Ms. Lora smile as well.

But during that summer together, it was Tanya's impatience, and the scrunched-faced fits she would sometimes throw when the world was moving too slowly, that Ms. Lora found so frustrating and challenging. If and when Tanya announced that she "got it," she was ready to move on and was not inclined to wait for anyone, Ms. Lora included. On occasion, Tanya was subject to toddler-like fits. She would shove aside the extra practice work Ms. Lora had prepared for her and would fold into a elbowy

ball under a table, too furious to express herself in other ways. The space was tight enough that her ever-changing arrangement of braids would swish against the underside of the table as she rocked in frustration. These tantrums were inevitably introverted and contained, and the other summer-school students eventually granted them little more than a curious glance.

Even at this early phase in their relationship, however, Ms. Lora was deeply troubled by Tanya's behavior. Ms. Lora's initial, self-critical diagnosis was that her instructional plans and methods were simply not sufficient to satiate Tanya's intellectual needs, and that Tanya's behavior was a side-effect of her academic boredom.

Ms. Lora knew that Tanya's angry outbursts had begun when her mother had died eighteen months earlier, but that sad fact did nothing to mitigate Ms. Lora's sense of responsibility to address and suppress them. For Ms. Lora, her teachers'-lounge knowledge of Tanya's mother's death added to the depth of the problem, but did not suggest a particular solution.

So, even as summer school had ended and Ms. Lora had told Tanya that she looked forward to having her in the fourth grade, Ms. Lora had viewed her challenge in the fall with Tanya as one of instructional planning and design.

"So, did you miss me?" Tanya called again from across the room.

Ms. Lora was not sure whether she could honestly say she had missed Tanya in the few weeks since summer school, but she certainly had been thinking about her. Given that preview of Tanya's intelligence and unpredictability, Ms. Lora had been planning ways to keep her challenged ever since. Ms. Lora had an extra folder in her file cabinet full of next-step challenges for Tanya if and when she proved to have mastered the basic concepts before the rest of the class.

"Of course I did, Miss Tanya Law. Please get started on the assignment on your desk," Ms. Lora said, reaching out to shake hands with the next student coming through the door.

#### **Roberto (Year Four)—Mug Shots.**

"C'mon, Roberto. Big smile!"

"*Sonrio*, Miss!"

The whole class, including the straight-faced Roberto, giggled. It was precisely the level of irony accessible to fourth graders. Roberto wasn't being obstinate; he just didn't have an effusive smile. Or any smile, really. His eyes, however, were smiling vigorously.

As he had all day, he held his three-ring binder against his hip, covering the small hole in his white uniform shirt. His thick eyebrows were arched in anticipation of the flash as he "smiled" into the camera.

"Ace it!" he yelled as the camera flashed. He then jogged back to his place in line and Javier stepped in front of the goals chart.

"Let's go, Javier. Show us how handsome you are, young man," said Ms. Lora. "One, two, three. . ."

"Ace it!" yelled Javier and Ms. Lora simultaneously. Javier's smile was huge.

That was the last of the photos. They would be useful in dozens of projects through the year.

"OK, team. We're late! Let's see the Lora Line! Great job. Line straight. Eyes ahead. Hands at your side. Good stuff. I love the way that Corey has his hands by his side. Great job!"

As she stepped to the front of the "Lora Line" and motioned for her new class to follow her to music class, she shared with them how good she felt about her first day with them.

"I am so proud of you all," she announced walking backwards at the front of the line. "Fourth grade is difficult. And can be a real adjustment. But you, every one of you, is really putting in some hard work today. We've practiced lots of procedures. Can anyone remind us of some of the important procedures we practiced?"

A few procedures were called out, including "homework collection" and "class dismissal."

Ms. Lora turned around and took a left at the end of the hall, leading the line down the stairs. She continued to share her excitement with her students.

"You did a great job on the Important Person reflections! I am really proud of you. You really focused on the math assessment. That's going to help you see where you need the most help to improve. We're off to a good start. Let's give ourselves a round of applause."

One of the fundamental requirements of a perfect Lora Line—"hands by your sides"—was momentarily suspended as every student clapped enthusiastically.

Ms. Lora felt great. It really had been a good day so far.

"Can you believe one of our days is already mostly gone? Unbelievable. So after today, how many are we going to have left until we show the world what great writers we are?!"

"189!" A chorus of voices called out as the Lora Line snaked out of the classroom-building's double doors and onto the covered sidewalk.

### **Tanya (Year Three)—Diagnostics.**

"I'm done!"

Tanya was standing by her chair waving the diagnostic test before Ms. Lora could rush across the room to quiet her. Only about half of the students in the room bothered to look up at this latest disruption—a real sign of progress, Ms. Lora thought.

Ms. Lora put her arm on Tanya's shoulder and whispered in her ear, reminding her that others were still working and asking her to continue reading the book she had chosen from the library corner.

This math diagnostic was the shortest, which was why Ms. Lora gave it on the first day. She had been handed the whole set by an officious woman at the new teacher orientation before her first year. The cover letter on top of the four booklets said she was required to administer these diagnostic exams in the first week of school.

She was initially bothered by the fact that simply copying class sets of these "required" assessments used up most of her semester's allotment of copy paper in the workroom. But once she got those first results back, she never regretted that investment for a moment. For better *and* for worse, they instantly clarified her previously hazy vision of her students' academic needs.

"You have ten minutes to finish up," she said quietly as she stood up from beside Tanya's chair. A few kids had already finished and were reading a book from the Reading Corner. Most were still hunched over the dog-eared packets, pushing to finish the fifty math problems before the time was up.

Having been through this process twice before, Ms. Lora could predict pretty accurately what the class's academic needs would be. This test was going to show her that she needed to focus on order of operations, fractions, units of measurement, three-by-two digit multiplication, and long division.

What she could not predict, and the reason she was so glad to have been required to use these assessments, was where each individual student was particularly strong or particularly weak.

With Tanya engaged in a book, Ms. Lora walked quietly back to her desk, picked up a couple of the tests that had already been turned in, and wondered how many kids in the wealthy suburbs of Houston made it to the fourth grade without knowing their multiplication tables.

"Five minutes," she said softly.

**Douglas (Year Two)—The State Limit.** Ms. Lora set down her sandwich. Mentally formulating her requests at that very minute, she was relieved to see Principal Werner walk in the door. Ms. Lora needed to have the air conditioner fixed immediately and her class-size returned to manageable as soon as possible. It turned out, Dr. Werner was there to talk about those very issues.

"Whew, Ms. Lora! I'm sorry it is so hot in here. Mr. Washington said he could get to that this week," she said quickly. "And, I've decided not to hire another fourth grade teacher this year, so that's why you have all the English-speaking fourth graders."

“What?” Ms. Lora was genuinely confused. “Where will they go?”

“You’ll be their teacher, Ms. Lora.” Dr. Werner’s tone had instantly turned sharp. She spun on her heel and headed back out the classroom door.

Ms. Lora just couldn’t make sense of this. Principal Werner must have seen the confusion on her face and stopped at the door.

“You did it with eighteen. You can do it with more,” Dr. Werner said as she turned again to walk away. Her white, square-heeled shoes—the only color-deviation from her all-navy, all-starched business suit—clipped down the hall.

Ms. Lora stood up and stepped out of the doorway and into the hall. “But how many more?” Ms. Lora called after her.

“The state limit is twenty-four. It’ll be ok.” Although the clapping got quieter, Dr. Werner’s voice somehow remained close as she disappeared around the corner. “Don’t worry. You can handle it. You did it with eighteen.”

Ms. Lora immediately wished she had proactively pointed out that she had already four more students than allowed by law, or that Homero Juarez was using two milk crates as a desk.

Ms. Lora stepped silently back into her empty classroom and sat at her desk. She looked up at her carefully arranged Team Tables and tried to imagine actually teaching with twenty-eight. Twenty, or even twenty-two, seemed doable. She could probably just rearrange and add one more table without crowding the Reading Corner too much. Twenty-eight fourth graders? That seemed impossible. And there would probably be more tomorrow, including Douglas Rogers. Where would they all sit? She would have to get another pencil sharpener. And a few more mailboxes. And maybe Douglas wouldn’t show up.

Her puzzlement began to gel into frustration. This was not going to be fair to her students. Her learning centers couldn’t handle groups of six. Just last week she sat through a whole day of professional development about “differentiating” instruction to meet each child’s needs, an idea that seemed like a joke with this many students. Where would they all sit during Read Alouds? She winced at the thought of even longer trips to the bathrooms.

As her frustration crystallized into full-on anger, she couldn’t decide whom to resent, the fourth grade teacher who had left or the principal who had decided not to rehire anyone because Ms. Lora “did it with eighteen” and “can do it with more.”

This wasn’t going to be fair to her kids. She was able to “do it with eighteen” last year because there were eighteen of them.

Ms. Lora stood up, grabbed her sandwich and soda, and walked out the door to find Dr. Werner.

**Anthony (Year One)—Honest Silence.** Ms. Lora had to ask her students to show her the best way there, but the snaking line took a relatively efficient path to P.E. As her new charges filed past her into the gym, Ms. Lora whispered to Anthony to hold back for a minute. He stepped out of line and looked up at her. She was glad to see him smiling.

Anthony had the shape of a big kid, but not the size. He was round-faced, but small—a set of physical characteristics that were accentuated by his frequent proximity to his round-faced, but *large*, twin brother, Raul. Imagining them related—not to mention twins—was all but impossible until they simultaneously laughed, a frequent occurrence when they were together. The matching constellations of dimples around their wide smiles and squinting eyes left no doubt they were brothers.

Standing there by the gym door, Anthony, inexplicably, had a nest of papers and books in his arms and an empty, over-sized backpack on his shoulders. The backpack hung down almost to the back of his knees. She wondered if there were lockers in an elementary school gym but decided to explore that question at another time.

Without explicitly mentioning Mrs. Franklin or the earlier incident in the hall, Ms. Lora knelt down in front of him and told Anthony how glad she was that he was in her class and how much he was going to

learn this year. To her surprise, Anthony addressed directly what she was avoiding addressing explicitly. To her dismay, he dispassionately took up his former teacher's mantra.

"It's OK, Miss. What the Miss said is right. I'm not smart like Raul," he explained.

Now, talking to Ms. Lora, Anthony wasn't the least bit tense, flustered, or red-faced.

"My brother's smart, but I'm not. It's ok though. I can beat him at lots of stuff."

Ms. Lora swallowed her reawakening anger at Mrs. Franklin and knelt down so she was looking up at Anthony's round face. She deliberately enunciated. "I believe that you *can* be so smart," she said. "I guarantee that if you work hard enough, you can prove everyone wrong. We can learn so much together this year."

They looked at each other for a long moment. Anthony may have been wanting, but struggling, to believe Ms. Lora's prediction. Or, more likely, his blank look may have indicated his jaded endurance of Ms. Lora's naiveté. Neither of them spoke.

For her part, in that moment, Ms. Lora was mentally debating just how honest to be with Anthony. She had read Anthony's file, and she knew he had a major mountain to climb, but she also, in her state of frustration with Ms. Franklin, wondered if he actually ever had a chance to learn.

"Anthony, you failed the state test last year by 22 points," she told him. "That means you got fewer than half the questions right. This year's test is going to be even harder and to pass, you'll really, really have to work hard. We're really going to have to work on your writing. But I know it is possible, and I want to help you."

Anthony looked into Ms. Lora's eyes for another long moment before turning to stare at the floor. The conversation ended right there. Ms. Lora watched him walk into the gym, his backpack slapping the back of his legs.

As Anthony turned the corner in the direction of the echoing yells and chirps of children on hardwood, Ms. Lora added him to her mental list of people she would have to prove wrong about him.

### **Douglas (Year Two)—Just a Drill.**

"Single file!" she yelled to the children, all of whom had been through fire drills many times before. Most of Ms. Lora's students were pressing their open palms against their ears.

Amid the confusion of the swirling children, the intense heat, and the clapping, rattling, clanking bell, Ms. Lora gave quiet thanks that poor Matthew was already at the Nurse's Office. His classmates squealed as they evacuated on tip-toe—over, around and, in a few cases through, his vomit.

**Roberto (Year Four)—The Time Monitor.** The school-wide classroom management program's "multi-manager system" had seemed absurd when she first heard about it. Ms. Lora remembered laughing with other rookie teachers at the training workshop as the facilitator put a list of about fifty "manager"-roles on the screen. Something like "Line Monitor" seemed reasonable, but keeping up with a "Cubby Supervisor," a "Board Eraser," and a "Plant Manager" seemed crazy.

Now, as her new students eagerly scanned a similar list on a similar screen, it was her initial, novice skepticism that seemed absurd. In her first three years as a teacher, Ms. Lora had seen the power of empowering her students, especially those students who frequently acted out in class. She was still amazed that, despite her instincts to deprive troubling students of responsibility, classroom behavior and management seemed to get better and easier the more responsibility, along with structure, she gave the students. Ms. Lora even had students with particularly severe behavioral problems who were inclined to monitor their own behavior when they had been granted some indispensable title on the classroom management team.

Of course, "indispensable" is in the eye of the beholder, and Ms. Lora was surprised each year to see what roles were in high demand.

"Light Monitor. Form Collector. Plant Manager," one student listed.

"Thank you, Julian," said Ms. Lora. "Elizabeth, what are your first three choices?"

“Plant Manager. Line Director. And Homework Collector,” Elizabeth called out as Ms. Lora took notes.

“Wow, you guys,” said Ms. Lora. “You’re really stepping up for the high-responsibility roles. I appreciate that. We are going to have a well-run classroom with all this leadership. Thank you.”

She looked down at the next name on her list.

“Roberto, what are your top three choices?” She spoke more deliberately and slowly to him than she had meant to. Whether he noticed or not was impossible to tell given his poker-faced countenance. Only his thick eye-brows moved as he spoke.

“Time . . . Monitor.” Roberto, speaking quietly but determinedly in a strong Spanish accent, was struggling to read his own list. “Weather Monitor. And Line Director.”

Ms. Lora smiled and thanked him, noting that Roberto, for whom English was a new and challenging phenomenon, had selected only roles that required public speaking. A good sign, she thought.

Ms. Lora had found that even when there was an inexplicable run on some particular role (last year it was “Librarian”), every student would end up thrilled with the weight of his or her responsibility *if* Ms. Lora delivered the news of the appointment personally, via a whispered statement of confidence in the student’s leadership. Ms. Lora had also learned the hard way that she needed to publish the list of managers in big letters that could be read from anywhere in the classroom. The few times she had forgotten or misidentified a child’s “indispensable” role had required some immediate damage control. (“Oh, I’m so sorry. I had thought you would be so good in so many roles that I just didn’t remember which leadership role you had taken” was her most effective spin.)

Ms. Lora had grown to love these process matters. She had come to believe that setting a strong foundation for efficient classroom processes was probably the most important part of this first-day routine. It was not an exaggeration to say that everything—every transition, every collection, every hand-raising, every plant watering—had to be explicitly discussed and thoroughly practiced. Then, it had to be practiced again. Already today, she had had all the students practice *not* jumping and running as she mimicked the sound of the end-of-class bell. Mostly, the students were giggling and covering their ears, but her point that “the bell doesn’t dismiss you, I do” seemed to have been made.

“OK everyone,” Ms. Lora said when she had collected the last of the students’ top choices for leadership roles in the classroom, “Friday you will receive your assignments for the first six weeks. We’ll talk more about your specific responsibilities at that time. And, each of you will get a chance to practice your job at least once before you take on full responsibility. Right now, we’re going to review the process for lining up to go to the bathroom. And then we’ll practice it. Who can remind me of the three characteristics of a Lora Line?”

Roberto, Ms. Lora’s next Time Monitor, raised his thin arm and his thick eyebrows slowly but confidently.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Extra Work.** Ms. Lora knelt down by Tanya who was working on her exit journal. Maybe it was because of the grander distractions of the first day of school, but compared to some of Tanya’s worst spells in summer school, they had had a good first day of fourth grade together.

“Tanya, thank you for all your hard work and focus today. You are going to be a leader in this class.” Ms. Lora said.

“You’re welcome,” she said, smiling and twisting one of the blue beads at the end her braids. “I can help you teach stuff sometimes, too.”

“That would be great. Thank you.”

Tanya’s self-assurance made Ms. Lora smile as well.

Ms. Lora continued. “You know, Tanya, I’ve done some thinking about the difficulties you and I had this summer, and I think part of the problem was that I wasn’t challenging you enough. Sometimes things were probably too easy for you, don’t you think?”

Tanya nodded aggressively, her beads rattling like rain.

"So this summer I put together some extra work for you. It's going to be challenging. Some of it is fifth grade, even sixth grade work. So sometimes I'm going to give you different assignments from the rest of the class so that you are really learning as much as you can."

"I think that would be ok," Tanya said with an affect of maturity, but with the smile of an excited child.

"Great," answered Ms. Lora. "Let's show everyone how much you can learn."

Ms. Lora got up and left Tanya to her exit journal. The topic for that first day was "What I Did This Summer." Ms. Lora was eager to see if and how Tanya would describe their rocky summer school experience.

**Douglas (Year Two)—Unwelcome Bulletins.** Ms. Lora had learned quickly in her first year that the 3:15 bell served less as a signal that the day was ending and more as a warning that tomorrow was coming. It was ten minutes after the last bell and her room was still teeming with students. Soon, she would have her after-school tutoring sessions set up and all this extra energy in Room 210 would be put to better use. For now, she found comfort in the familiar bustle as she stood at her homework table, fashioning pieces of construction paper into a still-unfinished bulletin board. Two students were helping her cut out some stars.

Amidst this swarm of a classroom of dismissed-but-in-no-hurry fourth graders, Ms. Lora caught the purple blur out of the corner of her eye. Without looking up from her scissors, she called out "Hello Mrs. Franklin."

"Doing some bulletin boards?" a voice said.

"Sure am," Ms. Lora answered.

Ms. Lora extracted the middle part of a forest-green "D" and looked up at her guest. Mrs. Franklin, one of the two English-only third grade teachers, had on a purple button-down shirt on which someone had glued, or maybe sewn, dozens of little, diamond-shaped mirrors in four or five rows across her chest.

Over the past year, Ms. Lora's initial strong dislike for Mrs. Franklin had gradually been replaced by a strong dislike for purple. Ms. Lora found Mrs. Franklin too nice to find objectionable, so the purple would have to do. All of Ms. Franklin's clothes, and her entire classroom, were purple.

"That's going to look lovely," Mrs. Franklin said.

A full year of small, daily interactions like this one had convinced Ms. Lora that Mrs. Franklin's inappropriate judgments and comments about students were not actually motivated by meanness but instead were born of an well-intended desire to help other teachers—namely Ms. Lora. The two foundations of Mrs. Franklin's world-view seemed to be infinite shades of purple and the time-honored role of "mentor-teacher." Mrs. Franklin longed to be helpful and needed, and that longing meant helping younger teachers survive what she perceived, endured, and celebrated as the massive, unreasonable strains of being a teacher in "today's day and age." In simple terms, Mrs. Franklin held up teachers, including herself, as overburdened saints, and her day-to-day existence was littered with reminders of that reverence in innumerable quippy, punny sayings on mugs, t-shirts, and bumper stickers. Ms. Franklin herself had written "Teachers Have Class!" in purple paint-pen on the back of her grade book.

On occasion, when Ms. Lora could ignore the assault of purple, she appreciated the sentiment of Mrs. Franklin's hen-like protectiveness. At the same time, Ms. Lora would never fully forgive her for what she had said to Anthony last year. And Ms. Lora had little respect for Mrs. Franklin's fundamental vision of third-grade teacher as talker, even if that philosophy was a natural out-crop of Mrs. Franklin's gregariousness. As evidenced by the time Mrs. Franklin offered Ms. Lora a vignette from her latest gynecologist appointment in front of a group of third graders, Ms. Lora privately thought Mrs. Franklin might benefit from a little stronger filter between her mind and her mouth.

At the moment, Ms. Lora's primary worry was heading off yet another public statement from Mrs. Franklin that would undermine her students' self-confidence. Ms. Lora kept working, but listened intently for signs of trouble.

"I finished mine yesterday," Mrs. Franklin said of the bulletin boards. "I've got a new gingham pattern that looks real nice on the big one."

Ms. Lora quickly sketched out a twelve-inch "E" on forest-green construction paper. "Sounds nice," she said with a smile, "I'd love to see it." Ms. Lora didn't know they made purple gingham.

As usual, Mrs. Franklin had come to offer Ms. Lora some assistance.

"Now dear, I know you said last year you didn't want to hear this stuff, but just take it from this old lady that you'll be glad you did. Now I'm sure you've heard about Douglas Rogers, but there's some other ones to watch out for. Let me leave you this list."

Mrs. Franklin put a sheet of paper on Ms. Lora's desk. From where she was standing, Mrs. Lora could see that it was a copy of Mrs. Franklin's roster from last year with notes scribbled next to each child's name. Presumably, some of those children were in this room this very minute. Given Mrs. Franklin's interaction with Anthony, Ms. Lora cringed at the thought of the sort of notes Mrs. Franklin had written by each student's name. Ms. Lora was also relieved that the comments were written and not spoken.

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Franklin. I appreciate it, but I do like to get my own impressions during the first week of school. At least in my own head, I want every student to start the year fresh."

Ms. Lora suppressed her strong urge to say Anthony's name. It seemed inconceivable that Mrs. Franklin wasn't thinking about him, but she apparently was not. Mrs. Franklin laughed warmly.

"Well, I'll leave it here just in case it's helpful, dear."

"Thank you, Mrs. Franklin," Ms. Lora said. "I'll come see your bulletin board in a little bit."

As she stepped into the hall, Mrs. Franklin waved good-bye. "Have a good night," she called.

**Anthony (Year One)—Mr. Sterling.** People often smiled when they heard Aurora's full name. But her father's grin—a smile that Ms. Lora could actually hear in his voice on the phone—was one born of pride, not amusement.

"Well hello, *Ms. Lora*. How was your first day?"

It was just moments after the last bell had rung and Ms. Lora felt like her day was far from over. In fact, her room was still full of children.

"Well, ok so far. Pretty crazy, actually. I'm still in the middle of it, actually. Can I call you back tonight?"

"Sure, but tell me real quickly, how's the school?"

"Like a school. Except there's barbed wire around it."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's really weird looking."

Ms. Lora walked to the window and looked down on the teacher parking lot. Covering a small, but entire, neighborhood block, Blair Elementary's classroom buildings rose abruptly just a few feet from the weed-veined sidewalks on its four sides. An eight-foot chain-link fence, topped with three sagging lines of barbed wire, rose just as abruptly from the inside edge of those sidewalks. The sidewalk, the fence, and the colorful student art in the tall, narrow windows created the surreal impression of a Disney-designed prison surrounded by a well-fortified grass moat.

"What are y'all up to?" Ms. Lora said, turning her back on the windows.

"Well, your mother says Hello and not to bother you. But I'm just checking on *Ms. Lora*."

Her father thought it was as amusing as she did to call her "Ms. Lora." He had been calling her "Ms. Lora" since she told him she had accepted the offer to teach in Houston.

And every time he did it, she smiled too. They both understood that by calling her “Ms. Lora,” Aurora’s father was lightly teasing her but also signaling his approval of her decision, and his disapproval of all of those who thought the idea was crazy.

Ms. Lora could not count the number of strange looks she received—ranging from the merely quizzical to the blatantly disapproving—when she told friends, relatives, colleagues, professors, and employers that she was going to teach. The idea that Aurora should use her own academic achievement and budding leadership skills to work toward raising others’ seemed absurd to many, and actively distasteful to some. “Have you thought about law school?” “Or grad school?” “Didn’t you want to be a doctor?” “But you can do anything you want to do. . .” Ms. Lora had endured the subtle and not-so-subtle disapproval of her decisions, telling herself that those short-sighted, but supposedly well-intended, comments only further validated her decision. Her father’s smile-laced “Ms. Lora” was a welcome reassurance that she had made the right decision.

Bombarded with doubts, Ms. Lora chose to rationalize those comments as misguided assumptions based in ignorance, rather than debilitating prejudices based in malice. She knew that most of her loved ones, college friends, mentors, and family just did not think about how stark, and shameful, the achievement gap is in this country. She knew for a fact that none of those people had met the amazing children that were still gathering backpacks and pencils in her room at this very moment. Self-protectively, she resisted the more obvious, and perhaps more likely, scenario that many of her friends, family, and advisors had succumbed to the insidious but subtle social pressure to view children like Ms. Lora’s as somehow less capable than the children in better schools.

“Thanks for calling, Dad.” Ms. Lora suddenly missed her family deeply.

“Sorry to interrupt, Ms. Lora,” he said. “Call us and tell us some stories tonight.”

“I will. Remind me to tell you about Mrs. Franklin,” she whispered.

“I can’t wait.”

Ms. Lora closed her cell phone and turned back to the window. Her room had suddenly cleared out, and she found herself watching the same children who had been fussing with their school supplies in her room moments ago, now walking down the center of the quiet street next to the school.

She studied the barbed wire below her and thought for a moment about those who had told her this was a mistake. As she watched the chattering mass of children parade down the street, she wondered if they were right.

As Sixto took off his backpack and playfully threw it with all his might, scattering a group of boys like bowling pins, Aurora smiled, thinking about her father’s phone call.

All those nay-sayers did not know these children. They did not really know her. And they didn’t know about Antonio. They did not know that many years before he even imagined having a daughter, not to mention a daughter who would grow up to be a teacher, Antonio had moved with his family from Mexico to Chicago. Despite having been a strong student in the third grade in Mexico, he was placed in a first-grade special education classroom because he did not speak English. Those doubters had not heard about how Antonio had waged a mighty struggle to learn the language but was taunted and degraded by students and teachers alike. He was threatened, beaten up, and told on a daily basis that he was dumb and could not learn. He was told that his own native language was against the rules and wrong. After being thrown in a dumpster and told he was trash by an amused group of older kids, Antonio swore off school altogether.

Growing up, Aurora had listened intently as her father told of the teacher, Mr. Sterling, who, figuratively speaking, pulled him out of that dumpster and into a welcoming and challenging fifth grade classroom. Mr. Sterling saw something in Antonio that no one else could see—the combination of massive potential and an obvious need for help. Mr. Sterling ignored Antonio’s ragged clothes and made learning come alive. He offered extra tutoring to improve Antonio’s English, he took Antonio on school-sponsored field trips, and he demanded that Antonio try out for the school play. By December of that year, with a smile and a tear, Mr. Sterling told Antonio that he was just too advanced for fifth grade and

that Antonio would spend the rest of the year in the sixth grade. Antonio won the school spelling bee, in English, later that year and worked his way into honors classes by the end of junior high.

Today, Ms. Lora and her father still both feel inspired and thankful when they think about Mr. Sterling. “Finally someone realized that I wasn’t a dummy,” her father states matter-of-factly.

Ms. Lora loved that he called her “Ms. Lora.” And she loved that he was so excited to hear about her new school.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Across the Street.** Tanya reappeared in the classroom at about 3:40 p.m. Ms. Lora was just sitting down to review her seating chart. The first day always brought on changes.

“Can I push the button on the computer tomorrow?” This was Tanya’s way of announcing she was back, again. Ms. Lora used simple PowerPoint presentations each day and the responsibility of advancing the slides was a coveted role in her room.

“Sure you can,” Ms. Lora answered. “But probably just for tomorrow. We’ll pick a Technology Manager later this week, but since we don’t have one yet you can do it tomorrow.”

For the next hour and half, Ms. Lora and Tanya settled into a quiet busy-ness; Tanya helped Ms. Lora alphabetize books in the reading corner, file the students’ first-day “interest inventories,” and set out the morning “Do Now” assignment on each student’s assigned seat. Ms. Lora greatly appreciated the help. She was exhausted from all the anticipation, anxiety, and frenzied pressure of the first day. She was hoping to get in bed before the sunset.

Ms. Lora offered to walk Tanya home. Tanya, with an unpracticed attempt at a mature affect, said “No, thank you. But I’d be happy to walk you to your car.”

As it turned out, those counter offers were nearly one and the same. Tanya’s house was literally across the street from the school, directly opposite the teacher parking lot. It was a small, wood-sided house speckled with what was left of decades-old, cream-colored paint. Each side of the house had one white-framed window. The eave of the roof in the front and back bowed, giving the impression that Tanya lived in a box wearing a hat. A white-poled carport jutted from the front of the house and a boxy, blue, tinted-window sedan, missing hubcaps but otherwise apparently in good health, sat in the grass next to the sidewalk, dominating the one-tree yard.

The eye-catching landmark of Tanya’s house, however, was actually her father. For reasons Ms. Lora never understood, he stood, sat, and paced in that yard all day every day. Ms. Lora had seen him many times last year, but did not realize that he had a daughter at Blair. Sometimes he’d be on his cell phone. Sometimes he’d sit in a lawn chair. On occasion an acquaintance or two would stand with him, each man’s arms crossed, unhurriedly talking and shifting, smoking and laughing.

As she opened the trunk of her car and said good evening to Tanya, Ms. Lora looked across the street and waved to Mr. Law. He nodded and waved back. Tanya hiked her backpack onto a second shoulder and walked across the street to her house.

#### Questions to Consider

- (1) Aurora encounters several examples of low and high expectations. Identify an example of each and consider its ultimate sources. Why was that expectation developed? What do you think is a teacher’s responsibility for perpetuating or dismantling such expectations?
- (2) Which of Aurora’s many decisions and reactions did you most identify with? Which did you least identify with? Consider a moment in the story thus far that you would have handled differently and think about why.

## Chapter Two

### First Weeks (189-175 days)

**Anthony (Year One)—Dark Reflections.** Ms. Lora turned over for the hundredth time, hoping to find a cool spot on the pillow that would slow her racing mind. The room's only light came from the barely discernable outline of the window as she involuntarily relived the day's intense panics and joys and surprises and frustrations. She endured the pre-sleep rewinding, replaying, and regrets of her first day as a teacher, while hidden in the midnight-black of her bedroom her face charted her mind's sprinting course, a furrowed brow giving way to a broad smile giving way to an adamant, disapproving head-shake. Her dark eyes were half-closed, covered but not bothered by twists of hair.

There was a barely-audible gasp as she was hit with a memory of the inaugural panic from that morning. She had pulled up to the school at 7:00 a.m. to find the campus already bustling. Hand-holding siblings gliding across the campus. Giggling groups of third grade girls clustered on the already-sizzling sidewalks. Older, larger, and much faster boys flocking in and out of Blair's doors and walkways. In her bed, just as they had almost eighteen hours ago, her shoulders relaxed with the realization that the students were heading into the cafeteria, not classrooms, at that early hour. Virtually every child at Blair qualified for free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch. Children, and occasionally parents, would start lining up outside the "cafetorium" as early as 6:30 a.m.

With a flash, that mind's-eye relief gave way to a wave of frustration as she mentally searched for someone, other than herself, to blame for so overestimating the availability of even the most basic classroom supplies. For weeks she had been gathering books, and plotting learning stations, and dreaming up thematic units, only to spend this first day desperate for a stapler, a pair of scissors, and chalk.

Then, with a rush, and against her will, Anthony's moment of angst filled her pre-sleep consciousness. She replayed the moment in her mind, regretting her inability to think of the right thing to say when it mattered. She should have interrupted Mrs. Franklin the moment she put her hand on him. "Anthony! You look ready to learn today! We're thrilled to have you in the fourth grade. This year, we're going to become authors!" She should have seen it coming, looked Mrs. Franklin in the eye, and announced loudly, "Anthony, I guarantee that we can work hard enough so that you can pass my class and the fourth grade writing test. Let's get started!" She felt the returning rush of Anthony's flushed shame in her own face, in part out of empathy, but mostly out of distress at her own impotence. How could it be that only here in the safety of her own bed could Ms. Lora gather the confidence to tell Mrs. Franklin that Anthony's struggles last year were obviously the teacher's failures, not Anthony's, and that no child on this earth should be stuck for even one second in her classroom? In the pitch dark of her room, Anthony's embarrassment and humiliation translated into Ms. Lora's frustration and anxiety, and for the first time as a teacher, on her first day as a teacher, Ms. Lora lost her own fight to hold back the hot tears welling in her eyes.

She took deep breaths and tried to steer her renegade thoughts to the good of the day. Her frustration gradually gave way to muted joy as she scanned vivid images of her first encounters with her students. Sixto, April, Sotero, Rosanna, Francisco, Sylvia, Hilario, Cliff, Chris, Joey, Garrick, Anthony. She practiced remembering names as their energetic and hopeful faces swirled around her. She involuntarily chuckled—remembering Rosanna's determination to keep a sharpened pencil behind each ear all day, even if that meant sitting staring at her paper with nothing to write with, remembering Sotero's brash and unsolicited announcement during silent reading time that "this is the fourth grade now and you all should know better and shut up and read," remembering Rachel's tears when Ms. Lora explained that her

kindergarten brother really would have to go to his own classroom, remembering Anthony's solemn, and illicit, offer of an orange slice to Ms. Lora in the middle of the class's discussion of important people in their lives.

But just as quickly, as she turned again on her pillow, Ms. Lora's grin gave way to a sense of dread as the weight of the responsibility for teaching these children washed over her. Even in the first day, she had experienced in some of her children the impacts of small and dilapidated homes, of crowded or uncomfortable sleeping conditions, of hunger, of tattered clothes and shoes, and of poor nutrition and hygiene. At the same time, she had also experienced their massive and largely untapped potential as creative and inquisitive thinkers, as well as their own low expectations of themselves. Joey's string of questions, blurted out as Ms. Lora introduced herself to the class, replayed in her mind over and over: "Miss, how *old* are you? Are you married? Why are you teaching *us*, Miss?"

The last question rang in the dark silence.

She recognized, but resented, the irony that the last time she was this anxious in the middle of the night was probably the night before some other first day of school on a similarly hot night during her own childhood in El Paso. Somehow, in this moment, the prospect of being a teacher was making her feel like a child. What will these children be like? What will they think of her? Will she be able to handle it? The same questions bolted through her mind now as did then. She longed for sleep. Her grandmother's alarm clock ticked loudly in the early-morning dark.

She satisfied her mind's acidic hunger with a search for just the right metaphor for this week's milestones. It was not really like going to the dentist; her dread of the unknown was matched with eagerness for the possibilities. It was not like giving a speech to the Student Assembly; there, she already knew who in the crowd would applaud and who wouldn't. She was not above fantasizing about how great a teacher she hoped to be, but the prospect of kids applauding tomorrow seemed remote.

In what felt like a brief moment of cooling clarity, Aurora decided that this almost unbearable nervousness was what the nights before her first days of college *should* have been like. That is, she would have been this anxious about going to the University of Texas if she had had any clue just how poorly prepared she was, if she had known that her title as Valedictorian of her own under-resourced high school did not mean she was ready for the rigors of the state's flagship university. After years of making all A's, she was hit hard by self-doubt in college, wondering whether she actually was a C student who would struggle and fight for Bs. She felt so far behind.

And she struggled and fought every day to catch up. Every night, exhausted from the long day of study, class, work, and student politics, she'd fall into her bed and set the same ancient alarm clock that ticked in the dark this very night. On a good day, she could close the gap with her preparation in the early morning, before the sun rose, while others slept.

This drive and pace meant that her freshman and sophomore years were difficult, eye-opening, and infuriating. She was considering quitting when an English professor unceremoniously told her that she "needed to learn how to write." She was livid when she realized that most of her classmates had already mastered the math skills being taught in her basic freshman math course. She just couldn't believe how much more knowledgeable and skilled her classmates from better schools were.

The key difference between her anxiety tonight and the start of her college experience, however, was that her college-eve anxiety was born of naiveté. She had no idea what she was getting into. By contrast, here in the dark of her room, the weight of all that she needed to learn threatened to squeeze the breath out of her. While Aurora had been pleased with her steep learning curve over the past few months, each and every step forward had been accompanied by a new realization of how much more there was to learn. She had read, observed, and reflected on classrooms' effectiveness, intensity, warmth, and culture. At the same time, she discovered during her summer school training just how difficult it was to rally a room full of disparately skilled elementary students around a single energizing purpose. As she read stacks of training materials about lesson planning, instructional strategies, and tracking students' progress, she was daunted by the ideal of a classroom where not a minute of her

limited time with students was wasted. She knew she wanted, but did not know if she could actually create, a space where students were truly obsessed with their individual and class academic goals.

Her summer instructors' trite reminder that "every teacher, no matter how prepared, has a first moment, first day, and first week in the classroom" did nothing to ease her sense of inferiority as she considered the massive challenge before her. How could she possibly pull this off? How could anyone think she was ready?

This thought process was doing nothing to calm her frantic thoughts or to cool her hot apartment. It did nothing to change the fact that in a few hours, she would be back in front of eighteen, or maybe twenty-two, fourth graders trying to put them on track not just to college, but to a college experience that didn't have to start at 5 a.m. every day.

As Ms. Lora stared into the darkness, it dawned on her that these anxieties might be her best hope for actually pulling this off. Here was a thought that could focus and streamline her thoughts. Aurora was driven as much by the personal frustration of having experienced the achievement gap as she was by its glaring affront to lofty ideals of equity and democracy. She knew all the statistics, the trends, and the correlations. She could draw graphs on napkins for strangers to lay bare the stark reality that whiter and wealthier groups of kids are provided with a dramatically superior education than are browner and poorer groups of kids. But in the end, or at least thus far, she was driven as much by anger as by ideals.

Ms. Lora told herself that this hard-earned determination would carry her through. It would bridge those moments when quitting seemed reasonable. She knew that she could apply the same long hours and persistence to teaching that she had applied to her own education. If she screwed up the first day, she simply had to believe that it would be something that hard work could fix. Just as she had, her students might walk in the door academically behind wealthier kids in the suburbs, but in Aurora's mental vision of her own classroom, they would leave her classroom caught up.

Aurora bolted upright, knocking her pillow on to the floor. The room felt cooler. She sat for a moment rubbing her face as the alarm by her bed continued to ring.

**Douglas (Year Two)—The Summer School Miracle.** One year after she had first heard his whispered name, Douglas Rogers sauntered into Ms. Lora's classroom. The child whose mere reputation had brought her fractions lesson to a halt a year ago was now entering the room live and in person.

She put down the lunch forms she had been gathering and walked over to the door to meet him. "Good morning Douglas Rogers! We're glad to see you here. We missed you yesterday!"

Starting their renewed relationship with a lie was not ideal, but Ms. Lora thought honest disclosure would probably be unprofessional. The truth of the matter was that adding Douglas Rogers to yesterday's 100-degree, vomit-complicated fire-drill might have pushed yesterday's total disaster into a full-blown apocalypse.

Every head in the room turned to look at the door at the sound of his name.

Ms. Lora watched the room's reaction with interest. The first dozen times Ms. Lora had heard the name "Douglas Rogers," it was whispered by her students. One morning almost exactly a year ago, just a few weeks into her first year of teaching, her fourth-graders were buzzing with anxious excitement. As she led the class in a math lesson, the words "Douglas Rogers's back" kept shooting across the class, followed closely by raised eyebrows and furtive glances.

Ms. Lora finally gave in to the interruption, set aside her colorful cardboard cutouts of various slices of pie.

"OK, we're not focused this morning. Who *is* Douglas Rogers?"

The room exploded in explanation, and Ms. Lora raised her hand and silently counted to five with her fingers. As practiced, the room fell silent and every student's hand shot up and joined her in what was supposed to be a calming count to five. The dozens of bouncing knees and feet did not connote calm, but the room in fact was silent.

"Sylvia," she said, "can you tell me why you are all so excited about Douglas Rogers?"

Sylvia beamed with her responsibility, but took no time to savor it.

"Oh, MISS," she said with exaggerated exasperation, "Douglas is the biggest, baddest kid in the whole third grade and he's been there for so many years and he left and now Ms. Jackson is going to have a *breakdown* . . ."

As soon as Sylvia stopped to gasp for air, half the class—annoyed by Sylvia's poor reporting—shouted out "Douglas's back!"

In bits and pieces throughout the day, Ms. Lora had learned that Douglas Rogers had in fact returned to Blair Elementary. Having failed the third grade twice, once under the guidance of each of Blair's two third-grade teachers, Douglas had started a third, third-grade year at another campus. That school sent Douglas back to Blair mid-way through last year and back to another stint with Ms. Jackson, who had been, according to Ms. Lora's students, destined for a "breakdown." Ms. Lora also learned in the teacher's lounge that Douglas's mother had resisted immense pressure to put him in Special Education.

Last year, in his third tour of the third grade, Douglas had failed the state test for the fifth or sixth time, a feat that led Douglas to Ms. Lora's summer school class this summer. And then, just a few weeks ago—in a bizarre episode of her life that Ms. Lora mentally referenced as "The Summer School Miracle"—Douglas finally passed the third grade skills test. So after three years of third grade and summer school, Douglas was walking into the fourth grade for the first time.

Sensing he had the full attention of the room, he made his grand entrance to the fourth grade a dramatic one.

"Hey, Ms. Lora," Douglas said as she smiled and shook his hand just inside the door. He then authoritatively ambled past her, stopped, and surveyed the room.

"Good morning, Douglas," Ms. Lora repeated. "It's so good to see you. We missed you yesterday. How was the rest of your summer?"

Douglas did not respond, but instead continued to inspect the other students in the class, all of whom were inexpertly pretending that they weren't watching his every move. They emptied backpacks, compared pencils and three-ring binders, and settled into the seats Ms. Lora had directed them to the day before. Douglas then eased over to an empty chair at the back of the room, the same chair that he had slept in through much of summer school.

The seat's occupant had not yet arrived, so Ms. Lora decided to give Douglas a moment to acclimate before moving him to his assigned seat. In the last week, she had pored over the over-loaded roster, trying to find just the right combination of calming influences to sit next to Douglas. She was eager to build on the inexplicable summer-school success they had had together just a few weeks before, but she was also aware of the impact her seating decisions would have on the students sitting next to him.

Douglas didn't know it, but Ms. Lora had big plans for him this year.

Having gotten to know him over the summer, she believed that she had an opportunity to get a fresh and productive start this year. She was going to leverage the Summer School Miracle into a new era of academic success for Douglas Rogers.

Ms. Lora's mental pep-rally was interrupted by a sharp retort from Douglas.

"No way, man. This is *my* seat."

Ms. Lora sped across the room to intervene. Alfonse, who was assigned that seat yesterday, had made a bold power-play and told Douglas to move.

Based on his reputation and her experience with him over the summer, Ms. Lora knew that Douglas Rogers would promote himself as the tough-guy in her room. Much of the time though, Douglas was the kind of tough that was just as likely to make other kids want to be him as it was to make them scared of him. Despite being a bully, other students seemed attracted to Douglas's veneer of confidence, an affect that manifested in his being a little louder, more aggressive, and more certain than necessary in any given situation. Outside of his presence, other children reverently mimicked his swagger, tone, or volume. Of course, in his presence, those same kids usually just steered clear of him.

“Douglas, I have a new seat for you this year,” she said as she stepped between him and Alfonse.

Douglas was a dedicated disciple of his older brothers. And he was keenly aware of his own age relative to his classmates’. With those facts in mind, Ms. Lora diagnosed Douglas’s calculated and self-conscious bluster as a predictable psychological reaction to being the only thirteen-year-old in a room of mostly nine- and ten-year olds. Ms. Lora knew that Douglas was thrilled to have advanced from third to fourth grade, but she also suspected he felt that in the grand scheme of things, he didn’t really belong there either.

Douglas was not actually larger than his younger classmates, and, Ms. Lora’s novice psychological assessments aside, the only physical hint that he was older was the disproportionate ratio of his relatively long limbs to his relatively squat body and face, a harbinger of adolescence that was otherwise reserved for a few girls in Ms. Lora’s classroom. So while size was not the clue that he was older, he did catch one’s eye as somehow different. On those unfortunately frequent days when Ms. Lora needed to remind herself of Douglas’s youth, she needed only look at his hands. At the end of his long and sinewy arms were the pudgy, dimple-knuckled hands of a child.

Ms. Lora was relieved that Douglas did not immediately object to her instructions to move to a new seat, even if he did show no signs of moving to let Alfonse sit down. Douglas’s projected toughness, while always shallow, was unfortunately not always innocuous. As she had considered and reconsidered the seating chart, she could not help but worry about whomever ended up near Douglas. She had not, however, thought to worry about the well-being of the student who happened to have been assigned Douglas’s summer-school seat.

Douglas Rogers was prone to sudden storms of fury that often demanded Ms. Lora’s full and immediate attention. While these incidents were difficult to manage, Ms. Lora had quickly discovered that his face was unfailingly accurate in predicting them. She had learned to watch constantly for the warning signs—a furrowed brow, clenched fists, or an icy stare. One moment, Douglas might be infecting other students with his loud laugh and wide grin over a table of group work. The next, his intense eyes and furrowed brow might roll in, calling for a quick, diffusing intervention from Ms. Lora.

A frustrating variable in this cycle was the degree to which a particular method of intervention would stave off one of Douglas’s angry, sometimes dangerous, outbursts of anger. Those outbursts ranged from a silent but seething pout on the floor of the classroom to a tornadic whirl through a row of desks, throwing or toppling books, or paper, or furniture. Unfortunately, these storms of anger sometimes also resulted in physical threats to other students or teachers. Douglas’s frequent home suspensions, Ms. Lora imagined, were largely responsible for his long tenure in the third-grade. They certainly put Douglas farther and farther behind academically.

At the moment, Douglas was not moving, but by stepping between Douglas and Alfonse, Ms. Lora had established a tense stalemate. Douglas, however, seemed to be digging in. He folded his arms across his chest and turned away from Ms. Lora and Alfonse.

In search of the root causes of his behavior problems, during summer school Ms. Lora had kept a mental list of what butterfly flap seemed to have spawned each squall. Sometimes it was asking him for homework he had not completed. Rarely, it was asking him for homework he had completed. Other times it was asking him to read aloud, and other times it was waking him from his frequent naps. Sometimes Douglas himself would identify the seminal moment of a given fit of rage as when another student “looked at him.”

Ms. Lora leaned down and whispered to Douglas that she would appreciate his cooperation. Given their history together, even on his first day as a fourth grader, as he told her with a sneer and a glance that “this was his summer school seat” and that he did not want to move to his assigned seat, she felt the weight of the extraordinary effort that it was going to take to help Douglas.

Douglas’s seat sat empty across the room among three unsuspecting students who Ms. Lora had identified as potentially calming influences.

“Douglas,” Ms. Lora said firmly, “this was your summer school seat. But you were a third grader then. Now, you are a fourth grader, and that is going to require some changes.”

The third-grade teacher, Ms. Jackson, had avoided a “breakdown” during her second tour of duty with Douglas, but Ms. Lora was determined to do more than just survive hers. She was determined to find the interests, the motivations, the strengths, and the spark in this child that was so trapped in his own anger that he could not learn. She knew the other teachers thought she was crazy. In fact, three of them had explicitly told her so. But she was confident she could reach him. Perhaps naively and perhaps arrogantly, she blamed some of Douglas’s problems on those very teachers who dismissed her optimism.

And as she imagined a new track for Douglas, Ms. Lora was banking on her secret weapon. She had a distinct advantage over other teachers’ previous attempts to reach Douglas Rogers. Just a few weeks before, she had been the undeserving recipient of “The Summer School Miracle.”

Ms. Lora had stood in the hall with Douglas on the last day of her four-week summer school session. She had taught third-grade summer school for students who had failed the state exam the previous spring. Douglas, of course, was at the top of the list of students who needed to take summer school and retake the test.

On that summer day, Ms. Lora had looked back and forth from Douglas’s disinterested face to the sheet of test results. She tried to hide her incredulousness. Struggling to keep them non-verbal, her thoughts were uncomplimentary: “I couldn’t keep you awake through most of my lessons, you never did the homework, and you cost me instructional time with your disruptions.”

But sensing the magnitude of this opportunity, Ms. Lora simply said, “Douglas, you passed.”

Douglas snapped to attention. He looked into Ms. Lora’s eyes, and asked, “Really?” A giant smile crept across his face.

“Yeah, really,” Ms. Lora responded through her own, slightly forced, grin. She was in that moment, as surprised by his reaction as he was by the test score.

For the first time all summer, Ms. Lora saw Douglas’s pudgy hands clenched in joy instead of rage. He literally jumped up and down, unable to contain his happiness. He unselfconsciously let his head bounce from side to side as his long arms flapped in time with his jumping.

Ms. Lora was shocked at his reaction. She too had bought Douglas’s veneer of indifference. She too had assumed he did not want to pass.

“Let’s call my mom! Oh man, you gotta call her!” he yelled at the top of his lungs. Ms. Lora laughed, now honestly infected by Douglas’s joy. She reached for her cell phone as Douglas continued to bounce in a circle around her.

As she dialed the familiar number, she relished the thought of the confused looks that must be on other teachers’ faces up and down the hall. Was that Douglas Rogers’s voice? Was that Douglas Rogers *wanting* someone to call his mother?

Douglas’s mother answered the corner-store gas-station phone on the first ring. Upon hearing Ms. Lora’s voice, Mrs. Rogers immediately said “Oh God, what is it? I don’t get off until. . .”

Ms. Lora interrupted her. “No, no, Mrs. Rogers. Douglas wants to tell you something himself.” She handed the bouncing boy the phone.

With his head tilted into the phone that he clutched with both hands, and still bouncing unselfconsciously, Douglas told his mother that he had finally passed the state exam and that he was going to fourth grade. Ms. Lora couldn’t make out the words, but she could hear Mrs. Rogers’s tinny-toned excitement through the phone. Douglas and his mother were now both talking at once. “I did it, Mom. I did it. I did it,” he repeated. And he kept on bouncing.

It was Mrs. Rogers who first used the word “miracle” later that very day. When she got off her shift, she came straight to the school to thank Ms. Lora for her work with Douglas during summer school. To Mrs. Rogers, Ms. Lora had worked some kind of miracle by teaching Douglas skills that had eluded him for years. Douglas stood beside his mother, watching her rave about Ms. Lora’s wondrous gifts as a teacher.

In that moment, Ms. Lora had wanted to share in the Rogers’ happiness, but she knew that she had little, if anything, to do with Douglas passing the test. Everything she had done to try to motivate him had failed. She had no basis for pride in his success. He put no effort into her class. Seeing his joy now,

Ms. Lora felt ashamed to have lost hope that he would pass at all. But this victory, she thought to herself, was a fluke. It was, she agreed in that moment, a miracle.

Now, a month later, on the second day of Ms. Lora's second year of teaching, as Douglas savored the fruits of that victory by staking claim to his summer-school chair on his first day in the fourth-grade, Ms. Lora realized that the real miracle was not the fluke itself, but her good fortune as the undeserving beneficiary of two potentially powerful myths.

First, Douglas's mother believed Ms. Lora was the one person in the world who could help Douglas. Douglas's mother had said as much over and over, and pledged to support Ms. Lora in any way she could.

Second, Douglas, for some reason that Ms. Lora just did not understand, believed that he had *earned* his success on that test. Rather than disabuse him of that notion, Ms. Lora decided to nurture it. She decided to constantly "remind" Douglas of the glorious results of his hard work, smart strategies, and intense focus on learning over the summer. Ms. Lora would stoke the myth of Douglas's responsibility for his own success in order to make it a reality.

Of course, the reality at this moment was a stand-off about Douglas's assigned seat. When Douglas didn't respond to Ms. Lora's admonition that fourth grade was going to require some changes, including a new seat, she decided not to push the issue just yet. She asked Alfonse to help her at her desk with the early morning paperwork. After the other children got started on the "Do Now" assignment in their journals, Ms. Lora knelt down beside Douglas's self-assigned seat. He had nothing on his desk but a tightly packed ball of tinfoil, and his arms still folded across his desk. He turned to look at Ms. Lora as she came to eye level with him.

"Douglas," she said with a smile, "it's so good to see you again. Do you remember how much fun we had last time I saw you? When we called your mom about the test?"

A grin took over his face.

"I am just so proud of you. You decided to work hard. You put in the effort. You asked for help when you needed it. You used our test strategies. And it all finally paid off. I'm so proud of your hard work and focus this summer."

The words sounded absurd to Ms. Lora's own ears, but she stuck with her plan. He didn't respond, but he was listening.

"You know, we can do it again, Douglas. In the spring, you are going to get to take the fourth-grade test. It has a lot of writing on it. If you can focus as hard on that as you did on the third-grade test, you can pass that too. I can't wait to help you call your mom and tell her."

"Yeah," he said.

"Now, let me show you where you're going to sit now that you are a fourth grader."

Still grinning, Douglas stood up and Ms. Lora showed him to his new seat.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Even Though I Was Bad.** With her students at lunch, Ms. Lora was hurriedly reading the students' exit journals from yesterday. Her plan was to quickly incorporate some of the students' summer experiences into the afternoon's lessons. The kids loved to see themselves in her PowerPoint presentations, even if it was only in an error-full sentence that they were charged with editing.

Ms. Lora sat at her desk and skimmed through the journal entries, jotting notes and questions back to the students in the margins, and also making brief notes in her own spiral notebook of student experiences and interests. Given the nature of the assignment and the state of her students' writing skills, she could read and respond to most of them in a matter of seconds. But Tanya's entry interrupted her pace:

*This summer I did not do anything. I lived with my grandma and my dad, And my sister Stefanee. My grandma was sick some time. I went to your class, even though I was bad and you don't like me.*

*I was in this class this summer but you said it was easy for me. Now I'm going to do sixth grade work even though I am a fourth grade.*

*Ps--Ms. Lora—can I push the button on the computer tomorrow if I don't act bad?*

Ms. Lora blinked against the noon glare as she sat thinking about Tanya's entry. As she absent-mindedly ate pretzels from a small sandwich bag, she turned over in her head, again and again, Tanya's assertion that Ms. Lora didn't like her.

This sentiment had been a growing theme during summer school. Tanya would violate some rule, Ms. Lora would apply the expected consequence and Tanya would respond with what appeared to be genuine despair that "Ms. Lora hates me." So while Ms. Lora was not surprised to see this idea in Tanya's journal, she was surprised that it came on the first day of the school year, a day that, in least in terms of Tanya's relationship with Ms. Lora, was relatively incident-free.

At first, Ms. Lora had all but dismissed Tanya's self-deprecating despair as savvy fourth-grader manipulateness. Ms. Lora assumed that it was a way to get her to say that she did in fact like Tanya. And after each of Tanya's declarations, Ms. Lora would try to reassure Tanya that it was her behavior that she didn't like, not Tanya herself.

But over the course of the four weeks of summer school, Ms. Lora came to realize that Tanya honestly believed, at times, that Ms. Lora did not like her and that Tanya struggled mightily with making sense of her relationship with Ms. Lora. Ms. Lora, for her part, found that struggle contagious.

**Roberto (Year Four)—Just For Today.** Ms. Lora checked off Roberto's name as present, just as the muffled clicks and whispers leaked from the speaker in the ceiling. She suspected that Roberto would be one of those kids who never missed school. She looked over and saw that he was already standing with his hand on his heart, his acrobatic eyebrows stretched up almost to his thick hair-line in a bizarre fourth-grade attempt at reverence.

As every student rose to stand, Ms. Lora quickly announced "We'll continue brainstorming measurements in our lives tomorrow morning. Jamal, yesterday's assignments are in the homework folder." Ms. Lora took her place by her own desk as the shushes and bumps continued to be broadcast school-wide. A few students followed Roberto's lead, putting their hands over their hearts.

While the quiet of early morning was Ms. Lora's favorite planning time, her actual, stand-up teaching responsibilities started fifteen minutes ago, at 7:45. Her kids would make their way from breakfast to her room between 7:30 or 7:45 and a bell would ring at 7:45, signaling the official start of the day.

For her fourth graders, this official start of the day was most notable for the revered ritual of crushing around the pencil sharpener. In her first year of teaching, after a half-dozen failed attempts at retiring the custom, Ms. Lora eventually co-opted pencil sharpening into her network of classroom procedures—an accomplishment that ultimately required an oppressive system of regulation and multi-tasking. Now, with three-years of practice under her belt, Ms. Lora has an efficient system by which homework managers would gather homework from the "No More Than Three People" sharpener-line and the "privilege" of pencil sharpening was incorporated into the list of opportunities that could be lost by poor behavior. She had also bought a second, and third, pencil sharpener.

Aside from pencil sharpening, that first fifteen minutes, from 7:45 – 8:00, was largely administrative in nature, as coats and bags were stowed, attendance was recorded, homework was gathered, and school-wide handouts about upcoming book fairs, lice checks, field trips, or student

holidays were distributed. It took more than half of her first year, but Ms. Lora had eventually streamlined all of those simultaneous processes enough to squeeze in perhaps five minutes of substantive review of the previous day's lessons.

Today, while she used the seating chart to take roll, her students had helped Ms. Lora brainstorm ways that they used "measurement" in their everyday lives. Although the growing list had been upstaged by the impending announcements, as the class stood waiting for the Pledge, the screen in front of them glared with hastily scribbled examples, including "how tall you are—inches," "Dr. Pepper—ounces," "meat—pounds," "hot—temperature (degrees Fahrenheit)," "tortillas—pounds," and "groceries—money, bags, weight/pounds."

After a few seconds of staring at the speaker over their heads, the muted shuffling stopped. Without any introduction whatsoever, a chorus of children's voices burst into the room: "I pledge allegiance, to the flag, of the United States. . ." Having been there herself on a number of occasions, Ms. Lora pictured the mysteriously chosen class of students crammed into the school's office craning to speak into the one microphone. The speaker volume would have been overwhelming had it not been drowned out by Ms. Lora's own students, who were dryly reciting the pledge at the top of their lungs.

As soon as the first chant was finished, a second one—this time pledging allegiance to the Lone Star State—began. Then, in a ritual that seemed as bizarre today as it did on her first day of teaching, The Texas Pledge was followed by the Blair Elementary Learner's Creed.

Ms. Lora's students, in the same head-rattling, flat-affect voice with which they declared their loyalty to their state and country, recited in unison:

*I believe in myself and my ability to do my best at all times.*

*Just for today*

*I will listen,*

*I will speak,*

*I will feel,*

*I will think,*

*I will reason,*

*I will read,*

*I will write.*

*I will do all these things with one purpose in mind:*

*To do my best and not waste this day,*

*For this day will come no more.*

Ms. Lora always wondered why the "just for today" was necessary, but she liked the creed's sentiment.

After a several-second pause that every student had apparently internalized, they would follow up the morning's promises by shouting, at the top of their lungs, the Blair School Motto:

*"Blair Students are the best,*

*We can outshine all the rest!"*

In her first year, Ms. Lora mistakenly assumed some correlation between students' further increased volume during the motto and *bona fide* school pride. It became apparent quickly, however, that shouting the motto was less about the motto than it was about the shouting.

The room filled with its own muffled clicks, whispers, and bumps as the children sat back down. Ms. Lora noticed Roberto cross himself and whisper what she assumed was a brief prayer before he retook his seat. She flipped off the overhead projector and raised the white screen to reveal the morning's "Do Now"

"Yesterday, you began writing about important people in your life. Today, please pick one of those people and write one paragraph that describes him or her with descriptive details. HINT: Remember all five senses!"

**Anthony (Year One)—I'm Not Really Quitting.** As her disappointment morphed into anger, Ms. Lora's eyes turned shiny and red. She let the stack of essays drop to the floor by her chair and covered her face with both hands.

At first, she thought there must be some mistake. They just couldn't be this bad. Then she realized the mistake was hers. She should have never signed on to do this.

Ms. Lora rubbed her eyes and stood up. After staring out the window at the hazy Houston sky for a few seconds, she walked over to the computer and pulled up a yellow, kid-sized chair. She began to type:

*Hey—*

*How's the grad school life? Oh that's right, your summer lasts FOREVER. Think about us working-stiffs on the rare days that you get out of bed.*

*So, does your apartment have room for me? I can sleep on the couch.*

*Not really. I'm not really quitting. But today was rough. It'd been a pretty good week, but I had to send a kid to the office today. First time. I think they might spank kids there. I don't know.*

*And you just wouldn't believe how low my kids are. Seriously you wouldn't believe it. I just read these essays I assigned them about a fun day during their summer. I am required to give these math, reading, and writing diagnostics to see where they are. They're nowhere. It's unbelievable. I'm supposed to teach them a five paragraph essay? Give me a break.*

Ms. Lora stopped typing for a moment to wipe the tears that were welling in her eyes. Writing about it only made her feel more helpless. She wiped her eyes with her palms, considered deleting the note, and then leaned in to finish it.

*There's almost never a complete sentence—even among the better ones. Some kids just ignore capital letters and punctuation. Others use them randomly, everywhere. Just a mess. There are even a couple where I just can't tell where one word starts and another one starts. I gave that assignment to learn about the kids' homes and families. All I learned was that I'm screwed.*

*How's your day? I'm not quitting. Just needed to vent. I just don't get it. It's unbelievable. Fourth graders should be able to write a WORD, right? I'm so pissed right now. Who passes these kids on? Who teaches them? I get a whole roomful of kids who can't write a sentence.*

*Sorry to unload on you. The venting feels good. I just can't get over how low they are.*

*Anyway, enjoy your summery days, punk. Let's talk this weekend?*

*Hey—you want to go to the Tech game in Austin in two weeks? I think it's a noon game.*

*Talk to you later.*

*Aurora*

The sun was beginning to set as she stood up. She picked up the essays off the floor and put them on her desk. Her initial sharp feelings of shock had begun to meld into a heavy sense of loss. She longed for the pre-sleep pseudo-confidence of her own bed. Why were her kids so far behind? What had they done to deserve it? What in the world was she going to be able to do about it?

**Tanya (Year Three)—Scattered Clothespins.** Ms. Lora knew it was naïve to think that the mercurial relationship she and Tanya had developed over summer school was temporary, but Ms. Lora's optimism was stoked by Tanya herself. During the first few days of school, Tanya exhibited flashes of true maturity. While she had not stopped interrupting Ms. Lora's instruction by declaring the point of each lesson from a standing position by her seat, at the same time she had been responding to Ms. Lora's gentle admonitions with a genuine effort to be patient. She accepted Ms. Lora's extra work with grace and several times a day would ask Ms. Lora if she could help prepare materials, or clean up group work spaces, or tutor her friend DeShavier.

But then, on the first Friday of the year, Tanya's—and Ms. Lora's—patience ran out.

Ms. Lora had just finished discussing with the class for the fourth or fifth time her rules and expectations. As part of a school-wide management system, Ms. Lora had a set of posted rules, the violation of which brought a predictable consequence. As in every other classroom in the school, one corner was dominated by a colorful "Conduct Board" made up of a green E, a blue S, a yellow P, and a red U. Each child's name was on a clothespin. They all started each day on E (for "Excellent"), but clothespins could be moved to Satisfactory, Poor, or Unacceptable—or back up toward Excellent—depending on a child's behavior. Each move came with a certain set of consequences.

On this day, all of the clothespins had been unceremoniously moved to the floor, courtesy of Tanya Law. All morning, Tanya had been unsuccessfully seeking special attention from Ms. Lora. She had asked for special permission to go the bathroom, asked to be in charge of the morning's news report, and demanded that Ms. Lora allow her to remain in the reading corner after the announcements. At one point before the first bell, Tanya had literally stepped between Ms. Lora and the three students Ms. Lora was talking to. When Ms. Lora stepped aside to continue her conversation with the three students, Tanya was furious.

Now, in the midst of an otherwise fruitful discussion of the management system, Tanya had sidled over to the Conduct Board and begun to pick one clothespin at a time off of the big green E and to drop them at her feet. Tanya watched each one click and dance on the floor before dropping the next.

As she brought the management-system conversation to a close, and as Materials Managers began to pass out manipulatives for the next lesson, Ms. Lora was aware of not only the clothespins dropping to the floor but also of Tanya's glances in her direction to see if she was noticing. It was just a bizarre scene. They had had such a strong start to the year. Tanya was completing her work. She had visited with Ms. Lora each day after school so far. Ms. Lora felt like she had been very quickly building a close relationship with Tanya.

Now, Ms. Lora found herself wondering which of the carefully crafted rules and consequences in her management system addressed an assault on the management system itself.

Ms. Lora hoped to keep class moving. "Everyone please transition to your math teams and clear your desks of everything except for a pencil. Tanya, please put each clothespin back on green except for your own. Please move your clothespin down one level to blue. This is your warning for today."

Ms. Lora looked directly at Tanya as she gave those instructions, but upon completing them purposefully turned back to the rest of the class. Ms. Lora felt Tanya's glare as she turned on the overhead projector. She then heard the clothespins clatter across the room as Tanya kicked the clothespins as hard as she could.

Ms. Lora tried to remain calm but felt her anger rising. "Tanya, that's it. You are on yellow. You're in time out. Please take a seat in the time-out chair. After five minutes, you can calm down, pick up those clothespins, and get ready to learn, or we will move to the next consequence. Your choice."

“You don’t like me so I don’t like you!” Tanya screamed through her now visible tears. By now, the entire class was fully focused on this exchange, and Ms. Lora was embarrassed for Tanya and angry that her lesson had been commandeered for such ridiculous behavior. Tanya was just much too intelligent for all of this. Ms. Lora swiftly moved across the room, physically blocking Tanya’s access to the table that she had, this summer, crawled under during such fits. Ms. Lora gently steered the enraged Tanya to the time-out chair. Tanya writhed away from Ms. Lora’s touch, dropping with a thud into the chair. She then sat glaring at the room of students, silent tears slowly streaking her cheeks.

During summer school, Tanya Law’s disruptive cycle of rules-testing, fits of rage, and feeling unliked was usually capped off with some later self-motivated denouement. This latest fit of rage fit that pattern. The post-mortem for this clothespin fiasco came right after school.

Tanya sulked into the room as Ms. Lora was responding to the day’s journal entries. Tanya slumped into her desk chair and again alleged that Ms. Lora hated her.

As always, Ms. Lora tried to assure her that enforcing the rules and consequences was not about liking or disliking Tanya. Ms. Lora explained to Tanya that she sometimes disliked her behavior, never her.

“I think you are very special,” Ms. Lora explained. “I just really don’t appreciate you throwing and kicking the clothespins, and I really don’t like having the class’s learning time disrupted.”

As usual, in this moment Tanya seemed to accept and understand the distinction between herself and her behavior. But if the pattern begun during the summer held, in a few days Tanya would once again push a classmate as she looked over her shoulder at Ms. Lora, or scream an obscenity, or tear a page of a library book, and the sequence would once again repeat itself.

As she looked past the student journals at Tanya’s scrunched face and crossed arms, Ms. Lora secretly acknowledged that she too had some work to do accepting and understanding the distinction between Tanya and her behavior.

#### **Douglas (Year Two)—Their Frustrations.**

Ms. Lora closed her eyes and let out a long, slow breath. Douglas, hunched over his desk, did not notice.

On the assumption that the hands over his ears were more effective as an expression of his frustration than as earplugs, Ms. Lora leaned over Douglas and said as calmly as she could manage, “Douglas, I know this is challenging work, but you can do it if you try. You will not leave this desk or this classroom until you pick up that quiz off the floor and complete it.”

Douglas did not move. Ms. Lora walked away from him.

#### **Roberto (Year Four)—Incomprehensible.**

“Yes, Miss?”

Ms. Lora looked down to see Roberto’s dancing-eyed but serious face, looking up at her. She had almost forgotten that she had asked to speak to him after school.

“Hi, Roberto. Thanks for staying,” she said.

“You’re welcome, Miss.”

A slight, pale, velvet-headed boy with an elusive smile that seemed to be reserved mostly for his own thoughts, Roberto Reyes epitomized a wizened matter-of-factness common to Ms. Lora’s fourth graders. In these first days of school, Ms. Lora had watched Roberto practice his nascent English by dryly recounting stories of gunshots, drugs, arrests, and violence in his community. Although Roberto mostly kept to himself, other students, when they could hear and understand him, would nod in impartial confirmation of his descriptions of the neighborhood’s latest drama.

The unsettling content of Roberto's quiet communications was not, however, Ms. Lora's primary concern today. She had asked him to come see her because she wanted to talk to the boy who had written the most incomprehensible essay she had ever seen.

Reading the writing diagnostic essays was always the most painful part of the diagnostic process. They revealed that many students were missing fundamental concepts that she would have to address. She had grown to accept that teaching writing well meant teaching several layers of writing at once. She had to address simultaneously basic sentence construction and more macro-skills like brainstorming and outlining. She had to model and explain basic rules of punctuation while concurrently addressing thesis sentences and the flow of a paragraph. With few exceptions, her students were years behind where they should be according to state standards. With no exceptions, her students were years behind the kids in the suburbs. And Roberto was years behind most of her students.

She remembered specifically that instead of putting his essay on the table at the front of the room like the other students, Roberto had walked over to Ms. Lora and handed it directly to her. He looked so proud and hopeful. She had simply thanked him.

Ms. Lora also remembered the confusion, disappointment, and fear she felt when she read it. A jumble of letters and near-letters, she could hardly identify the writing as English or Spanish. In its entirety, Roberto's essay read:

MAi espCil dAl Is wen Ay hAf prTy. For mi brdAi. It is vri fun An itwas Cek An Ay Was et an Were Wen to Mxco for mi brDai.

Ms. Lora, in disbelief, sat at her desk sounding the letters out loud, deciphering this virtually illegible submission. With some effort, after several minutes, Ms. Lora's best guess was that Roberto had written, "My special day was when I have party. For my birthday. It is very fun and there was cake and I was eight and we went to Mexico for my birthday."

From their verbal interactions, Ms. Lora knew Roberto had a sophisticated understanding of language. But somehow he had come to be in the fourth grade with drastically deficient written language skills. The weight of this reality made Ms. Lora feel weak, and lost. To succeed in her class and on the state-mandated tests, Roberto would have to learn written English, somehow, from the beginning.

Roberto remained standing in front of her expectantly, his serious face in full effect.

"Roberto," Ms. Lora said, "*hablas espanol tambien, si?*"

"Yes."

"*Hace cuanto tiempo que estaba hablando ingles?*"

"We lived in Mexico until second grade," he said, seriously. "But I spoke English in Mexico too."

"You speak English well," Ms. Lora said. "Your writing, Roberto, is going to need a lot of work this year."

"Yes," he said. "Writing is hard for me."

"It is hard for me too," she said. "We'll work hard and help you improve, ok?"

"Yes, Miss," he said. Now his eyes were just as serious as the rest of his face.

Ms. Lora wasn't sure what she had expected this conversation to sound like, but this was not it. She had planned to feel him out about his writing and start the detective-work it would take to figure out what was holding him back. She expected him to resist her initial diagnosis, or to explain he had not tried hard on the essay, or maybe to tell her he was just kidding and that he had his real, perfectly sculpted essay in his pocket. She was surprised and pleased to see a child who seemed to know what he needed and to want it.

She was even more surprised and pleased by his parting question. Roberto turned back to Ms. Lora and asked with grown-up seriousness, "Can I have some practice work to help me write better?"

Ms. Lora smiled for both of them.

**Douglas (Year Two)—Happy Hour.** The metal-framed chair creaked and leaned as she pulled it up to the glass-top table in her small kitchen. She'd picked up both bits of furniture at a garage sale for \$25. That was just over a year ago now. She had considered them just temporary purchases, but the chair was pretty comfortable, and she enjoyed the cold of the glass on her arms.

Exhausted, she put a CD into her battered laptop. She turned the music down so she could barely hear it over the whirl of the window unit and composed a note to her college friend:

*Just thought I'd drop you a note to let you know school started this week and although I'm still currently alive, I may be jumping off a cliff sometime soon. Just kidding, however I did just come back from a Happy Hour so the whole situation doesn't seem that bad at this moment. But to quickly fill you in, my school experienced some severe budget cutbacks this year and although we previously didn't have enough money for toilet paper and soap, we now don't have enough money for teachers. Right now I'm currently the only fourth grade teacher at my school. My class size is almost double what it was last year, and it probably will have doubled by the end of the week.*

*I have a pack of boys that are going to become teenagers this year whom I'm told are some of the "biggest, baddest" kids in the whole school. They are bigger than the fifth graders. One of them told the pre-K teacher that he'd like a piece of her ass. Another one insists that his name is Pimp Daddy aka Trick D. And on the first day of school, one of my boys said he wants to be in the navy when he grows up so that he can legally kill people.*

*Anyway, I've done a pretty good job of whipping them all into shape, but I will say that I lost it when the air conditioner broke on the first day, Matthew started vomiting all over my classroom, and then the fire alarm went off and the kids had to walk over the vomit to get out of the room. My principal said she would originally hire another teacher if my class size went over the legal limit of 24, which it did, however after coming in today, she said I now need to exceed the limit of 32 students before she would consider getting another one. They're making me crazy. Dear Lord, thank you for the strength to make it to Friday. Alright, it's bed time. I'll talk to you soon.*

**Tanya (Year Three)—Room 210.** The gray light of morning barely reached the corridor through the narrow windows of each classroom door. Ms. Lora's footsteps echoed in the empty hall. Those echoes were joined by the jangle of her keys as she neared her room.

Whether it was true or not, the faithfully enforced company line at Blair Elementary was that the Fire Marshall had prohibited decorating the halls except on the handful of dry and crumbling bulletin boards scattered around the school. As a result, its squeaky, Spartan halls could make Blair feel like a particularly institutional institution. While their muted paints changed without warning each year, the halls were always metallic and austere. Flickering fluorescent lights occasionally reminded Ms. Lora of the barbed wire outside.

Those sober halls provided a palate-cleansing transition to the rainbow of student work, tracking grids, management systems, and instructional aids that eventually blanketed every inch of Room 210's walls and cabinets. At times during the last couple of years, it appeared that the chalkboard had been somehow hung on a wall of construction and notebook paper.

Ms. Lora turned her key in the door and used her back to push her way into her room. She set her two armfuls of grocery bags on the desk closest to the door and flipped on the light. She looked around the room with pride.

The fronts of the floor-to-ceiling cabinets on the left were each assigned a role in the efficient management of the classroom. Charts indicating students' various roles as managers of homework

collection, reading supplies, or science materials hung alongside the certificates students earned by doing additional work to practice basic grammar skills. Many of Ms. Lora's academic units involved some creative arts-related project, and because the demand for gallery space always outpaced its supply, various corners of the cabinet doors were called on to display student work. This early in the year, she had filled those spaces with some of the best pieces from last year. (When gallery space was particularly tight and student work particularly impressive, pieces hung from the tiles of the ceiling.)

In the little remaining wall space next to the cabinets, Ms. Lora hung several posters providing visual reminders of the class's writing process. She often depended on those posters during lessons and encouraged students to reference them during writing assignments.

One of the two official bulletin boards in the room, the one that hung above a table topped with three computers, displayed classroom rules, consequences, and rewards, the homework tracking chart, and "The Great Wall of Ideas." Ms. Lora referred to that student-brainstormed list of interesting writing topics as she planned units and lessons. This year's list was as fascinating as the last two. Rainbows, wrestling mania, sports, Harry Potter, mummies, families, and television were all on the list. Tanya, with a standing shout, had contributed "medicine" to the brainstorm.

The second bulletin board was dedicated to displaying student writing, its treasures changing almost daily. The Room 210 Post Office, clearly labeled as such, stood in front of the windows next to Ms. Lora's desk.

Ms. Lora moved her grocery bags to the floor behind her desk and walked across the room to erase the chalkboards before preparing them for the morning lessons. Rarely fully erased, the chalkboard across from the cabinets revealed to students the day's learning objectives and transition assignments. That chalkboard also served as a constant reminder of recent homework assignments and as the home for the class's growing Word Wall.

After considerable hand-wringing, early in her first year Ms. Lora decided to sacrifice most of the second chalkboard (on the right wall as the children walked in) to her students' need for books. She had gradually stocked that wall with four shelves holding hundreds and hundreds of books. The latest shipment had come from her mother who bought a milk crate of early-readers at a garage sale. Some of those new additions were a little young for her students, but given the reality that her students were as many as three years behind in their reading level, Ms. Lora liked having them available. She purposefully created secluded space for some of her struggling readers to spend time with those younger-children's books.

In addition to those shipped book-rate by her mother, Ms. Lora brought in books she discovered as she scoured garage sales, used bookstores, and retiring teachers' classrooms. She had built a library of books that she was just as likely to give to students as she was to assign to them. The custodian, Mr. Washington, even snuck in some extra bookshelves to help organize them all. Students loved having their own library, and they competed for a spot in the reading corner of carpet and pillows next to those bookshelves. Next week, she would introduce a Thursday-ritual of choosing one or two books to take home until Monday.

The chalkboard mostly erased, Ms. Lora picked up some chalk and started writing Monday morning's writing objectives on the board. At the end of the mini-grammar lesson, her students "will be able to identify run-on sentences and to correct incorrectly combined sentences using a comma and the word *and*." Ms. Lora would discuss those objectives with students when they arrived, after they sharpened their pencils.

Even though it was early Saturday morning, and she was unlikely to see any students today, Ms. Lora could not help herself—she stepped over and erased the "188" in the Countdown box. She wrote 187 in large digits and set down her chalk.

**Questions to Consider**

- (1) Imagine you are sketching an agenda for a parent conference this afternoon with Douglas's mother. What would your purpose be? How would you start the conversation? What would be your biggest concern about the conversation? How would your thinking and preparation for a parent conference with Anthony's family be different? Why?
- (2) We see several instances in which Aurora reacts emotionally to her work. Identify one of those moments and consider whether and how you might react similarly or differently.

## Chapter Three

### Destinations

(183-175 days)

#### **Roberto (Year Four)—Blessings.**

"Well, was he really a priest?" someone at the table asked.

"Oh, c'mon. That didn't happen," another teacher said. "Seriously, you can't bless pencils."

"I hope it is true. We need all the help we can get," someone else said.

"Doesn't bother me a bit. I hope he blesses the whole damned school," added another.

Ms. Lora pictured frail Roberto crossing himself before each and every worksheet in her room.

She thought about contributing that story, but then decided against it. Instead, she just listened at the lounge refrigerator, enjoying the collective amusement of the other teachers.

She had no idea whether a priest had blessed the school's pencils or not, but in her two previous years, just about every wacky rumor related to standardized testing had proven to be true. Just last January, she had been certain that the notion of a "Test-Prep Pep Rally" was some kind of joke until she herself had been handed a microphone to "fire up" a whole gym-full of already screaming elementary students about taking a standardized test. There were real, live cheerleaders there, doing their best to adapt their basketball cheers for the occasion, and Dr. Werner had set up big speakers that blared a random assortment of college fight songs.

With that experience in mind, all she could do now was agree with the general sentiment that having the pencils blessed, if in fact they were, was a strange preparation technique with unlikely benefits but little downside.

In fact, such trivial amusements were in some ways a welcome relief from the incessant talk and pressure of becoming a "recognized" school. The goal of having 80% of Blair's children pass the various levels of the state test was real, tangible, energizing, and highly ambitious. At the same time, that potentially inspiring goal was coupled with the murky, unspoken threats to principals' and teachers' employment, threats that were always just in the background of the district, state, and country's focus on bringing up Blair's horrendously low test scores.

The result of this mix of beneficial and debilitating pressures, in Ms. Lora's experience, were behaviors much more encouraging, and more disturbing, than academic pep-rallies or pencil exorcisms. On the one hand, the school had a real focus on achieving results for children whose failure to learn was traditionally and, she thought, ignorantly blamed on the students or their circumstances. Ms. Lora had seen first-hand that the focus on state standards was shining a light on neglected populations and leading to greater student achievement at Blair.

On the other hand, the movement toward results and accountability manifested in some misguided and short-sighted decisions by, in Ms. Lora's opinion, poor leaders and teachers. Those manifestations included the fact that science and social studies were all but ignored by the principal because they were not on the test. Or the fact that since the second and third grade tests covered reading and math but not writing, some of Ms. Lora's fourth graders had written virtually nothing at all in at least two years. Or the fact that students who were likely to fail and would therefore bring the school's scores down were pushed toward special education where their test results would not "count."

What bothered Ms. Lora most was the sometimes unhealthy trickle-down of anxiety from teachers to students. The tests were termed "high stakes" because students could not move on to the next grade without meeting the exams' minimal standards. Ms. Lora saw first hand, however, that the bulk of the pressure that made its way to her students came not from the hazy and incomprehensible threat of some day being held back a grade, but instead from the teachers' and administrators' collective

and palpable anxiety about the security of their own jobs if the test scores came back too low. Blair was a school with a long history of underperformance on these assessments. Eventually, the state could flush the school of its personnel and start over. Test-anxiety dripped from the halls at Blair.

As she sat to eat her lunch and listen to the room's small-talk, Ms. Lora remembered the difficulty she had explaining this phenomenon to her family during her first year. She could describe the principal's, and now her own, daily countdown to the test date. She could tell them about the principal's daily reminders of the tests' standards, and about her students' wide-eyed and confused knowledge that one day they would have to write an essay to determine whether they could become fifth graders.

Ms. Lora had a hard time communicating, however, the sense of interminable pressure that permeated every moment, decision, and discussion at Blair. The next time she called home, this pencil-blessing story would help make the point. As strange as it sounds, working in this crucible was almost like living in the aftermath of a family death, when one feels simultaneously relieved and guilty to forget, even for brief moments, the unpleasant pressures of reality.

She hated, and fought, that feeling. For her part, Ms. Lora viewed and presented the test to her students as an opportunity for them to show off all they would learn about writing. In fact, that's precisely what she said when she was given the microphone at the pep-rally.

"This is Blair Elementary's chance to shine!" she had declared, swept into the energy of hundreds of screaming kids. "You're finally going to get to show those other schools how great you are!"

Ms. Lora took a long drink from her soda and washed down her last bite of peanut butter and jelly. The lounge talk had shifted from pencil-blessings to professional basketball.

Ms. Lora looked at the clock and hurriedly threw away the rest of her lunch. By now her kids would already be waiting for her on the walkway outside.

**Anthony (Year One)—Forget All Your Troubles.** Ten days into the school year, Ms. Lora still found it hard to get used to. A garbled, chime-laden tune had just burst through the speaker in the ceiling. The children, without signs of enjoyment, but without any signs of reluctance either, stood up and started to sing along with the piped-in jingle. Ms. Lora set down her notebook and walked toward the door.

"Forget all your troubles, forget all your cares, do do, do do do do do. . ."

As the kids filed out of the classroom into the rapidly filling hall, every child in the building was leaning into the chorus "S—F—A, come on over now! S—F—A, everybody's talking about it! S—F—Ayyyyyyy!"

Ms. Lora, like every other teacher up and down the hall, stepped outside her classroom while trains of children trailed in and out of doorways, most of them singing the catchy ditty. It was like some kind of ice cream commercial, but this scene—one Ms. Lora had described in an e-mail to her mother as "Brave New Sesame Street"—was instead part of the school's literacy program.

"SFA" stood for Success For All, the scripted program purchased by the district to teach basic reading skills. Ms. Lora, and every other teacher in the school, would spend the next ninety minutes reading a precise script from a guidebook. Every word, question, response, and sound was laid out in the teacher's guide. Each activity and transition was timed to the minute. To ensure perfect compliance, the "SFA Coordinator" of the campus—a busy body administrator with the biggest office on campus and a whole bevy of aides—would speed up and down the hall with a stopwatch, barking corrective orders to anyone who got off schedule. Ms. Lora lived in fear of that woman's stopwatch.

With the stopwatch nowhere in sight, at this moment Ms. Lora felt only a dull ache as she watched Anthony, with his giant, empty backpack dangling from his shoulders like a cape, peel away from the main current of fourth graders and head down the hall to Mrs. Franklin's third-grade room. Cliff, the one other child in Ms. Lora's class who still went to third grade reading, followed along after Anthony. The rest of Ms. Lora's class was headed in the other direction down the hall to "low," "middle," or "high" fourth grade sessions. Some of Ms. Lora's students remained in her room for her "middle" class.

From Ms. Lora’s perspective, it was an intolerable injustice that Anthony had to leave her room every morning to go sit through a scripted program with Mrs. Franklin, the same teacher under whose instruction Anthony had failed last year and who dared to blame that failure on Anthony himself. Ms. Lora had lobbied both Mrs. Franklin and the principal to make a change, but those two were united in their belief that Anthony just needed more time with the third-grade SFA material.

Ms. Lora watched Anthony making his way down the hall with his backpack, and Cliff, trailing after him. He finally turned into Mrs. Franklin’s room. Though she could no longer see him, she knew that he was silently making his way to the back of that purple cave. In a few moments he would listen to precisely the same script he heard on precisely this day at precisely this moment last year.

**Tanya (Year Three)—A Dancer, A Soccer Player, A Vet.**

“Lourdes, would you mind sharing what you wrote in your journal this morning?”

As she often did, Lourdes raised her hand even though she had just been called on. She then lowered her hand and read quietly, “My goal is to be a doctor or a dancer. My sister’s goal is to be a police but not mine.”

“Thank you, Lourdes. Chris, would you share your journal entry with us?” Ms. Lora tried to alternate between stronger and weaker writers.

“My goal is to be a boxer. I made my goal already, but I want to be a real boxer. I will practice a lot and will training-box with my uncle this summer.”

Ms. Lora elicited several other examples. Beto’s goal was to “play soccer so good I get paid.” Tanya, standing by her desk and in a voice much louder than necessary, offered that her goal was to be a veterinarian.

After a few minutes, as she had promised, Ms. Lora read her own entry to the class. The students listened intently. They were naturally hungry for information about their teacher’s personal interests.

“My goal is to become a student again,” Ms. Lora read from her own tattered spiral notebook. “I would like to return to school to learn about being a principal, like Dr. Werner, or a superintendent, like Dr. Page. A principal is a boss of teachers, and a superintendent is a boss of principals. I think my biggest goal is to be a student at Harvard University. Harvard is a college in Massachusetts. In high school, I always dreamed of going to Harvard, but I lacked confidence and never did apply. Now I regret that I did not try to go there. Even if I had not gotten into Harvard, I wish I had tried. After I have been a teacher for a few years, I might apply to Harvard or some other school to learn to become a principal or a superintendent.”

After briefly entertaining several questions from the students about Harvard (“Is it far away?” “Does it have a football team?” “What do people eat there?”), Ms. Lora began what she had come to consider the most important conversation in each of her years of teaching. Over the course of several weeks at the beginning of the school year, she discussed with the students the importance of setting and working toward goals. And she had discovered that it was vitally important, and immensely rewarding, to actually teach those ideas—just like any other difficult academic objective.

“Can anyone tell me why he or she thinks people set goals?” she asked. Several hands slowly rose.

“Yes, Jasmine. What do you think? Why do people set goals?”

For the next fifteen minutes, and each day during the next few weeks, Ms. Lora would start the long road to indoctrinating her students into a goal-oriented mindset. She moved slowly, and stopped frequently at concrete examples, but she kept her students’ minds thinking about ideas like tracking one’s progress toward a goal, pacing that progress, and working hard every day to reach that goal. Drawing on the students’ own examples, she emphasized the hard work and focus that it would take to become a doctor, a dancer, a boxer, a lawyer, a soccer player, a fireman, and a teacher. Students drew “challenge maps” to articulate the obstacles they might encounter on the way to reaching their goals. They added the words “ambitious,” “realistic,” and “persistence” to the class Word Wall. Hilario offered

that the Blair Elementary Learner's Creed was a kind of goal that you set every day. The excitement about setting and achieving goals gradually built, stoked by Ms. Lora's excited anticipation for the day when, as a class and individually, they would set their own academic goals for the year.

This morning, Ms. Lora's objective was just to plant the seed of need. She wanted her students to start to feel that without a clear goal, they would be lost.

"That's great thinking, Jasmine," she said. "You're right. Some people set goals so they can know when they are finished. Let's think of some examples of that idea. Can anyone tell me about a situation in which people might like to have a clear goal so they know when they are finished working hard?"

**Douglas (Year Two)—The Hole.** Ms. Lora had hoped to get in three one-on-one goal conferences with students while the children were editing each other's writing. Her brief conversation with Shawn had gone well. She had maneuvered Shawn into thinking that "writing better than a fifth grader" was about the right manifestation of his self-proposed big goal of getting "as smart as his brother." Ms. Lora would meet with him again to further crystallize Shawn's writing goals.

Douglas Rogers was next. She had seen that he had actually written something on the goal proposal form and she was eager to see his ideas.

Without looking up, she called his name as Shawn walked away from her desk.

"Douglas?"

She knew even before several voices in the room said "Miss! Look!" that something was not right. She looked over at Douglas's desk and saw that it was empty. She followed the gaze of her students and saw that he was laying flat on his back, furiously glaring at the ceiling. She quickly scanned the room again for some evidence of this display's catalyst. She saw nothing.

"Please continue working on your editing projects," she instructed the class sternly as she slipped out of her seat. She gave the appearance of disinterest, straightening papers on her desk, and just as sternly instructed Douglas to get back in his seat and go back to work.

From what she had heard from other teachers, for Douglas to lie on the floor in a fit of anger was not that unusual. And given the potential spectrum of tantrums, self-imposed prostration was a relatively mild and unobtrusive display, even when he refused to get up for long periods of time. On this particular day, however, he was sprawled directly in the path of the classroom's one door. He refused to acknowledge that Ms. Lora even existed, much less her orders that he return to work.

As they had practiced for just such an occasion, Ms. Lora again encouraged her students to focus not on Douglas but instead on editing the descriptive paragraphs. Under the influence of her constant reminder that there just wasn't enough time to learn all that needed to be learned, Ms. Lora's students had already shown a surprising ability to ignore each other's disruptive behavior. Ms. Lora roamed the room, helping redirect attention to the work on students' desks.

In this instance however, Ms. Lora was having a hard time sticking to the plan. She was watching the clock. Bathroom-time was nearing, and she did not want a confrontation with Douglas at the door of the classroom while twenty-eight other kids stood in line and watched. She also recoiled at the thought of even one student trying to step over Douglas in his current mysteriously agitated state.

So, she stood for a moment contemplating her options. Her instinct was always to try to figure out what was causing this intense anger and try to address that. She knew from her experience with Douglas, however, that that represented a grander quest than she had time for right now, and that if she tried to play counselor with him in this state things would end badly.

With just a few minutes left before the class would take a break, Ms. Lora asked her seated students to finish up their work, and she turned her attention to her prone one. Ms. Lora crouched down by Douglas with her elbows resting on her thighs.

In a whisper that she hoped couldn't be heard above the productive chatter of the Table Teams, Ms. Lora said, "Douglas, you need to stand up and get to work."

Douglas's only response was to turn his head away from Ms. Lora and sprawl his long limbs even further across the path to the door. He looked like he was posing for a sidewalk-chalk drawing at a crime scene.

From her low perch at his left arm, Ms. Lora addressed two questions from other students while Douglas lay motionless at her feet. Then, looking at the clock, she tried again.

"Douglas, you need to get off the floor right now. This is your third warning today, and I'm going to have to move your pin to yellow."

A sign of some progress, Douglas responded.

"You can't make me," he said, not looking at her, but pulling in and crossing his long arms over his round chest.

"You know, Douglas," said Ms. Lora, "you're right. I can't make you. If you want to stay on this floor all day and all night I can't make you get up."

"But here's the thing," she continued, "you and I both know that your head is dangerously close to the rat hole, and who knows, they could be watching you right now. I'd be really nervous if I were you, because I don't think you can get up fast enough if one runs out."

Using a child's fear of rodents as a tool for behavior modification is probably not going to make it into any teaching textbook, but Ms. Lora was pretty proud of the results. Douglas leapt up off the floor and all but sprinted to his seat. And so did Ms. Lora. She was terrified of them too. She had only seen the rats two or three times during regular school hours, but Ms. Lora hated the thought of one of them getting near her or her children. As Douglas shot to his feet, Ms. Lora grabbed the opportunity to announce it was time to line up for the bathroom.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Class Goals.** Ms. Lora had assigned them the task of designing a "Class Goal."

"I need you to come to an agreement on our goal for what percentage of the students in this class will pass the state test. Remember 100% would be every single student. 50% would be half of you. Zero percent would be nobody."

She had been setting the stage for this discussion all week. Ms. Lora stepped to the back of the room, purposefully removing herself from the discussion. The students were still not used to discussing tough issues among themselves, and faces repeatedly flashed back toward Ms. Lora for guidance. Ms. Lora tried to discourage those looks by maintaining her own interested focus on whichever student was speaking.

"How many kids are in this class?" someone asked.

"My sister said the test is going to be really hard," another contributed.

Several students spoke at once. Tanya tried to shout over the room that "we all should be smarter than the sixth graders." Ms. Lora let the conversations go for a minute before gently and temporarily stepping in.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she offered, "please remember our agreements for discussions. It's very difficult to have a productive discussion if several people are talking at once. Remember that you have elected Javier to be the Discussion Manager and he should be calling on people. We only have five minutes left."

Ms. Lora stepped back against the wall.

Javier took his cue and tried to mimic Ms. Lora's tone. "Ms. Lora wants to know our class goal. Who has something to say about that?"

Ms. Lora was deeply proud that in both of her previous years of these conversations neither class considered setting anything less than 100% passing as the collective class goal for the state test. But she knew posing the question to the class was a risky proposition and she stood by to redirect the conversation if it looked like the group was going to pick something less than 100%. While for Ms. Lora, anything less would have been to give up on some students in her class, for her fourth graders, the only

slightly skewed logic was that with so many of them working together toward the same goal, they could definitely meet 100%. Even if that was “ambitious.”

“We should ALL pass,” someone responded to Javier’s solicitation of ideas. Several other hands shot up.

**Douglas (Year Two)—“Special” Education.** Ms. Lora was sitting on her desk and Mrs. Rogers was standing in front of her. Since the Summer School Miracle, Douglas’s mother frequently stopped by to say what a wonderful teacher Ms. Lora was, and how much smarter Douglas was in her class, and that all those other teachers had wasted her son’s time. Sometimes, without warning, Mrs. Rogers would give Ms. Lora giant hug.

But now Ms. Lora had apparently found the limits of Mrs. Rogers’s support.

“Excuse me?” Mrs. Rogers said sharply. “Ms. Lora, let me tell you something. Ain’t nothing wrong with my boy that you can’t fix with your teaching. I’ve had all kinds of teachers and principals and people telling me to put him in Special Education, but I know how that works and that’s not going to happen, you hear me?”

Mrs. Rogers ended her scolding with a softer tone. “Now, I know you don’t mean nothing by it, but no thank you.”

Ms. Lora had not actually meant to suggest that Douglas be put in special education; she only wanted to know a little more about the degree to which it had been considered.

“OK, Mrs. Rogers. I respect that decision,” Ms. Lora backed away from her questions quickly. “I just was wondering what conversations had taken place.”

“Well, they were short ones, I’ll tell you that.” Mrs. Rogers was still a little agitated.

Ms. Lora let the subject drop and went on to invite Mrs. Rogers to the Family and Friends Night the following week. The last thing Ms. Lora wanted to do was to undermine Mrs. Rogers’s unfounded faith in her this early in year.

The truth was that Ms. Lora was actually pretty sympathetic to Mrs. Rogers’s resistance to special education. While the system could work wonders in some well-implemented contexts, at Blair “special education” was little more than a holding pen for behavioral problems. Ms. Lora had also seen and felt the pressures to move certain children toward special education so that those kids’ scores would not be reflected in the school’s reported data. Ms. Lora doubted that Mrs. Rogers knew that Blair’s special education classroom sometimes had as many as 30 children in it, eight more than the legal limit for regular classes.

Ms. Lora’s early lesson in the politics of special education came last year when she innocently noted during a meeting that one of her students—also named “Douglas” but spelled differently—was outperforming some of her regular-ed students and that he might be able to move out of the special education system.

The second that the students’ parents were out of earshot after the meeting, the Special Education Coordinator turned on Ms. Lora, berating her for broaching the idea at all. This “counselor,” in a harsh whisper, scolded Ms. Lora for several minutes, reminding her that she was new to this school, that she had no idea how this process worked, and that she was never to tell parents there was a possibility that a child would get out because that “creates false hope and complicates the process.”

Ms. Lora, in one of her first acts of defiance at Blair, told the Coordinator not to ask what she thought or have her at these meetings if she didn’t want to hear it. The woman had snapped back, “If you don’t know how things work at this school, you should just keep your mouth shut.”

Now, although she did not say so, Ms. Lora admired Mrs. Rogers for refusing to do just that.

### **Roberto (Year Four)—To Write In English.**

"Roberto," Ms. Lora whispered. Several heads looked up as the frail, furrow-browed boy made his way across the room to Ms. Lora's desk. Roberto was holding his goal sheet in one hand and a well-sharpened pencil in the other.

"Hi," Ms. Lora said, still in a whisper. "Have a seat here. Let me see your goal sheet. Can you tell me about your individual goals?"

Individual goal setting was, of course, the ultimate—but complex, personal, and evasive—prize in these on-going conversations. After reading students' files, reviewing their diagnostic exams, and considering their social, emotional, and academic needs, Ms. Lora met with each student individually to discuss and design specific goals for the year.

The puzzle in this process was that Ms. Lora wanted each student to feel ownership of his or her own academic horizon, but she also had to come into the process with a pretty clear sense of what each student's goals would ultimately be. Thus, the whole process was an exercise in artful facilitation and manipulation. Ms. Lora asked each student to lead the meeting and to bring a filled-out template to get things started. Much of Ms. Lora's role in the early stages of this process was expanding students' ideas and translating their proposals to more academic matters. With careful questions and considerable patience, Ms. Lora moved each student's vision of his or her hopes to align with her own.

So far this morning, among the initial proposals she had discussed in hushed tones were "turning in all but one homework all year," "doing algebra," "reading Harry Potter," "not cussing ever," "passing the essay test," and "being nice to Joe." Joe, for his part, had wanted to "not hit my sister." (Some goals needed more alignment than others.)

Ms. Lora would whisper back suggestions for changes, additions, and subtractions to the list, not-so-subtly shaping the end result. More often than not, she'd ask students to "give some thought" to this or that idea, and wait another day or two before pushing her ideas further. Together, Ms. Lora and each student would map out a plan for tracking progress toward each of the agreed-upon goals.

"I want to learn to write in English," Roberto told Ms. Lora in a loud whisper.

Ms. Lora had never stopped being impressed by Roberto's self-awareness.

"That's fantastic, Roberto. Writing is so important. And I know we've talked about areas that you can improve. I think writing will be a real focus for us this year."

"Yes," he said.

"You know how we've been talking about knowing our starting point and making our goals very specific? I think you and I should give some thought to that. Let's think about some specific areas that we could work to improve in your writing."

"Punctuation?" Roberto asked. Roberto still did not fully understand where and when to use it, but his jumbled essays were certainly rife with punctuation.

"That's a great idea. We can set some goals around punctuation. Maybe 'to properly use capital letters, periods, question marks, exclamation points, and commas'?" Ms. Lora suggested.

"I like quotations too," Roberto offered.

"Ooh, excellent. I love that you are willing to take on the challenge. What if we add that to the list?"

In most cases—and Ms. Lora expected the same of Roberto's—these conversations went on for days. Goal sheets were written and rewritten. Slowly but surely, these conversations gave rise to a manageable list of ambitious academic goals for each child. Not surprisingly, with Ms. Lora's influence, the goals always ended up representing skills that would be required on the "high stakes" fourth grade test in late February.

With satisfied pride, each student would walk away from these conversations with a narrowly focused set of academic objectives that Ms. Lora had Socratically shaped from the child's own ideas. She manipulated the process so that each student's individual goal represented between a year-and-a-half and two-years' worth of academic growth in reading, writing, and math skills. She figured that, given how far behind her students were, anything less than that would not really be helping them.

As Roberto took deliberate, and largely incomprehensible, notes on his and Ms. Lora's evolving ideas for his academic goals, Ms. Lora felt, again, the power of these conversations. It was really a thrilling process, for both the children and for Ms. Lora. Despite her efforts to keep these worksheets in the official Goals and Progress Folders, in past years students carried their goal sheets in their binders, book bags, or, in some cases, pockets, with great pride. With Ms. Lora's help, students would find space in their folders and on the cabinet doors for visual representations of their progress toward their goals; they would check their charts and graphs each day, even though as the sole editor of those tools they knew nothing had changed since the day before.

The flipside of this energizing charge was the inevitable sense of uncertainty that Ms. Lora felt about some of her and her students' most ambitious aims. Some of the goals she and her students had set—not to mention the 100% classroom goal—were truly ambitious. How could she make sure they all met them? What would she do if they didn't?

Every year there were students like Roberto who seemed like real long-shots to make great academic leaps, but who Ms. Lora felt needed desperately to experience academic success, and the hard work associated with it. And every year at this time, she was terrified. She was terrified that she and her students had over-reached.

Two years ago, she had been sitting in these individual meetings with Douglas Rogers, secretly doubting herself, wondering what "ambitious but realistic" would mean with a student who had such behavioral challenges and missed so much school. Douglas had eagerly and sincerely proposed goals of "managing my anger" and "making my mom happy." It was a great start, but how would he—how would *they*, together—really stem the tide of suspensions that robbed him of half of his learning time?

And last year, Ms. Lora had been wracked by the unique challenges of Tanya Law. Tanya probably could have passed the state writing test on the first day of fourth grade, but how could she maintain her "positive focus" enough to meet her high potential? How could Ms. Lora really keep Tanya from sabotaging her own self-confident goal of "reading faster than a sixth grader"?

The goal-setting meeting that stood out most prominently in Ms. Lora's mind was Anthony Vasquez's in her first year of teaching. She had successfully suppressed the urge to simply scrawl across Anthony's goal sheet, "*To prove Mrs. Franklin is an idiot,*" but she did not suppress the urge to push Anthony beyond his low self-worth and to help him set ambitious academic goals.

Ms. Lora had been positive that Anthony was behind, in large part, because he believed it when teachers had told him he was "dumb." Ms. Lora's big goal for Anthony had been to disabuse him of that idea. Anthony's big goal for himself, after some artful motivation from Ms. Lora, was to "be ready for the fifth grade." For Anthony, that would mean increasing his reading, writing, and math skills by about three years' worth of growth. Ms. Lora remembers soaring with inspiration as Anthony agreed to and wrote down his goals. She also remembers the sense of breath-stealing panic that overcame her after he walked away with his goal sheet. How in the world were they going to accomplish that?

"Can you help me spell 'English' please?" Roberto looked up from his notes.

"Of course," Ms. Lora said, spelling it for him before realizing she needed to get two more conversations in before silent reading ended.

"Roberto, let's stop there for the day. We've made some real progress. I think that these goals around punctuation and complete sentences are fantastic. Why don't you give some thought to your math goals as well, and next time we talk, we'll talk more about writing and a little about math, ok?"

"Thank you, Miss." Roberto slid from his chair before gathering his paper and pencil off of the desk. He walked to his seat.

Ms. Lora felt the familiar but somehow invigorating weight of her responsibility. False hopes sat side-by-side with grand accomplishment. How in the world would Roberto master the writing process and English simultaneously in just a few months?

Ms. Lora put the goal sheet that she had already made for him away in its folder and picked up the next one.

"Michael?" she whispered.

**Roberto (Year Four)—Ms. Lora’s Mail.** Her keys noisily clattered on the glass table. Ms. Lora simultaneously kicked off her shoes, let her backpack drop from her shoulder, and tossed the mail onto the kitchen counter. Two catalogs, a postcard from a realtor, and a large envelope marked “Requested Materials” from the Harvard Graduate School of Education slid against the toaster.

**Questions to Consider**

- (1) In what ways do you agree and disagree with Aurora’s thoughts and reactions to the state tests (and to the teachers’ and students’ views of them)? What information, if any, would lead you to change your perspective on those assessments?
- (2) In what ways do the conversations about Special Education align with or contradict your own views or experiences? What would you add to those conversations?
- (3) What benefits and what burdens do you expect to see as a result of Aurora’s focus on goal setting? How would you have handled that process differently? Why?

## Chapter Four

# Messiness

(173-123 Days)

### **Douglas (Year Two)—Learning Sandwiches.**

For their part, the students shared not one iota of Ms. Lora's concern that the lesson was more activity than learning. They were huddled like surgeons over their purported peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. They chattered and squealed as they passed ingredients among the tables. Streaks of purple appeared around most of their mouths, and Ms. Lora giggled along with Bernardo's team as he vigorously shook his hand, trying to dislodge the note card that seemed permanently attached to his wrist with jelly.

Ms. Lora was thrilled to see that, for once, Douglas seemed to be the calm eye of the storm. He seemed oblivious to the circus around him as he looked back and forth from his note card of instructions to his paper plate. He seemed to have a particular affinity for "How To" essays. He was, for example, the only student in the class who had started his instruction card with "1. Pt a plat on the dsk." Douglas's nascent ability to parse a task into its essential elements was part of what gave Ms. Lora hope that he could catch up before the state test.

Under strict instructions to do only and exactly what they had written on their card earlier that morning, most students' plate-less desks were by now smeared with peanut butter and jelly. Some sandwiches looked like open-faced casseroles. Others had more peanut butter outside the slices than in them.

Somehow, Elena now had food on both of her elbows. Ms. Lora laughed out loud as she watched Elena take a napkin between her two elbows to try to scrub them off. Ms. Lora noticed more than one student licking their pencils. Two students, entirely unselfconsciously, were feeding each other goopy wads of bread and jelly.

"Time out!" she called for the fourth time since they began. In seconds, the whole class stood perfectly still.

"Hector, tell me one step that you would add to your instructions if we stopped and started all over."

Two-dozen faces turned to examine Hector's sandwich, which consisted of one slice of bread curled around a giant, spherical glob of peanut butter. It looked more like a taco than a sandwich. Judging from the ends of his fingers, he had forgotten to include any instructions about utensils as well as a plate. If there was jelly involved, it was buried deep beneath the log of peanut butter.

As he licked his fingers, Hector too looked at his "sandwich."

"I forgot to write the second slice of bread, Miss," he said with genuine regret.

"So what would you write on your instructions," Ms. Lora pressed.

With his oily fingers splayed out on both hands, he lifted his note card up using just one finger on each hand.

"Step six should be 'Put another slice of bread on top.'"

"Excellent. That sounds like a good idea."

"It still tastes good," Hector said defensively.

"Time in!" Ms. Lora called out, and the spreading and squealing and licking and giggling recommenced immediately. She would call time out again in a few minutes. If they could get cleaned up by the bathroom break, they could rewrite their instruction cards before P.E.

Given the scripted and quasi-scripted nature of the reading and math blocks each morning, the heart of Ms. Lora's creative instruction time did not begin until 11 a.m. While it was broken up by carefully choreographed class trips to the restrooms, lunch, and rotating "ancillaries" like music, P.E.,

and art, she coveted the three hours of self-generated instructional time she had with her students each day. She focused much of her students' energies in that time on writing, usually annexing her social studies and science objectives into the writing process as well.

While this morning's sandwich adventure was a little bit inefficient, as she watched the students try to write corrections on their cards without getting even more peanut butter on their pencils, she privately absolved herself of being "activity driven" in this lesson. Sure the kids were having fun, but they really were discovering, first hand, the surprising precision necessary for a good "How To" essay. And, "activity-driven" or not, Douglas Rogers was deeply engaged. Ms. Lora basked for a moment in the fun of her job.

Ms. Lora would be able to harvest the teachable moments, and the energy, of this mess for weeks. Over the next week, Ms. Lora herself would be modeling the full writing process in the context of a "How To" essay about going to college.

Early last year—her first year in the classroom—Ms. Lora had made a nerve-wracking strategy decision that she looked back on now as critically important. Faced with competing models for and advice about how to best teach writing to students who were lacking in even the most basic writing skills, Ms. Lora decided to forego a pure start-with-basics philosophy in favor of a teach-all-layers-at-once policy. It's not that she ignored the basics of punctuation, grammar, spelling, and sentence construction, but she taught all those basics in the context of writing full essays.

This epiphany had come to her as she was attempting to sketch out a long-term plan for the year in the first months of her teaching. If she atomized writing into the basic components that her students were lacking and then taught each one in succession, her students might end up being able to write a sentence, but there would never be time to master the arts of brainstorming, designing, outlining, shaping, and writing a full essay. So she dove in, teaching compare/contrast essays in the first month, even though that meant identifying and correcting sentence fragments, teaching punctuation and capitalization rules, and correcting spelling along the way.

This peanut butter and jelly party was the first step—really just the "hook"—for what would be a six-week unit on "How To" essays. In the course of that unit, Ms. Lora would model the complete writing process (including pre-writing, writing, and post-writing strategies) for no fewer than four "How To" essays and the children would write six essays themselves.

As with each type of essay, after this initial hook she would begin with a whole-class reading of an excellent example of the ultimate product they were aiming for—here a "how to" essay. Other units would similarly start with an exemplary short story, or a compare/contrast essay, or a letter. Before writing their own, the class would assist Ms. Lora as she modeled the entire writing process on the overhead. Students would collectively brainstorm topics and ideas, narrow them down into key concepts, outline those concepts to fit the characteristics of the assigned format, draft the introduction, draft the body, draft the conclusion, and edit the zipped-together product. Ms. Lora spent extra time on the group editing process to acclimate students to the idea of editing each others' work; she even had a daily exercise called "Wrong Writing" during which she would facilitate the class's editing of a slightly inferior sample that she put on the overhead.

After having been through the entire process together (perhaps over the course of a week or so), students would accept the challenge of writing their own masterpiece while Ms. Lora, every couple of days, would again model the whole process start to finish. They would follow the same course of action at their desks, with Ms. Lora looking over their shoulder or listening in to their edit sessions often. Ms. Lora peppered these writing cycles with stand-alone mini-lessons on the "basic" grammar, punctuation, and spelling problems that she was seeing in the students' writing.

A collective "Ohhh!" rose up from one corner of the room and Ms. Lora looked over to see that Hector's giant peanut butter ball had rolled off his one slice of bread as he attempted to take a bite. Judging from its tracks, the ball had bounced off the corner of his desk and onto the floor where it had spread with a splat into a six-inch mound of goop. For the first time that she could remember, Douglas was the one looking at one of his classmates with disapproval.

“Time out!” Ms. Lora called. Crouched down to scoop up the puddle with the sides of his hands, Hector froze and looked up at Ms. Lora.

### **Tanya (Year Three)—Teacher Tantrum.**

“Miss, she’s back.” Elizabeth whispered into Ms. Lora’s ear. Elizabeth was sitting next to Ms. Lora at a table with the five other students who had come for tutorials after school. Nobody’s tattle-tale, Elizabeth’s report was motivated more by the bizarre fact of Tanya’s return than by any desire to get Tanya in trouble.

Ms. Lora turned around. Tanya, her face still streaked with dried tear-tracks, was sitting in the reading corner with a book. Aware of the class’s attention, she wasn’t reading the book, but was just staring at the wall in front of her, her shoulders slumped in exhaustion.

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” Ms. Lora whispered, and then continued with the review of parallelism. “Herman, what word is missing in sentence number three that would make the list parallel?”

As the cluster of tutorial students refocused on the paper in front of them, Tanya opened her book. Ms. Lora glanced across the room, but didn’t say anything.

Today was perfectly representative of the conflicting and unpredictable nature of Tanya’s character. Tanya had been at her best, arriving at tutorials for the express purpose of helping other students. Tutorials had only been in place a short while, but Ms. Lora already found herself depending on Tanya to handle the variant needs in the room. Ms. Lora tried to foster that dependence by reinforcing Tanya’s mentoring instincts.

Today, with her best friend DeShavier not around, Tanya had latched on to Beto, an angular and hyper boy who had difficulty thinking about one thing long enough to learn it. Just twenty minutes earlier, Tanya had been leaning over Beto’s desk, whispering guidance on alliteration. “You can’t just look at the letters—you’ve also got to listen in your own head,” Tanya said in what she probably thought was a whisper.

This teaching persona was the endearing Jekyll to Tanya’s occasional Hyde. She was a fantastically patient and careful instructor for other students. Tanya loved to be asked to help someone understand something. And, when she wasn’t asked to do so, she would sometimes just get up, go across the room, and help out anyway.

Tanya was especially fond of helping her best friend DeShavier. DeShavier and Tanya would always beg to be paired for group work and even outside of class Tanya could tutor DeShavier, a relatively weaker student in just about every area. Ms. Lora could now tell on which papers DeShavier had Tanya’s help.

To Tanya’s credit, Ms. Lora never heard her feeding answers to anyone, including DeShavier. Most of the conversations went more like the one between Tanya and Beto this afternoon.

“Slippery, slimy snake?”

“Exactly!” Tanya said, actually patting Beto awkwardly on the back. If he minded Tanya’s affected paternalism, Beto didn’t let on.

But then, something switched somewhere in Tanya’s mind and emotions. Apparently bored of Beto, Tanya had begun to demand Ms. Lora’s attention while she was helping several students with some subtle writing improvements. Tanya seemed unable to control her need for Ms. Lora’s attention despite Ms. Lora’s repeated, whispered reminders that the purpose of today’s tutorial time was to help students with parallelism.

In a surprisingly fast escalation, Tanya responded to the third such explanation by angrily tossing her book onto the floor.

“That’s it, Tanya,” Ms. Lora said firmly from her tutorial table. “I have to ask you to leave. This is a time for learning. Please gather your things and go home.”

“You hate me and I hate you!” Tanya screamed, charging out of the room, knocking over the three chairs within her reach on the way out.

Two of Ms. Lora's tutees, looking back and forth from the chairs to Ms. Lora, scurried over to restore order to the room. Ms. Lora closed her eyes and took a deep breath. In seconds, the chairs were back in their place and Ms. Lora was back to exploring good and bad examples of parallelism.

Now, just a few minutes later and against Ms. Lora's wishes, Tanya had returned and was peacefully, dejectedly pretending to read a book in the corner.

**Roberto (Year Four)—The Writing Rubric.** The writing rubric had revolutionized her approach to writing about halfway through her first year of teaching. This morning, just over a month into his fourth grade year, she was almost certain it was going to revolutionize Roberto's.

The full essay assignment she was handing back to the class had concluded her first unit on compare/contrast essays. As a class, the children had read a series of books by the same author, William Steig, and they had been assigned the task of picking two of those books to compare and contrast. Roberto had chosen *The Amazing Phone* and *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*. The end product was supposed to be a four-paragraph essay.

It had taken Ms. Lora over an hour to decipher Roberto's inventive and Spanish-phonetic spelling, but once she cracked the code, she could see clearly that he was trying to implement the skills they were discussing in class. He had an introduction and a conclusion—or at least their intent. Ms. Lora could see that he had brainstormed some ideas before he started writing.

Ms. Lora slipped his graded essay under the book he was reading and watched for his reaction as she continued to make her way around the room. Roberto turned immediately past his essay to the grading rubric and dragged his finger across each row, studying his score.

She saw his eyes narrow as he saw yet another "0" on the "conventions" row. "Conventions" included spelling and Roberto had made little progress on that front. But Ms. Lora was convinced that she actually saw the hints of a smile on his stern face when he saw the 1's and 2's on the other categories. Roberto had made enough progress on ideas, organization, voice, word choice, and sentence fluency to move out of the zero category. And Ms. Lora had been impressed enough with his attempt at organizing his ideas that he had earned a "2-" in that category.

While it was a long, long way to a perfect four in any area, that hint of pride was exactly what she was watching for and expected. On her way back to her desk, she leaned over and excitedly whispered to him, "We're making progress!"

He looked up at her and nodded, and actually smiled. A real, lip-curved smile. And then he returned his attention to his book about racecars.

Ms. Lora smiled to herself in pride and relief. She had been eagerly awaiting this moment for weeks.

Roberto had been pretty upset when he had gotten back the first rubric in the second week of school. He had received a zero in every category. He was the only student in the class not to have at least one "1" somewhere, and Ms. Lora had known that he would be distressed. Behind Roberto's stoic façade was an intense and demanding will to succeed, and she had seen Roberto respond to even minor shortcomings in his own work with a flash of self-directed anger. Once, after making an obvious mistake in a multiplication problem at the chalkboard, he had broken his chalk in frustration. Another time, she saw him pounding his own thigh in frustrated self-flagellation when he missed an easy multiplication problem in class.

That second week of school, with Roberto's tightly wound determination in mind and with his all-zeros rubric in hand, Ms. Lora had briefly considered inflating his score on at least one row, or even withholding the scores altogether. She knew receiving a zero in every category was going to upset him.

But Ms. Lora had ultimately decided to give him the honest, all-zeros evaluation in anticipation of exactly this moment. Today, on this second full-rubric evaluation, Roberto could actually see some progress. With full knowledge of where he was starting, and with the momentarily suppressed

knowledge of how far he had to go, both Roberto and Ms. Lora had actually earned an honest-to-goodness smile.

When the final afternoon bell rang, Roberto was still clutching his writing rubric in one hand. Ms. Lora had watched him read and reread it before and after P.E., during silent reading, and at least twice during her social studies drama about the three branches of government.

Now, amidst the bustle of the daily exodus, he walked determinedly over to her desk, his rubric still in one hand. Ms. Lora smiled at him again and while he did not, they exchanged knowing, self-congratulatory glances. With his empty hand, Roberto accepted the brown envelope from Ms. Lora without comment and stuffed it into the backpack at his feet.

“Please encourage your parents to call me if they have questions,” Ms. Lora said. She had written the same message in Spanish on a note in the envelope and had done her best to communicate it to his mother on the phone last night. Roberto’s mother understood the instructions for how to check Roberto’s work, but Ms. Lora was not convinced she understood just how phenomenally self-motivated her son seemed to be.

Roberto nodded and swung his heavily loaded bag onto his back. Ms. Lora reached out and patted his smooth hair.

Half the weight in that bag was made up of “extra” assignments that Roberto had requested to help him “learn to write.” It was just a couple of weeks into the school year and this was the fourth day in a row that he had asked for more “extra” work. Ms. Lora was thrilled, and was running out of readily available practice sheets. The good news was that Roberto’s writing was so poor, that any skill—from capitalization to thesis sentences—was helpful to him. Each morning, he returned with his valiant attempts at completing them, eager to hear Ms. Lora’s assessment of his work.

At Roberto’s own request, Ms. Lora had tried to involve Roberto’s family in checking the work. The brown envelope was a whole series of worksheets for the weekend that would help Roberto practice his punctuation skills. Ms. Lora had jotted instructions in Spanish for checking the worksheets on the answer keys that she was sending to his parents. She had had only the one conversation with Roberto’s mother so far, but Ms. Lora sensed that she was desperately eager to help Roberto master English and highly self-conscious about her own difficulties with the language. Roberto’s mother had declined to come to the school in person. Ms. Lora got the sense that it embarrassed Mrs. Reyes a little bit that Ms. Lora spoke to her in Spanish on the phone.

Roberto ducked out from under Ms. Lora’s admiring pat and gave her a twinkle-eyed but stone-faced “Good bye.”

She was just astonished by this child. She had previously had students who came to her already motivated to learn, but for most of her students, her top priority and biggest energy investment was making them think about learning in the way that Roberto already did. Very few students walked in her door with such an intense focus on their own academic needs. Unlike most of his classmates, many of whom had interpreted their own academic experiences as proof that hard work does not matter, Roberto already believed that his hard work was going to make him successful and he already really wanted that success.

Most impressive to Ms. Lora, Roberto seemed to have a perfectly realistic view of the dire state of his educational progress to this point. He knew he did not write well. He knew that reading the fourth grade books was very difficult for him. He even knew that his math skills were his best subject. He knew that he needed to work hard and to have a lot of help.

In these first couple of weeks, a time that was always hard for her as she struggled to gain traction with her students, Ms. Lora came to draw strength from his self-aware optimism. To Ms. Lora (but never in the presence of other students), Roberto expressed evangelical certainty about both his own potential to succeed and his great need for Ms. Lora’s help. Roberto walked into her classroom with an unshakable faith in the power of education, and the power of Ms. Lora to teach him English, a faith that she suspected was instilled in him by his parents, neither of whom spoke English at all.

Wherever this insight came from, Roberto, even at age nine, seemed to grasp the relation between the shootings on his block, and the skills and knowledge that Ms. Lora could give him. For Roberto, school was, all at once, the place where he had to practice constant vigilance to hide the hole in his school shirt and where he could eventually earn a new one.

**Anthony (Year One)—Anthony’s Cliff.** Ms. Lora could not see the playground from her room, but she had made a habit of standing in this spot where she could. During her lunch break, she regularly leaned against a pole on the walkway at the end of the classroom building and imagined herself a cognitive psychologist, or an anthropologist, studying the complex interactions among her students. She was fascinated by the groupings that formed and dissolved on the playground and in class. Gender-drawn lines appeared, disappeared, and reappeared. Wariness of fifth graders by fourth graders was observable, even from this distance, as was fifth graders’ self-assurance in the younger children’s presence. Some of the fifth grade girls huddled and whispered about boys. No boys ever whispered about anything. Some children who were active contributors in class revealed themselves to be grass-picking loners on the playground. A couple of students who were aggressive near-bullies on the playground rarely spoke up in class at all.

The pleasant laughter and yells of the playground echoed around her in the metal-roofed walkway as she ate her sandwich. She was noting that when the first and second graders were on the playground, one could see dozens of pairs of inter-racial, self-declared “best friends” playing, tagging, confiding, sharing, and chasing. When the fourth and fifth graders took over the field and jungle gyms, Anthony and Cliff were the only ones.

Last year, as an undergrad, she would have viewed the Anthony and Cliff partnership as a captivating research topic for one of her cognitive psychology classes. She would have hypothesized that Anthony and Cliff’s self-identity as “poor”—even in a community of relatively low-income families—was somehow trumping their self-identity as Latino and Black. But as their teacher, she viewed their partnership more simply—here were two kids who had similarly struggled with academics and therefore took solace in each other’s judgment-free company.

Perhaps both hypotheses were right. Cliff certainly was identified by his classmates as poor, a meaningful reputation in a school where virtually every child’s family struggles to make ends meet. In the first six weeks of school, she had come to realize that Cliff’s day-to-day life was a complex web of coping and (largely unsuccessful) misdirection strategies, all designed to hide or deny the shame of his poverty. For example, even as the stifling Houston heat made him sweat profusely, he wore his gray sweatshirt over his one, tattered and dirty uniform shirt, even though the sweatshirt itself seemed just as tattered and dirty. And early in the year, Cliff made a showy pronouncement that he “doesn’t like to dance” before the Back To School dance that cost fifty cents, even though every student had now watched him dance his way to and from the chalk board dozens of times. Ms. Lora was sure that others also noticed Cliff’s quiet insistence that he “wasn’t hungry” when someone would make a general offer of some bit of food, even though it was obvious how hungrily he ate from Anthony’s lunch every single day.

Ms. Lora hoped, however, that no one had noticed her slip soap and shampoo into Cliff’s backpack after he came to her in tears last week because a fifth grader had told him that he “stunk like garbage.” Ms. Lora was certain that no one knew that she had just a few days earlier been wrestling with how to broach the subject of personal hygiene with Cliff.

Whether through poverty, academic struggles, or some other bond, Cliff and Anthony were tight friends. They walked to and from school together, sat next to each other whenever possible, and ate lunch together, usually at the “girls’ table” where they seemed to appreciate the quieter scene. Everyday, Anthony would buy Flaming Hot Cheetos with the dollar he brought from home. He would pour some out on his tray and then hand the bag to Cliff. Cliff would pour some onto his tray before sharing the remainder with whatever girls were sitting around them.

Ms. Lora smiled to herself as she watched the much slower Anthony laboriously chasing Cliff on the packed grass, Anthony's arm cocked to hit Cliff with an all-purpose red rubber ball.

They made a great pair. Where Cliff was fast and careless, Anthony was plodding and meticulous. Where Cliff was quick with a joke, Anthony was quick with a smile. Where Cliff was smaller and angular, Anthony was bigger and rounded. In fact, Cliff was tiny. Just as Anthony was made small by his frequent appearance next to his twin brother Raul, Cliff was made small by his frequent appearance next to Anthony.

Both of the boys were easy-going and kind, to each other and to their classmates. Anthony had again and again proven himself to be especially thoughtful of and concerned for others. It was Anthony who had asked for additional leaves for the "Tree of Kindness" because he had more than three compliments to give his classmates.

And yet his only true friend seemed to be Cliff. The two boys spent every moment they could together.

Ms. Lora put the last bite of her sandwich in her mouth as Anthony and Cliff, on the other side of the playground fence, took turns punting the red ball as high as they could and then trying to catch it. She laughed along with them as they, arms out and eyes skyward, crashed violently into each other and the ball bounced hard on the ground ten feet away.

### **Tanya (Year Three)—Messiness In Your Hair.**

"You are going to get messiness in your hair!"

DeShavier was Tanya's best friend, but that didn't mean that she condoned Tanya's tantrums, especially when those fits were publicly embarrassing or potentially disgusting. This one was both.

Tanya had angrily pushed Sylvia as the girls stood in line outside the bathroom. In response to Ms. Lora's stern instruction to go to the end of the line and change her conduct, Tanya stomped to the back of the line and flopped down on her back on the floor of the hall.

Ms. Lora and Tanya had been flirting with confrontation all morning and Ms. Lora was tired of it.

"Tanya, get off the floor. The floor is dirty," Ms. Lora demanded.

"No."

"I'm not going to pick you up, Tanya. Get off the floor immediately. That floor is really dirty and you're going to get dirt and gross stuff in your hair if you stay there."

That's when DeShavier piped in from her place in line, distancing herself from her best friend.

"You are going to get messiness in your hair! That's gross, girl."

Tanya crossed her arms on her chest and, to the extent possible on a cold, grimy, linoleum floor, dug in.

"Line Managers, please lead us back to class," Ms. Lora instructed on the theory that Tanya wouldn't want to stay there by herself.

The theory proved correct, but Tanya did not get up. As the parallel lines of boys and girls headed back to Ms. Lora's room, Tanya began to scoot her body with her feet, head first, down the hall.

A chorus of exclamations of disgust and irritation arose from the other students as half of them were looking back at Tanya on the floor and the other half were being stepped on. With just the right soundtrack, the scene would have been hilarious. Given the full circumstances—and utter lack of a soundtrack—Ms. Lora found it deeply annoying.

"Everyone please turn your eyes forward. Do not watch Tanya. Let's not waste any more learning time."

Tanya scooted down the entire hallway on her back, her hair collecting filth like a dust mop. When she finally did stand up inside the door of the classroom, every child in the room, including DeShavier, let out groans of repulsion. Tanya's hair was matted with dust balls, hole-punched bits of paper, and dirt. "Look at the staples!" someone yelled, and the room giggled.

Flinching with the sting of their disapproval, Tanya burst into tears and curled up under the group reading table, her filthy hair swishing against the underside of the table as she held her knees to her chest and rocked back and forth.

Ms. Lora turned on the overhead projector.

"Would everyone please clear your desk of everything except your edited essays and a pencil?"

**Douglas (Year Two)—The Blue Slip.** In accordance with its detailed instructions, Ms. Lora closed her SFA script as the 9:30 bell rang. She dismissed her reading groups and made her way to the door. In the hall, without the encouragement of a piped-in jingle, but under the watchful eye of the SFA Coordinator's stopwatch, students were once again pouring into Blair's halls.

The students who had attended Ms. Lora's SFA session streamed out of her door just in time for her regular students to make their way back in. Ms. Lora greeted the returnees like long-lost family. "Welcome back, Elena!" "I missed you, Pablo!"

For the second time this morning, she shook their hands at the door, then asked them how their reading lesson went, and encouraged them to get started on the day's warm-up Numbers Challenge. From her post by the door, she could scan her students' faces, noting smiles and frowns as rough predictors of each student's demeanor during math. She watched with particular interest to see Douglas's countenance as he came down the hall toward her room. More often than not, Douglas was wearing the stress and frustration of the last ninety minutes on his face as he pushed his way through the door.

If only for Douglas's sake, Ms. Lora was grateful that the next hour and half was math. Douglas did better in math than in reading.

Like the reading block during the previous ninety minutes, math was guided by a commercially-developed program. But this program's design—or at least its execution—was not nearly as strictly managed as SFA's. For one thing, there was no school-wide "Coordinator" with a stopwatch in the hall. Ms. Lora generally followed the program's sequence and lessons and found them helpful, but she had considerable freedom to determine exactly what warm-up, objective, and activities the children would do on any given day. Occasionally, stopwatches were involved, but only in the hands of the children.

She watched carefully as Douglas pushed past her open hand and slid into his fourth-grade seat. His face indicated frustration, but there were no signs of impending disaster. She felt her own shoulders relax and she moved to the front of the room to start the math lesson.

Only seven minutes later, as a chorus of voices was reminding her to "carry the one" in her word problem calculations, Ms. Lora was also reminded that reading Douglas's face did not mean reading the future.

A cry of pain pierced the classroom and Emmanuel—a small and gentle boy who received more than his share of teasing from other kids—doubled over his desk holding his arm. He tried to hide his face behind his book as Douglas stood over him.

"Douglas!" Ms. Lora yelled. "In the hall, NOW!" She was already half-way to the boys by the time she finished her command.

As she arrived at the scene, Douglas turned and walked out the door, his bright eyes glaring at Ms. Lora.

Ms. Lora directed the class to try the next word problem, offering a couple of hints, before filling out the necessary paper work. In utter defeat, Ms. Lora stepped into the hall and handed the seething Douglas the blue slip that would no doubt result in yet another suspension.

Rubbing her temples with one hand, with the other she pulled him by the elbow toward her. He kept his head down, but shuffled beside her.

She whispered in his ear.

"Douglas, I am so sad that you are going to lose more learning time, but you know that I am not going to allow hitting in this classroom. Ever. There are no warnings, no timeouts, for hitting. Do you understand me?"

Douglas did not look up.

"I wish you had chosen to control your anger and not hit. Please take this blue slip to the office. Dr. Werner will probably need to call your mother."

Douglas knew the drill. He took the blue slip in two hands and walked down the hall.

Ms. Lora reentered the classroom and pushed the white button on the wall behind her desk.

"May we help you?" A voice came out of the ceiling.

"Douglas Rogers is on his way to you with a blue slip," Ms. Lora explained.

"OK, we'll take care of it. Thank you."

"Thank you."

In perfect synchronization, the other students who were squeezed into Room 210 shifted their gaze from the speaker in the ceiling to the work problem on their desks. One of them, Emmanuel, still had tears in his eyes. He rubbed the back of his shoulder with one hand as he read.

Ms. Lora sat down at her desk, rubbing her own shoulder as well. She was just at a loss. None of her attempts to actually effect change in Douglas's behavior was nearly so simple or effective as the rat hole. In fact, the vast majority of her attempts to impact Douglas's behavior, both in an immediate and a long-term way, were failures. He just did not respond to her carefully crafted rules and consequences. He didn't care which level his clothespin was on; in fact, some days it seemed like he was in a race through the color-schemed warning system. He flaunted rules, blew off consequences, and continually disrupted class, sometimes in fun and sometimes in anger.

It was additionally frustrating that she was actually seeing some gradual progress in her overarching quest to create a sense of teamwork in her classroom, but Douglas's outbursts, threats, and constant agitation undermined that progress. And she was investing as much time, energy, and worry in Douglas's behavior as she was in the entire rest of the class.

At a deeper level, Ms. Lora quietly resented that Douglas was degrading the integrity of her entire classroom management system. His behavior was so out of line so frequently that she was forced to choose between staying true to the system, in which case he would be constantly sent to the office and suspended, or lowering her behavioral standards for him in hopes of keeping him in class long enough for him to learn something. The constant tension in that choice made her miserable, and exhausted, and made her head and shoulders hurt.

Why couldn't she get a handle on his behavior? What was she doing wrong? Why hadn't she been able to leverage the "miracle" into a better relationship? His raging outbursts every few days, and his even more disruptive daily boundary testing, just reminded Ms. Lora of her shortcomings as a teacher.

Looking at the clock, she saw that her math period was coming to a close. She announced that the students should finish up the problem they were working on and file the sheet in their math folders. She then reached across her desk and pulled Douglas's Goals and Progress Folder out of the accordion file. The last round of graphs were only half-completed, and they told much less than half of the story.

In a strange way, the burden of Douglas's behavior was made worse by his flashes of success in the classroom. While reading was never easy for Douglas, and he often returned from his "Success For All" class in a foul mood, he was grasping basic literary conventions and he loved to follow stories during Read Alouds. Even more often, he was enjoying genuine success in math, and he occasionally led the class in basics of multiplication and division. On a day without word problems, he might even make it through a whole period without a tantrum.

Ms. Lora's focus on writing, however, often brought out the worst in Douglas as it was one of his weakest subjects. She was constantly searching for ways for him to ask for help while still appearing to master the material.

At least a few times a week, Douglas would show glimpses of interest, hard work, and success, glimpses that simultaneously inspired Ms. Lora to keep working and that further fueled her feeling of

impotence. She so wished that she could expand those flashes into at least minimally sustained periods of productivity.

She had certainly failed today. By now, Douglas was handing the secretary yet another blue slip and she was calling the principal and his mother.

One-hundred-and-sixty days to go before the state exam, and Douglas and Ms. Lora had now thrown away another two days of learning.

### **Anthony (Year One)—One Minus.**

“Yes Anthony? Do you have something to tell me?”

Anthony had a habit of sidling up behind Ms. Lora in the mornings and waiting to be noticed. It wasn't meant as a game. He often had information that he had learned since yesterday that he thought Ms. Lora might like to know. He was just too shy to interrupt Ms. Lora, even if she wasn't doing anything.

More often than not, it was his sidekick Cliff's clattering that alerted Ms. Lora to Anthony's presence. But not today.

“Did you know anacondas can grow to thirty feet long?” Anthony said from behind her.

“Wow! I had no idea.” Ms. Lora spun around in only semi-mock surprise. “Where did you learn that?”

“Right here, Miss,” he said. Anthony held up the *Amazing Reptiles* book he had in his hand.

“Well that's fascinating,” Ms Lora said.

“OK,” he said and wandered off to his seat.

Anthony supplied similar factoids once or twice a week. More often than not, the “fact” he shared was more questionable than the record for anaconda-length. Anthony was a die-hard fan of the quasi-scientific books that proliferate in elementary school libraries about UFOs, the Bermuda Triangle, mummies, and Bigfoot. The “facts” that he had shared most recently with Ms. Lora were about crop circles, ball lightning, and unicorns.

Of course, Ms. Lora never discouraged his reading, and, like with the books about amazing reptiles or unusual weather, sometimes he read true non-fiction. In fact, sometimes, when he would arrive early in her classroom like today, Anthony would pull out a newspaper and sit at his desk reading it as if he were about to have a cup of coffee at a café.

In Ms. Lora's mind, the puzzle of Anthony lay somewhere in the fact that he enjoyed reading and read a lot, but he struggled with those reading comprehension questions. How could he remember to tell Ms. Lora that she had the same name as the Northern Lights, but find the test's multiple-choice questions about the three paragraph essays so difficult?

Ms. Lora was working on several theories, including one that Anthony just was not spending enough time reading the questions carefully. In the meantime, Ms. Lora was doing all she could to encourage his love of reading.

This morning, however, Ms. Lora had some news that Anthony wasn't going to like. The first bell rang just as she pulled his latest graded essay out of the pile on her desk. She wanted to give him some time to adjust to the news before the room filled up with other students. She had a restroom pass ready on her desk.

As she handed him the graded essay, and as his classmates streamed in the door, she whispered to him that his punctuation was getting much better. Anthony, however, looked immediately to the “1-” on the top of the paper and buried his face in his arms on his desk.

Every couple of weeks, Ms. Lora graded the students' essays on the 0-4 scale that the state would use. She encouraged her students to pay less attention to the number than they did to her comments about strengths and areas that need improvement, but Anthony had a difficult time seeing past the harsh grade. In the course of working hard on an essay, he could somehow convince himself that this time he had finally gotten it. He would tell himself that Mrs. Franklin was wrong, that Ms. Lora was right, that he could be good at school. But he would ignore the “it takes time” part of her daily pep talks.

Anything less than immediate results was devastating, and Anthony had been sure, once again, that this essay was perfect.

Although it did not seem to help in these moments of disappointment, Ms. Lora was constantly discussing with Anthony his weaknesses, as well as his strengths. He was still struggling with the conceptual side of his writing. Ideas were not always organized. His limited vocabulary led to poor and repetitive word choice. In fact, some of his essays still included the same sentence written more than once.

Ms. Lora had discovered, however, that the highly atomized and skill-targeted worksheets—worksheets that led Anthony to capitalize the first sentence of ten straight sentences, or to correct the misused pronoun in a poorly written paragraph, or to underline the thesis sentences in a whole series of paragraphs—did little to improve his writing. In fact, Ms. Lora partially blamed those worksheets for the frequent, silent crying episodes like this one. Anthony was so eager for success that he would repeatedly misinterpret a high grade on a worksheet as actual mastery of a practical skill. The shock of the transition back and forth from 90s on worksheets to failing grades on writing assignments devastated Anthony. How was he supposed to believe he could learn to write when Ms. Lora, the very person telling him he could do it, kept giving him such mixed signals?

Ms. Lora watched from across the room as Anthony kept his head buried in his arms. By now, she knew that puddles of tears were forming on his desk. Anthony interacted with the other students very little, but he cared deeply that they not see him crying.

As she had before, Ms. Lora inconspicuously slipped the restroom pass into Anthony's lap as she walked past. When she turned around at the front of the room, he was gone.

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Anthony's silent tears still on her mind, Ms. Lora sat down to call his mother after school.

"I'm calling about Anthony," Ms. Lora said into her cell phone. Ms. Lora explained that Anthony was making progress, but needed extra help to catch up.

"Would you help me make sure he comes to tutorial sessions after school?" Ms. Lora asked.

"You want him to stay after school?" His mother seemed perplexed.

"Well, I offer tutorials after school so I can work with students that need a little extra help. Anthony is working hard, but I think we need to spend some extra time working to catch him up. I'd like him to come after school and on Saturday mornings."

After a few seconds of silence, Anthony's mother responded.

"Why don't you try with Raul? He's the smarter one," she offered. "Raul is good at school."

Ms. Lora put her hand on her head and looked up at the ceiling. She was working so hard to make Anthony believe he could succeed; she had thought his mother was already in her corner.

"Mrs. Vasquez, I'm sure that Anthony can be good at school too if we can get him caught up. He is a smart kid."

"You're nice to help him, and that's ok with me," Mrs. Vasquez responded, "but I don't want you to waste your time. Raul is good at school."

Ms. Lora decided to take that half-permission and run with it. She suppressed the urge to use the "he's going to prove people wrong" angle that seemed to be working, to some degree, with Anthony himself. Ms. Lora was disappointed that his mother was one of those people.

"Mrs. Vasquez, I would like to meet with you here at school to show you Anthony's progress. I'm going to need your help on a few things and want to show you where he is doing well and where he is struggling."

**Tanya (Year Three)—Another Run.** Ms. Lora ran across the room and pushed the call button. She would run across the room, but there was no way she was going to chase Tanya Law across the

campus. She had twenty-five rapt faces watching her as the crackly voice said “Yes, Ms. Lora, can I help you?”

“Hi.” Ms. Lora tried to sound calm. “Tanya just ran out of the classroom and said she was running away. I can’t leave my class to go after her. Can you find someone to get her?”

The crackly voice was already giving instructions to someone else by the time Ms. Lora finished talking.

“Thank you, Ms. Lora. We’ll take care of it.”

“Clear your desks and take out your science books,” Ms. Lora barked at the class of wide-eyed students. This was the third time Tanya had bolted this month, and Ms. Lora was sick of it.

**Anthony (Year One)—Six Times Eight.** With a slight swagger, Cliff stepped up to the desk in front of Ms. Lora. With a slight blush, Anthony stepped up to face Cliff from the other side.

“Ready. . . go!” Ms. Lora said, holding up a handwritten note card that read “6 x 8.”

Anthony and Cliff each struggled with the basic multiplication facts they needed to win or lose, but they had mastered the sophisticated calculus necessary to assure, as they stood in ever shifting lines of squirming fourth graders, that they ended up squaring off against each other when it came their turn. Even when the rotating lines of contestants on each team were different lengths, or when a team member got unexpectedly called to the office, or when Ms. Lora made three lines just to shake things up, Anthony and Cliff could adjust their position at the back of the line so that they always simultaneously ended up at the front.

The class loved this game that Ms. Lora called Times Tables Showdown. The class *really* loved these entertaining duels between Anthony and Cliff.

Ms. Lora had invented the game as an alternative to the old favorite “Around the World,” a game that pitted two students in a multiplication flashcard race. In that game, the winning student remained standing and moved to the next challenger so that someone who made it through all of the challengers had gone “Around the World.” They had only played that game twice before Ms. Lora shelved it because it gave weaker students too much temptation to sit back quietly and lose passively.

This Showdown game had been a hit since its trial run one afternoon when the class came back from PE early and Ms. Lora had to figure out a way to maximize six unexpected minutes of class time. She had hurriedly created two lines of students, with the heads of the two lines facing each other. She would pull a flashcard and the first student to answer the problem correctly would get to put a point on the board for his or her team before rejoining the end of the line. The social pressure of scoring for your team dramatically increased the weaker mathematicians’ involvement. And, it kept everyone in the line involved in every “showdown.”

So while weaker students were less inclined to abstain from the competition in this game, the new frontier of gaming the system—as exemplified by Anthony and Cliff—was to position yourself in line so that you would go up against someone you thought you could beat. Cliff knew that he was faster than Anthony. Anthony knew that he was more careful than Cliff. Each of them did not mind losing to the other. So Cliff and Anthony always managed to face off at the front of the line.

“Forty-two!” shouted Cliff as soon as the flashcard was raised.

“No, I’m sorry,” said Ms. Lora, accompanied by a chorus of groans from the line behind Cliff. “Anthony, you have an opportunity to answer.”

“Two points off for helping.” Ms. Lora reminded Anthony’s teammates.

Anthony’s line went perfectly silent. Several of its members had their fingers crossed; others were jiggling up and down in anxious encouragement. Everyone knew this might take awhile. It was precisely this anticipation that was so enjoyable.

Trigger-happy Cliff often spoke too quickly, giving Anthony an untimed free shot at the answer. Anthony, under slightly more pressure to get the answer right than he was to hurry up, would take his

time calculating the answer using all the tools at his disposal—namely his fingers and several multiplication songs.

So, the class had come to a cliffhanging standstill. Ms. Lora was holding up a flashcard while Anthony counted on his fingers and hummed to himself. Meanwhile, a line of students wiggled, craned and danced behind him. By the time Anthony answered, the room was ready to explode. And it did.

Anthony stopped humming and said “Forty-eight.”

“Yeah!” his line yelled, as much in relief of the tension as in celebration of the right answer.

Cliff, as a ritual of his friendship with Anthony, reached out a closed fist. The two boys touched knuckles. Anthony, his face fully red now, smiled his way to the chalkboard and gave his team a point.

**Roberto (Year Four)—Go Astros.** Without looking up from her clipboard, Ms. Lora announced, “Could I have our technology manager up front, please?”

Roberto grabbed his binder and hurried to his seat at the front of the class by the laptop. The computer’s contents were being projected onto the white, pull-down screen in front of the chalkboard. In stark bold letters, the screen read “Subject and Object Pronouns.”

While the kids generally disliked the grammar book, they seemed to love the same material projected on a screen. The real attraction was the personalized sentences and stories that Ms. Lora incorporated into each mini-lesson. Sometimes those were stories about Ms. Lora’s childhood, sometimes they were drawn from books the class was reading, and sometimes they were made-up or real accounts of the lives of students in the classroom. The students loved seeing familiar names on the screen and even came to Ms. Lora with suggestions for stories that might be good for teaching commas, or subject-verb agreement, or parallelism.

Today’s mini-lesson was on pronouns, and after displaying and reading the stark objectives of the lesson to the students, Ms. Lora nodded to Roberto and he brought up the next screen.

With a few giggles at the mere mention of their classmates, students read the two, side-by-side paragraphs to themselves:

Jose asked Richard and Roberto if Richard and Roberto wanted to go to the Astros game with Jose. Jose, Richard, and Roberto asked Ms. Lora when the game was. Ms. Lora told Jose, Richard, and Roberto that the game was on Monday.	Jose asked Richard and Roberto if they wanted to go to the Astros game with him. They asked Ms. Lora when the game was. She told them that the game was on Monday.
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While the focus was supposed to be on the pronouns, Ms. Lora didn’t mind that everyone in the room was sharing in Jose, Richard, and Roberto’s excitement about having gone to the Astros game Monday night. The three boys had earned the trip with perfect attendance so far to after-school and Saturday tutorials. Roberto especially had been in awe at the giant stadium. None of the fifteen students who joined Ms. Lora and two other teachers had ever been to a professional baseball game before and they settled into their nose-bleed seats like kings and queens. Once the kids realized that yelling and cheering was expected of them, they didn’t stop shouting for the entire night, even for basic communication with each other.

Ms. Lora decided to let the boys keep the limelight and she set aside her cup of Popsicle-stick names.

“Richard, can you talk to me about what is the same about these two paragraphs?”

Richard voice was still hoarse from yelling things like “Go Astros!”, “C’mon Ump!”, and “Pass the nachos!” two days before.

“Both paragraphs are about the Astros game,” he croaked.

“That’s right,” Ms. Lora helped. “In fact, both paragraphs convey exactly the same information, right? Jose, why is one of these paragraphs shorter if they both convey the same information?”

Ms. Lora took the class in a few logical circles before nodding to Roberto. He tapped on the laptop and a new slide magically appeared that, with three bullet points, told what work pronouns do in a paragraph.

With the students’ help, Ms. Lora worked through the 20-slide presentation, having different students identify or fill in first subject pronouns and then object pronouns in a whole series of teaser-*tales* from upcoming tutorial-reward trips. When she had written and received the original \$40,000 grant to fund and improve Blair’s after-school services, she had included money for these trips to reward students with perfect attendance. The rodeo, where L’il Bowow would perform, was especially prominent because so many of Aurora’s students had shown interest in going. There was another slide about a late-spring trip to a Rockets game. She used the last slide to shamelessly promote the end of year reward-trip to the zoo. The last slide before the homework assignment read:

*I hope that we will see you at the zoo!*

**Douglas (Year Two)—Coach Washington.** Mr. Washington ducked into her room. He claimed he was only 6’6” but he ducked to come in the 6’8” door.

“Good morning, Ms. Lora.”

“Good morning, Mr. Washington. You got my note? I’m sorry about this.”

“Oh no, that’s ok. I understand and appreciate what you’re doing. We can work together on this for sure.”

“Thanks, Mr. Washington. We’ll try to get things in shape for next week.”

Ms. Lora explained to the custodian/basketball coach how Douglas had been on “yellow” three days last week and had not upheld his end of his behavior contract. As Ms. Lora and Mr. Washington had agreed, that meant that Douglas would not play in this week’s basketball game. In order to stay on the team, he was, however, required to attend the game and sit in the stands.

While she rarely allowed herself a moment to consider it, the fact was that over time, through trial and error and constant modifications of her approach, Ms. Lora was beginning to find small footholds in the steep climb to affect Douglas’s behavior. First and foremost, there was basketball.

Ms. Lora knew from Douglas’s chatter, his dozens of jerseys, and his intermittent journal entries that he loved to play basketball. Basketball and his mom were Douglas’s favorite journal topics. He took great pride in playing at the Salvation Army on the school team against other neighborhood schools. He considered himself a star. He was after all, three or four years older than many of the other kids he was playing with and against.

Ms. Lora and Mr. Washington had originally bonded when, in September, Mr. Washington had been assigned the unenviable task of physically removing Douglas from Ms. Lora’s classroom during a particularly dangerous fit of anger. Ms. Lora was a little surprised and a lot thankful that Coach Washington and Douglas’s mom gave their full support to Ms. Lora’s decision to hold Douglas out of games as a consequence for unacceptable behavior.

Douglas was not thrilled with that arrangement. In fact, he initially dismissed it as so unspeakably horrible as to be impossible. Ms. Lora did what she could to indicate her sincerity. And she made a point of clearly repeating her expectations and the basketball consequences daily.

He was nevertheless shocked, and livid, the first time Ms. Lora pulled him from a game. But now, after three or four missed games, Douglas was at least coming to accept that basic notion that his classroom behavior had consequences he cared about.

“I’ll keep talking to him about it,” Mr. Washington said as he turned to leave.

“Good luck tonight,” Ms. Lora said appreciatively. “I’m hoping to stop by.”

“See you there.”

As Mr. Washington curled forward to duck out of the classroom, Ms. Lora wondered, for the millionth time, whether she was doing the best she could for Douglas. Between storms of anger and low-grade violence, Douglas showed such tantalizing glimmers of potential. How could she isolate those moments of promise and nurture them?

One avenue that Ms. Lora had decided not to pursue was special education. Douglas's mother's articulate indictment of the special education services and system at Blair gave Ms. Lora great pause, but it was actually a recent visit from the school's "Special Education Coordinator" that led Ms. Lora to pledge never to refer Douglas to special education.

"How many referrals do you want, Ms. Lora?" a voice had said into Ms. Lora's room after school.

For a moment, Ms. Lora could not even figure out where the voice was coming from, much less what it meant. Once she saw the Special Education Coordinator's head peering in the doorway, it still took Ms. Lora a minute to make sense of the question.

"Oh, I don't need any. Thank you."

The fierce-faced woman stepped into the room. She smiled and cocked her head like she was whistling to a puppy.

"Oh, come on, sure you do," she said.

"No, I don't think so," Ms. Lora repeated, starting to wonder whether she didn't understand the offer.

"Ms. Lora, I know I was hard on you after that IEP meeting, but I was just helping you learn the ropes. Don't punish me through your kids."

Ms. Lora felt like she'd fallen down the rabbit hole. Punish *her* through her kids? Ms. Lora had almost forgotten about the scolding she received for mentioning that student's high performance in front of his parents. Ms. Lora still believed that he should have been exited from special education. Her lack of interest in referring anyone to special ed had nothing to do with this woman.

"You can have as many as you want and it can't hurt to try," she persisted. It was as if she was pitching sample pigs-in-the-blanket at the grocery store. "Mrs. Johnson took fifteen, since she's already got SpEd kids in her class."

"Fifteen?!" Ms. Lora realized she must be misunderstanding the offer. "She's going to refer fifteen kids?"

"Oh sure. Some teachers just refer all their kids, you know, so the testing gets done, and then from there they can be sure they didn't miss anybody."

"That's unbelievable." Ms. Lora still could not really make sense of this.

The woman was irritated by Ms. Lora's incredulousness.

"Well, better safe than sorry, you know. Tell you what, you can look at your roster and think about it. Meantime, I'll leave three or four here on your desk. You've got Douglas Rogers and some of those other big boys, don't you? Just remember I need the filled-out forms by the end of next week."

Alone again, Ms. Lora leaned back in her chair and rubbed her face with both hands. This was unbelievable. Teachers were referring entire classes?

As much as she loved the theory that each child with special needs should have special attention, given the reality of the system at Blair it made Ms. Lora sick to think of teachers referring fifteen kids at a time to special education. She knew that the "special" label meant that a child's test scores wouldn't "count" for or against the teacher or school, but from what she had seen it also meant that the student would get virtually no academic instruction at all, would be placed in a class of dozens of other high-needs kids, and would be essentially labeled as a lost cause for the rest of his school career.

Douglas's mother had told Ms. Lora that it would amount to a life sentence to send Douglas into that environment. The more Ms. Lora thought about it now, the more the figurative and literal meanings of that metaphor blurred together. He would be put in a room with 30 kids, half of whom genuinely had special needs, and half of whom were there because their teacher was tired of writing disciplinary referrals for them. Academic instruction would be all but non-existent. Douglas would undoubtedly find the one and only way out of that system: he would be expelled within days.

Matching her determination not to send Douglas into that trap was Ms. Lora's sadness that so many children were already there. She found it deeply depressing to think about the difference between the theory and reality of special education at Blair. In an ideal world where special education was all that it was supposed to be, Douglas probably would benefit immensely. His emotional outbursts, his trouble with reading, his self-defeating behaviors—what if he could blossom if he had someone who knew how to teach him? What if Ms. Lora could convince Mrs. Rogers to get him tested and moved into a really excellent program? What if Ms. Lora, with the help of the basketball coach, wasn't really helping address his needs at all?

Nevertheless, the thought of referring Douglas to special education felt just like giving up on him. She could not do it.

Ms. Lora began to pack some spelling quizzes into her bag to grade at tonight's basketball game. She was hoping that Douglas would sit right beside her.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Sign Here.** Ms. Lora and Mr. Law faced off in his yard, each waiting for the other to break the silence. Mr. Law's crossed arms and his chin were pressed against his chest. Ms. Lora stood, also looking at the ground, with her hands on her hips, one hand holding a single sheet of paper. Even in the relatively stationary context of an awkward moment with his daughter's teacher, Mr. Law paced a three-foot line in the trampled grass. Ms. Lora took a step to the side as well, trying to escape the blinding glare of the sun off of the windshield of the car in the yard behind him.

After a few seconds, they both started to speak at once.

"Ms. Lora, I know you think. . ."

"Mr. Law, I know you just want what's best. . ."

The gravity of the subject matter artificially inflated the minor humor in interrupting each other. They both smiled uncomfortably.

Putting both of his hands deep in his pocket and returning his gaze to the ground, Mr. Law signaled a withdrawal of his intention to speak. Ms. Lora mentally kicked herself for speaking a moment too soon and quickly decided that she had nothing to lose.

"Mr. Law, Tanya needs some help dealing with the loss of her mother. We're all pretty worried about her . . . her teachers, the principal, and the counselor. Her behavior problems started around that time, and you know what a bright child she is. . . I just know that if we got her into some professional counseling where she could talk through. . ."

Mr. Law stopped moving and spoke forcefully but quietly.

"Ms. Lora. . ." This time the interruption was purposeful. "I already told them. I don't want Tanya doing none of that. I am not going to sign any form about that."

Mr. Law turned his back and walked around the other side of the car, where he resumed his ritual pacing. Tanya seemed to have inherited his ability to make Ms. Lora feel absolutely helpless.

Ms. Lora turned and walked back across the street to the school. The sound of young voices counting jumping jacks echoed among the buildings. The unsigned permission form for Tanya's counseling was still in Ms. Lora's hand.

**Anthony (Year One)—No Shows.**

"Anthony, we missed you again at tutorials." Ms. Lora was leaning over his desk. She tried to sound warm, welcoming, and still severe.

"I know, Miss," he said. "I didn't go."

"Well, I know you didn't come, Anthony," Ms. Lora dropped the warm and welcoming. "Anthony, you need the extra help. You need to commit to coming to tutorials."

Ms. Lora saw in Anthony's eyes that her words seemed absurd. She still had not convinced him that it was worth it. He not only doubted that the extra work was actually going to make any difference, but he also saw the costs of committing to Ms. Lora's after-school plan as just too high.

For Anthony, to "commit" to tutorials meant little more than missing his favorite time of the day—the exciting wanderings home with Raul and Cliff. The three boys, in every imaginable configuration and according to ever-more-complex rules, would share one bicycle that belonged to one of Raul and Anthony's older siblings. On a good day, they would visit and revisit empty lots, barking dogs, muddy construction sites, decaying road kill, and a tortilleria, all before they made the first rotation on the bicycle. To Anthony, tutorials seemed like a less promising investment.

"Hey Cliff," Ms. Lora said, looking past the surprised Anthony to his friend.

"Yes, Ms. Lora?"

"I need a filing helper this week after school. Do you think you could come help me?"

"Sure, Ms. Lora," Cliff said with an air of pride.

"Anthony, maybe we could practice 'outlining' this afternoon. Could you come to tutorials today?"

"OK, Ms. Lora." She saw that, in this moment, he was sincere, but she knew he had the best of intentions every other time he'd promised to come for extra help.

"Great, see you there guys," Ms. Lora said, reverting to her welcoming warmth.



That afternoon, Ms. Lora kept one eye on the door as she handed each of the six children a set of five flashcards. Shivonne held one of hers up for the others to see. The card said "africa." Four hands slapped on the table and Shivonne pointed at Pablo.

"Proper Noun. You capitalize it. The common noun is country."

Shivonne looked at Ms. Lora for confirmation.

"Well, it's a continent, but good catch on the capitalization," Ms. Lora offered.

Shivonne then nodded to Pablo. Pablo then held up a similar card with "spring" printed on it. All six hands slapped the table.

From her seat, Ms. Lora leaned over to look out the windows, but saw no signs of Anthony and Cliff.

#### Questions to Consider

- (1) What advice would you give Aurora concerning Tanya's father? If you were to join Aurora in a meeting with him, what would be your purpose in that meeting? What would you say?
- (2) In your estimation, what is working and not working in Aurora's approach to Roberto? How do you know?
- (3) In your estimation, what is working and not working in Aurora's approach to Douglas? How do you know?

## Chapter Five

# Trials and Errors (120-85 Days)

**Douglas (Year Two)—Brand Spanking New.** Two large strips of colored butcher paper were hanging from tape on the chalkboard. Ms. Lora had written “Voice” on the yellow one in big red letters and had written “Word Choice” on the orange one.

By now, the children knew the drill. Ms. Lora was reading from one of the “exemplary” essays that the state had released to teachers. The students each had several post-its. When they heard a good example of voice or of word choice, they would write it down and then stick their post-it to the corresponding paper.

This had proven to be a fun and productive five-minute exercise, as it nurtured students’ active listening and immediately impacted their writing. Inevitably, they would use the same words and phrases they identified in this exercise in their next essay.

Douglas usually had a difficult time following this exercise, but Ms. Lora continued to try to include him. Today, he was paying enough attention to laugh so hard he choked.

When she had read through this essay earlier, it had never occurred to her that “brand spanking new” would bring down the house. But when she read the line “We got into my family’s brand spanking new Suburban,” the class, and especially Douglas, just lost it. He actually shouted out “brand spanking new!” a couple of times between laugh-gasps before he literally doubled-over onto the floor laughing.

The only thing preventing this from being a disruptive spectacle were the tears of laughter in every other student’s eyes as the infectiously funny thought, “brand spanking new,” took over the room. There was a mad rush to be the first to write “brand spanking new” on a post-it. Still giggling, students swarmed to the front and, in equal numbers, pasted their post-its to each sign while Douglas climbed back into his seat, still giggling.

Ms. Lora realized she could look forward to seeing “brand spanking new” in every essay she read for a few weeks.

**Anthony (Year One)—A Long Way To Go.** Ms. Lora flipped through and pulled Anthony’s essay to the top of the pile. The review assignment had been to compare/contrast two important people in his life. Not surprisingly, he had written about his brother Raul and his best friend Cliff. Not surprisingly, the first of his three, required body-paragraphs was about size: “Raul is very big but Cliff is small.”

That was it. A one-sentence paragraph. Everything was spelled correctly and the simple punctuation mark was correct. This represented some major advancements over Anthony’s first-week diagnostic essay, but Ms. Lora knew that this essay would not pass the state standards.

She looked back across the room at Anthony who was leaning close to his make-up work, his pencil squeezed in his dimpled hand. She just didn’t know what to think. Maybe Mrs. Franklin was right—writing was just not Anthony’s strength.

Or maybe, as Ms. Lora so wanted to believe, Mrs. Franklin was a horrible, debilitating influence on Anthony. Maybe if Anthony had not had her telling him he was dumb for an entire year, he would be a strong reader and writer. Maybe if Anthony could get out of Mrs. Franklin’s suffocating SFA class and into a class where learning was celebrated, he would grow by leaps and bounds.

As diplomatically as she could, she had made exactly that point to a not-so-sympathetic panel of decision makers not long ago. When Ms. Lora actually said, “I think Anthony can really blossom in a more open atmosphere that takes advantage of his strong motivation to read non-fiction,” the previously heated, argumentative impasse transformed into a cold, silent one. For a moment, the four women sat

quietly, surrounded by purple, none looking at each other. Ms. Lora stared at the mug on Mrs. Franklin's desk where she kept pencils that she "rented" to students for a nickel. The mug had written on its face, "My Three Favorite Things About Teaching: June, July, and August."

Mrs. Franklin and the SFA Coordinator stayed seated in the children's desks they had pulled into a circle, but Principal Werner stood up to leave.

Ms. Lora stopped her with one more plea.

"Dr. Werner, would you at least come watch Anthony during tutorials? I just don't know how else to tell you that he is succeeding well beyond the third-grade reading material. He will do so much better if we can move him to a higher SFA level."

Mrs. Franklin, not in the least bit offended by Ms. Lora's arguments that Anthony wasn't learning in her room, stepped in with the aim of protecting Ms. Lora from her own naiveté.

"Aurora dear, I know Anthony is a special boy. I like him too. But you know he struggles with reading and writing. That's just not your fault and that's ok. He doesn't even speak in my class. I think he'll fail the test again this year, but we all have those kids. . ."

Ms. Lora felt her face flush. Her voice raised, she started to explain that Anthony now read constantly and that if she were in Mrs. Franklin's class she wouldn't do anything either.

But, perhaps for the best, Dr. Werner interrupted.

"We'll revisit this question after the tests," Dr. Werner said as she walked out the door.

Now, as she looked from his one-sentence paragraph to his hunched back at his seat, she felt at a loss. She had to light a fire in him or they weren't going to make it. What was Ms. Lora actually supposed to say to him? The mantra "Anthony, I know you can do it" was sounding more and more hollow in Ms. Lora's own mind. What would be worse—creating unfulfilled hopes of success or suppressing those hopes in the first place? How could she build his faith in her when, to be honest, she was struggling with her own faith in his ability to succeed?

Ms. Lora glanced at the Countdown on the wall. "120." She returned Anthony's essay about his brother and Cliff to the middle of the stack. She watched him at his desk writing, in his beautiful cursive, answers to the questions on the form. On his last similar quiz, he had gotten exactly half of the questions correct.

"Hey Anthony," she said quietly. "You know we've got a long way to go, right?"

He looked up at her, not one bit confused about the context of her question.

"Yes," he said and hunched back into his methodical cursive.

**Roberto (Year Four)—Code Orange.** Since last year's sex offender panic, Ms. Lora had been assigned sidewalk duty on the perimeter of the school grounds as students ended their meandering walks from home each morning.

From her spot at the corner of the cafeteria building, she could see Roberto and Jose four blocks up the street, turning the corner toward her. Roberto had his battered trombone case slung over his backpack on his back. He was walking hunched over, each hand clutching one of the straps curling into his armpits. Jose, backpack-less, was bouncing along beside Roberto, a long stick trailing in his hand. These cooler days seemed to energize their trek.

From her spot at the corner of the cafeteria building, Ms. Lora could also see the sex offender's second-story apartment overlooking the playground. She assumed, but did not know for sure, that he was still there. She had not seen him in that window this year.

Last year had been a different story.

The police had actually come to the school months before the big blow up. They had told the principal that a registered sex offender had moved into the apartment, but that there was nothing they could do about it except keep patrols in the area and to make all teachers aware of his presence. In some bizarre way, it was a small relief to most teachers that the police had told the principal that the man was "mostly just a little crazy." The principal had done her best to announce this information at a staff

meeting in a way that was not overly alarming. No one ran out of the room in terror, but it was all anyone talked about for weeks. And the man himself stoked the school's anxiety.

Over the next couple of months, he would appear, usually shirtless, in that window during recess and after school. Ms. Lora had seen him several times while she was monitoring the recess period. More often than not, on those days when he appeared at the window, someone would call the police station and a police car would pull up by the playground. For the most part, the children seemed oblivious to the adults' glances, whispers, glares, and phone calls, but they all knew that something was scary about the man in that apartment.

Then, last spring, the man came out of his apartment during a P.E. class and crossed the street to talk to some children through the fence. Whether it was truly an attempted abduction was unclear to Ms. Lora, but the children, the teachers, the school, the parents, the media, and the police—in that order—acted as if it was. Ms. Lora, along with everyone else on campus, was genuinely terrified.

The girls he spoke to ran to the P.E. teacher, who immediately shepherded the entire class into the cafeteria. Mr. Washington, the janitor, was deputized to stand protectively at the doors. The principal was on the scene in seconds and had already called the police. She put the school on "Code Orange," a status that had been explained and practiced during in-service whereby no student could leave a classroom without adult supervision. Meanwhile, inside the closed cafeteria and in every classroom on campus, the term "rapist" somehow became part of the standard vernacular of elementary children at Blair.

News of the incident and the school's lock-down spread quickly across the community, and parents started showing up to pick up their children within minutes. While they were generally understanding that it took time to walk each student to meet them at the office, that anxious waiting gave them time to realize that the police had still not arrived. By the time the police did pull up at the school, hours after they were called, a mini-mob of angry parents was gathered in front of the school seeking an explanation. More police (who arrived much more quickly) were called because of the angry parents.

The media arrived just as the first police car did. Included in the fleet of television trucks that descended on the school were two Spanish news stations. On every channel, the sensational news headline that night was not actually the supposed attempted abduction, but the slow response of the police. The media stoked the parents' outrage and fear, pointing out that there were actually dozens of registered sex offenders living within fifteen blocks of Blair Elementary.

Now, seven months later, the effects of that chain of events were still being felt. Police still occasionally patrolled the neighborhood at recess and before and after school. Many more children were dropped off by their parents than there used to be. A few parents still joined the ring of teachers that monitored the morning arrivals and afternoon departures. And Ms. Lora was still standing on morning duty, glancing up at that second story window in resentment, anger, and fear.

"Good Morning, Miss Lora."

Roberto and Jose had made their way the four blocks to the school grounds.

"Good morning, boys," she said. "What's the news this morning?"

A mini-tradition had developed in the last few weeks. When Roberto and Jose arrived, Ms. Lora would interrogate them about the details of their walk from home.

"A dog scared Roberto," Jose offered with a snicker.

"It was big, Miss." Roberto saw no reason to deny it. "It was like a giant dragon."

"Sounds terrifying. I'd be scared too. Where'd you get the stick?" Ms. Lora asked Jose.

"From home," Jose answered. "I'm going to leave it here until after school."

"That's probably a good idea."

Ms. Lora's questions, on occasion, served as more than relationship-building and English-practice, although those purposes were hugely important. Ms. Lora also sometimes used the boys' experiences as bases for the mini-stories she would present to the class. The day the boys had killed a snake on the way to school served as fodder for no fewer than three writing exercises that day. The boys loved seeing their morning adventures incorporated into Ms. Lora's PowerPoint slides.

After drawing out a few more vignettes from their early morning adventures, Ms. Lora reminded the pair to be ready for the spelling quiz later that morning.

"I'm ready," Roberto said.

"Me too," Jose added quickly.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Crow Boy.** It was apparently Tanya who convinced Gerald to come talk to Ms. Lora. Gerald was a slight and gentle boy who often got teased by the bigger boys. Bucking the norm, all of Gerald's friends were girls, a list that included Tanya. Tanya whispered to Ms. Lora just moments ago that Gerald was very upset and needed some "counseling."

Tanya's most mature maternalism was on full display as she led him, her hand in the small of his back, over to Ms. Lora's desk. Gerald held his shirt to his face, trying to suppress growing, gasping sobs. Tanya ran over and shut the door.

"Thank you, Tanya," Ms. Lora said. "Do you want to sit with us for just a minute and then maybe give us some alone time?"

Tanya, not usually one to take even the least subtle hint, felt fulfilled by her role in this drama already. Standing as tall as she could Tanya mouthed "Thank You" to Ms. Lora and slipped out the door, closing it behind her.

Ms. Lora sat beside Gerald, one hand on his back and the other holding a box of Kleenex. The other students had just walked out the door to P.E.

"I am so, so sorry, Gerald," she said. "You are absolutely right that they have to stop."

Ms. Lora had talked with Gerald about the bullying, but she did not realize that her in-class monitoring had only shifted the teasing to the playground. Ms. Lora had only heard other students call Gerald "gay" a few times, but she had no reason to doubt his reports of aggressive taunting and harassment on the playground.

"They tried to pull my shirt off, too," he cried. That shirt was now soaked with his snot and tears. Ms. Lora handed him more Kleenex.

"If you'd like to tell me specifically who did that, Gerald, it would help me to know. I need to talk to those students."

Ms. Lora was hoping against hope that they weren't students in her class. She had been, at one point, pleased with the culture of tolerance and teamwork in her classroom this year. But as the class next door grew more and more out of control, and the principal attempted to resolve that by sending more and more of those students into her room, the dynamics had changed. Ms. Lora had failed to invest the new students in that culture, and she was losing the sense of community and support they once had.

Gerald didn't answer, but his sobbing subsided. The tears, however, continued.

"I told adults like you said," he whispered. "And I told them I didn't like it."

"You did, Gerald." Ms. Lora felt the weight of responsibility for his pain. "You did exactly what you were supposed to do. We made a mistake and didn't support you enough. You didn't do anything wrong at all, Gerald."

Ms. Lora pulled an unopened water bottle from under her desk, opened it, and set it on his desk next to him.

"Gerald, could we talk about some ways that we could address this with the class?"

He looked up her quickly, his eyes betraying his fear and embarrassment at the thought.

"You wouldn't need to be involved if you chose not to be. I just thought maybe you could help me think about how to address it myself."

Gerald relaxed a little bit and took a long swallow of the water. Ms. Lora handed him another Kleenex.

"Here's what I'd propose. I think we should call a class meeting where I would start by reading a story that had some issues about bullying in it. Then we could talk about problems that I saw going on in the classroom and on the playground."

Gerald was listening intently.

"I wouldn't mention your name at all. And, I bet there're other students that would be so thankful that we had this conversation. Maybe at the end, I'd ask if anyone wanted to contribute a story about bullying and how it made them feel. You could just decide for yourself whether you wanted to say something or not. What do you think of that proposal?"

"That's good," he said immediately. "And I don't have to say anything."

"That's right," Ms. Lora assured him.



Out of appreciation for her handling of Gerald's situation and out of concern that this conversation could fall flat, Ms. Lora had pulled Tanya aside and asked her to be sure to pay careful attention and contribute during the discussion of *Crow Boy*.

"How many of us in this circle have ever experienced bullying?"

Over the course of several seconds, every hand in the circle was raised, including Ms. Lora's.

"At the beginning of *Crow Boy*, why was Chibi treated the way he was treated by other students?"

On cue, although with more drama than necessary, Tanya raised her hand. Ms. Lora called on her and she gave a soft-spoken explanation of how Chibi was different from other kids.

Ms. Lora winked at Tanya in appreciation. Tanya winked back.

Ms. Lora had read *Crow Boy* to the class. She only rarely used these elementary-style read-alouds because she had very few class sets of books, but her students loved sitting in a circle and hearing Ms. Lora read. And the read aloud set the right tone for the upcoming discussion.

After several other students shared their explanations for Chibi's treatment at the beginning and end of the book, Ms. Lora asked again.

"How many of you have shared some of the feelings that you think Chibi probably had when the other kids were teasing him?"

Ms. Lora lifted her own hand again, and decided to take the opportunity afforded by yet another unanimous poll to start the transition to a class meeting.

"Thank you. I appreciate everyone's honest sharing of their experiences so far."

Ms. Lora was careful not to look at Gerald.

"Right now, I'd like to ask everyone to help me facilitate a discussion of the culture of our classroom. I'd like to talk about what we like and do not like about the culture of our classroom."

She had the room's full attention.

"I'd like to share my honest feelings. I've been sad and disappointed, and pretty frustrated lately. I feel like our class has lost some of the culture of teamwork that we need in order to succeed together. And I feel like our class is not as welcoming a place as it can be. Some of my disappointment is in myself for not being a better leader with you to create a place where everyone feels welcome. But to be honest, some of my disappointment is with all of us for not working together to make sure this is a safe learning environment for everyone."

Most of the eyes in the room were focused downward. And most students, including Gerald, fidgeted nervously and uncomfortably.

"Could I have everyone's eyes on me?" Ms. Lora asked.

"I'm not calling this meeting to get anyone in trouble or to make anyone feel bad. I really just want to talk about how we treat each other so that we can all do a better job of supporting each other, ok?"

A few heads nodded.

"Maybe we could begin by having anyone who wants to share a personal story or thought or suggestion offer that to the group? As we do, let's remember our class norms. In this conversation, we are going to let everyone finish what they have to say. We are welcome to disagree with each other, but we're going to do so respectfully. And, especially in this conversation, there really are no bad ideas. I

think we need everyone's creative thinking to address this problem. Let's also remember that in class meetings, if you have a concern about another student's behavior, you address those to me, not to your classmate."

With that, Ms. Lora opened the floor to thoughts, stories, or questions about the culture of Room 210. She scanned the faces, again trying to avoid Gerald so that he wouldn't think that she meant for him to contribute.

The first and only hand to go up, however, was Gerald's.

The class seemed to expect him to speak, and in perfect silence they turned to watch him. After looking at his crossed ankles for a few seconds, Gerald looked up. He took a deep breath that made his shoulder quiver a little bit. Then, in a shaky but steadily-paced voice, he began to speak.

"It hurts me a lot when you call me gay," he said. Tears started to well up in his eyes. "I just want to have friends like everybody else."

Ms. Lora reached for the tissues and his classmates hurriedly passed them around the circle to Gerald. Within seconds, Ms. Lora wished she had taken one before she passed them.

"I feel like an outsider in this class and I wish people wouldn't treat me bad."

Ms. Lora let the room sit in silence for a moment, in part to allow students to feel the gravity of the moment, but also to regain her own composure. After a few moments, she thanked Gerald for his courage in sharing his feelings and asked if anyone wanted to respond or tell their own thoughts. Ms. Lora noticed that several girls had taken tissues as the box came back toward her. Several boys were surreptitiously wiping their eyes on their shoulders.

After another moment of silence, Latondria Lee raised her hand. She told the group that it made her "sad, disappointed, and frustrated" to have everyone assume that she couldn't do things just because she got sick a lot from her sickle cell anemia. She said it made her sad to have to sit out in P.E. or to skip recess and that she felt like that made it harder to make friends.

Mariah Collins spoke next, sharing how hurt she was that some people thought she was dumb just because she was in special education. Those comments opened a floodgate of other similar comments. One student in particular gave an impassioned, teary speech—that Ms. Lora was sure he had heard somewhere else—about how having a learning disability did not mean you were stupid.

After almost thirty minutes of sharing and sniffing, Ms. Lora stepped back in as the facilitator and asked the circle to take sixty seconds of silent time to think of three things they could personally do differently in order to address some of the concerns that had been voiced by the group.

After one minute, she broke the silence.

"Would someone please share some ideas about how they personally could change their actions to help address some of the concerns we heard?"

Gerald's hand was the first to go up.

**Douglas (Year Two)—A Mother's Influence.** She watched him with some measure of astonishment and some measure of pride. Douglas was methodically going through the grammar flashcards. Every once in a while, she could hear the hiss of his whisper as he read each card out loud. He had a clipboard by his side and would turn over each card to see if he had correctly identified and remedied the error. Each time he had, he gave himself a point.

Ms. Lora turned her attention to the group of children at her table. As always, she was manning the small group "reading center" while other children rotated among the half-dozen learning centers she had set up around the room.

She asked Petra to read the next paragraph after suggesting that there might be four combined sentences in it. But as Petra read, Ms. Lora's mind wandered back to Douglas.

How was it that a child with so many behavioral problems in class seemed to focus so well when he had the least supervision? She thought back to the times that a Douglas storm had started during center rotations. She knew the generalization could only be drawn so far, but he really did seem to work

well on his own when given enough structure. She had seen the same pattern in the computer lab. With headphones on, playing math or reading or writing instruction games, he could sometimes sit still for a half-hour or more.

As Petra finished reading the paragraph, Ms. Lora scribbled on her own clipboard of notes, “Douglas more comp and center time,” and announced that all students should return to their desks. They would now shift to a lesson about metaphors in a short story they had been reading.

After the relatively smooth transition, Ms. Lora launched into a class discussion on the definition of a metaphor. The kids had been working with the definition for a week; so, to keep everyone’s head in the game, Ms. Lora quickly pointed to a succession of faces, each selected student supplied the next word of the definition.

“A!” “comparison!” “between!” “two!” “things!” “that!” “doesn’t!” “use!” “like!” “or!” “as!” The class applauded as they successfully completed the idea on the first try.

Ms. Lora shuffled over next to Douglas’s desk as she continued pulling Popsicle sticks with students’ names on them out of a red cup in her hand. Douglas saw her coming and leaned to his right, putting the tightly packed ball of paper that he had been batting back and forth on his book into the trashcan by Ms. Lora’s desk. He quickly glanced at her and then looked down at his book.

Her first seating strategy—surrounding him with students who were calming influences—was a flop. The only “influencing” happening at that table was from—not on—Douglas, and it was crying—not calming—that was often the result. After several interim seats, Douglas ultimately settled into a desk that was pulled up right next to Ms. Lora’s.

This arrangement gave Ms. Lora strategic proximity to Douglas in case of trouble. More importantly, she found that he liked having the ability to ask for help without anyone else having to see or hear him do it.

Looking at the name on the stick, she stayed next to Douglas as she called out “Pablo, can you tell us about the use of metaphor in that third paragraph?”

Douglas giggled with the rest of the class as Pablo answered in a tiny, squeaky voice, “Joseph, a great, big house of a man!”

Ms. Lora decided to ignore the showboating.

“Exactly, Pablo. Thank you. Um. . .”

Ms. Lora reached back into her cup.

“Alfonse, what is being compared in the metaphor Pablo just identified?”

Ms. Lora looked down and saw that Douglas was in fact on the right page of the book. She softly patted his shoulder in appreciation.

It was a rocky campaign of trial and error, and the resulting behavioral advancements might have been unnoticeable to the casual observer, but on good days Ms. Lora thought she could see that constant monitoring and tinkering with the setting in which Douglas was learning was in fact leading to some changes in his behavior.

Incremental progress was being built, for example, on Ms. Lora and Douglas’s complex web of special permissions that Ms. Lora created to help take control of his emotions and anger. In the half-hour after the scripted reading program, a window when Douglas was most at risk of eruption, he had standing permission to walk down to the bathroom to wash his face and cool down. Similarly, if he began to feel out of control at other times in the day, Douglas had Ms. Lora’s permission to go stand just outside the door of the classroom so he could still listen but could remove himself from the crowded room. Ms. Lora knew well that these permissions were ripe for abuse, but for the most part, the sense of self-determination they carried led him to take the privileges very seriously.

The constantly expanding list of behavior plans for Douglas—the basketball, the seating arrangements, the special permissions, and all of the dozens of others, successful and not—commanded enormous time and energy, and Ms. Lora relished even the smallest signs of progress. She would find herself talking out loud on the drive home, “Douglas sat in his seat for almost twenty minutes today.” Or she would rush down to the teachers’ lounge and tell anyone who happened to be there, “Douglas calmed

himself down in the hall!” The fact that Douglas actually said “I’m sorry” to another student whom he bumped into warranted an e-mail home to her parents. “Douglas put that paper wad in the trash without a fight!” Almost imperceptibly slowly, Ms. Lora and Douglas were making progress.

Of course, Ms. Lora’s constant partner in this micro-progress, for better and for worse, was Douglas’s mother. Aside from the rat hole, Douglas’s mother was the most influential tool available to Ms. Lora for immediately altering a particular behavior—even more effective than basketball. The mere threat of a call to his mom would at least make him temporarily stop what he was doing. And, while Ms. Lora’s students, other teachers, Douglas, and Ms. Lora herself all periodically lost confidence in Ms. Lora’s ability to improve Douglas’s behavior, his mother’s faith in the process, and in Ms. Lora, never wavered at all. She always accepted Ms. Lora’s account of events. She always reminded Douglas that Ms. Lora had helped him pass that third-grade test and that he needed to listen to her. She would always insist that Ms. Lora send home schoolwork during Douglas’s regular suspensions. And Douglas, even with tears still glistening in his eyes from his latest destructive tantrum, could instantly be baited into recounting that he was going to pass his next test to make her as happy and as proud as she was when he passed the last one.

Ms. Lora’s only complaint about Mrs. Rogers’s involvement, a complaint that she was reluctant to communicate, had to do with Mrs. Rogers’s own management of Douglas’s behavior. Mrs. Rogers insisted on rewarding even the smallest positive behavior with lavish gifts and praise. Early in the year, Ms. Lora had made a point to call all her students’ families to report minor progress as well as any infractions. She sometimes really had to think creatively to find a positive tidbit to report to Douglas’s mom. “Today, Douglas stood in line without violating anyone’s space,” Ms. Lora would tell her. The next day, Douglas would brag to the class about the pizza party his Mama gave him, or would show up with a fancy new pair of basketball shoes, all because of his “good behavior” the day before. Ms. Lora was confident that these inflated rewards were working against her campaign to help Douglas control his behavior and focus on learning.

Notwithstanding that frustration, Ms. Lora never stopped being thankful for the “miracle” that artificially inflated Mrs. Rogers’s opinion of her. Ms. Lora needed Mrs. Rogers’s partnership, as both of them were constantly reminded that Douglas’s progress was as fragile as it was slow. Back-sliding was a common occurrence, and the realities of Douglas’s life seemed to constantly conspire to undermine his incremental improvements.

Still standing by Douglas’s desk, Ms. Lora pulled another Popsicle stick out of the cup. It read “Sonya.”

“Sonya, can you please think of another metaphor that compares a person and a place? Everyone please have your thumbs ready to indicate whether you think Sonya has come up with a good example. . .”

Ms. Lora smiled. She felt good. A tightly packed ball of paper, gently set into the bottom of a trashcan—this was progress.

**Anthony (Year One)—The Two Strategies.** Ms. Lora glanced at the paper for no more than half a second.

“Anthony,” she said sharply.

Anthony had turned back toward his seat after handing it to her. Ms. Lora’s tone made him spin back around. His eyebrows had jumped almost to his hairline and his dimpled smile had been replaced with slack-jawed surprise.

“Anthony, take this back and do it again. I want to see you using the two strategies. You know I won’t accept this.”

He hung his head and reached up for the paper. When she handed it to him, he held it up to his face, looking closely as if to make sure Ms. Lora had not missed some small notes in the margins that he might have forgotten that he had put there. Then, without saying a word, Anthony spun again on his heel and headed back to his seat to work on the assignment some more.

After watching Anthony struggle with her fourth grade reading comprehension assignments during the first couple of months of school, Ms. Lora had decided to require him to use strategies that she had presented to the rest of the class as optional. There were two in particular that seemed to really help him—strategies that Anthony dubbed “The Margins” and “The Summary.”

Since discovering their benefits for Anthony, Ms. Lora was not going to accept a reading comprehension assignment from him that did not include a three- or four-word caption in the margin explaining the topic of each paragraph and a one-sentence summary of the entire story or article at the end. The simple process of coming up with those captions helped him comprehend as he read and maybe more importantly, by writing them in the margins he created a guide to help focus his review of the article once he was answering questions about it.

Anthony was pretty good about using a number of the other strategies they had discussed in class. He always, for example, read the reading comprehension questions first. And he usually skimmed the essay for its general idea before starting read.

But when he employed “The Margins” and “The Summary,” Anthony’s success on the comprehension questions literally doubled. On the almost-daily assessments, he went from answering three or four out of ten questions correctly to consistently scoring a six or seven, and occasionally an eight or nine. Every week she helped him draw charts of his progress in his Goals and Progress Folder and she made a big deal of those dips in his scores that corresponded with going too fast and not using the strategies. She emphasized to him that his scores were getting better while the reading assignments were gradually getting harder.

“This is amazing, Anthony. Look at the progress you are making,” she would say as they looked at his folder. Ms. Lora was genuinely impressed to see the graphs edge upward as he mastered the basic reading and writing objectives that Ms. Franklin had said were beyond him. In those moments, Anthony beamed. He asked for a copy of his progress graph to take home, and Ms. Lora eagerly complied.

Unfortunately, Anthony’s math skills were not progressing quite as rapidly, but Ms. Lora kept his focus on his positive growth.

“Why do you think you’re improving so quickly?” Ms. Lora would ask with an exaggeratedly puzzled look on her face.

“Aww, Miss. . .” Anthony would squirm sheepishly, knowing that he was being teased.

If he wouldn’t answer, Ms. Lora would answer for him. “That’s right. The strategies! You’re using your strategies so well! When you start getting straight 9s and 10s with these strategies, you can decide whether to keep using them. But for now, I want to see you use them on every reading assignment.”

By this point in the lecture—a lecture Anthony had heard dozens of times—his face would be pocked with tiny whirlpools, induced by his giant smile. He and his teacher would usually both crack up, unable to keep up the pretense that this was all new information. Anthony’s laugh was an infectious, full-bodied bounce, just like his brother’s.

Notwithstanding those warm, hopeful, and inspiring interactions, there were still days, like today, where the tediousness of the strategies seemed to outweigh their esoteric benefits, and Anthony tried to slip by without employing “The Margins” or “The Summary” in his work. But with gentle nudging, he could always be put back on track.

Ms. Lora watched from across the room as Anthony sat down next to Cliff. Anthony leaned closely over this paper and etched captions in the margins of his paper.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Get Well Soon.** Ms. Lora heard the knock, but didn’t get up. Assuming it was one of the many solicitors that roamed the neighborhood, she instead pulled the covers back up to her neck.

But then she heard the rustle of something being pushed through the mail slot. And a slap as something hit the floor. She lifted her head. The mail had been delivered hours ago.

Enduring a wave of chills, Ms. Lora pushed herself up on her elbows and took a long drink from the giant Houston Zoo cup on her night table. Her pajamas stuck to her back as she swung her feet to the floor. The chills came in another wave.

Most of her hair was pulled into a sloppy nest on top of her head. The rest clung to her forehead, the sides of her face, and her neck. She shuffled through the kitchen and leaned down to pick up the envelope. In adult handwriting that she did not recognize, "Get Well Soon, Ms. Lora!" was written across the unaddressed package in green marker.

Ms. Lora put the envelope under her arm, re-filled her cup at the sink, and shuffled back to the stability of her covers.

Ms. Lora spread out the colorful cards on her bed and read them one by one. She couldn't help but notice the progress many of her students had made in the first couple of months of school, at least on punctuation. Some of the cards were entirely composed of complete sentences. There were also some particularly inventive attempts at spelling "pneumonia," but Ms. Lora loved the courageous efforts. And the kind sentiment.

She also loved that several children had been unable to ignore the impending holiday and had drawn turkeys on their get-well cards for her.

The substitute, or some other teacher, must have written "Get Well Soon" on the board; that nicety was written somewhere, and each word of it was capitalized, on every single card.

Tanya's card was obviously Tanya's. She was a practiced expert at drawing bubbly hearts with arrows through them. One such heart, drawn on her favorite pink paper, was on the cover of the card. Inside, the message read "You better come back soon because the kids are really bad, especially me."

That thought might have been cute, or even humorous, if it hadn't been true. But Ms. Lora had heard in an e-mail yesterday that Tanya had been out of control two days earlier and was sent home—something about hitting the substitute with his own cane.

Even though she hoped that that rumor was exaggerated, Ms. Lora knew that the best-case truth was probably awful. Ms. Lora was too sick to feel anger, but not too sick to feel even more sick. And not too sick to feel profoundly sad, once again, at the thought of Tanya acting out violently when, or because, Ms. Lora wasn't around.

As she dozed back into a feverish haze, the only thing even remotely humorous in the card was Tanya's ironic assumption that her bad behavior was a reason for Ms. Lora to come back to school.



Ms. Lora did not realize something had woken her, or even that she had been sleeping, until she heard, again, the sound of something hitting the kitchen floor after being shoved through the mail slot in the door.

The get-well cards were still scattered all over her bedspread. The sun's evening glow filled her room. She looked for a clock, having no idea how long she'd been asleep, and then made her way slowly into the kitchen.

With her robe pulled tight around her, she sat at the kitchen table to read the two letters. One was a Xerox copy of a letter that Tanya had apparently written the substitute.

"I'm sorry I hit you with your cane," it began.

The second was a letter to Ms. Lora, apologizing for "being bad" while she was out. Tanya's name was nowhere on the second letter, but at the bottom of the page was a puffy heart with an arrow through it.

Ms. Lora didn't know who had put Tanya up to writing those letters, but she was grateful for them. She started thinking about journal topics that would make Tanya reflect on her behavior.

Then she stopped herself and got back into bed.

**Roberto (Year Four)—The New Spelling Strategy.** These five-minute walks were really the highlight of Ms. Lora’s early morning. As soon as she saw Roberto and Jose turn the corner toward her, she’d walk a couple blocks from her morning duty spot toward them and then walk back to the school with them, catching up on the latest news from their lives.

This morning, as often happened, Ms. Lora was looking forward to sharing a new learning strategy with the boys. This morning, as sometimes happened, it was just Roberto.

“Good morning, Mr. Reyes.” This was part of the morning ritual.

“Good morning Ms. Lora,” he said with a rare smile.

“Is he asleep?” Ms. Lora asked as she turned around to walk next to Roberto. Despite the obvious burden of his backpack and instrument, she had eventually stopped offering to carry his trombone because he had declined every day for weeks.

“I guess so,” Roberto said, his face directed to the ground just in front of his feet. “He didn’t come out.”

“You should have woken him up,” she teased.

“No way, Miss,” he responded quickly.

“What did y’all do last night?” she asked.

“My mom made gross asparagus,” Roberto said, a little short of breath. “And I played kickball with Jose before homework. But I checked all my math.”

Ms. Lora mentally filed those factoids as fodder for future grammar mini-lessons.

“Oh, I love asparagus,” Ms. Lora said “And, you better be glad I wasn’t there to play kickball because I’m pretty good at that too.”

Roberto looked up at her to confirm that she was being funny as they arrived back the school’s sidewalk.

“Hey Friend, have you got time to come by my room in a few minutes? I want to talk to you about a new idea for us.”

“OK,” he said without losing pace or trajectory toward the cafeteria.

“See you in a few minutes,” Ms. Lora said, and Roberto continued his hunched march into the school.

Ms. Lora handed Roberto his latest grading rubric when he arrived in her classroom a few minutes later. Sitting perfectly quietly at a desk next to Ms. Lora’s, his backpack still on his back and his trombone across his lap, Roberto’s squinting eyes and clinched jaw communicated his frustration. Although he was inching toward the “2” category in some areas, he had received a “0,” once again, in the “conventions” row. He rested his velvety scalp in both hands and took deep breaths.

Ms. Lora pulled a chair up next to him. Although it made her more frustrated than angry, she shared in his emotional reaction to this latest score. Together, they had been working diligently on spelling every day, methodically studying each chapter of the spelling book. Roberto had even earned admission to the Spelling Court with a perfect 100 a few weeks ago.

But that success was not translating to his essays. As they sat together looking at his essay and rubric, Roberto and Ms. Lora each blamed themselves.

“Roberto, I think we need to come up with a new spelling strategy,” she said, trying to mimic the matter-of-factness with which she knew he would respond.

Like a giraffe at a water hole, Roberto raised his head neck-first. His eyes met Ms. Lora’s.

“Me too,” he said, his voice barely betraying the seething emotions that his hands, now clenched on the sides of his desk, communicated so clearly.

Ms. Lora put her hand on his tense back and handed him a sheet of paper. She had had dozens of conversations with him about the importance of spelling and the need for his audience to be able to access his good thoughts and smart ideas. She decided not to revisit that conversation now; he understood the need.

“This is a list of the 100 most frequently misspelled words by fourth graders,” she said. “I got it from a teaching website and then I added at the bottom the words that you most frequently misspell on

these essays. I think we need to step away from the spelling book for a while and start with the basics, ok?"

It seemed glaringly obvious now, but Ms. Lora had relished this mental breakthrough. It had come the night before as she once again used pencil and paper to painstakingly decode Roberto's garbled spelling. She had just graded the spelling practice quizzes and it suddenly occurred to her that not a single spelling book word—not "make-believe," not "fantasy," not "dragon," not "power"—had appeared in a single essay she was grading. She obviously wanted to increase her students' spelling and vocabulary, but the reality was that Roberto still occasionally slipped back into his Spanish phonetics and spelled "I" as "Ay." She had excitedly searched spelling word lists on the internet and determined that she and Roberto would be much more strategic about this.

Roberto took the time to read the entire list of 100 words before responding. Many of them were words of just a few letters. Ms. Lora sat silently, waiting.

"OK," he said.

"Good, let's start with the words at the bottom that you most frequently misspell on the essays. Of all the ways that we practice spelling words, which approach do you think helps you learn them most effectively?"

**Douglas (Year Two)—A Brewing Storm.** Ms. Lora's daily scan of Douglas's visage set off alarm bells in her mind even as he walked in the door. He had been doing well, focusing on getting into next week's rematch with Cesar Chavez Elementary, but now a major storm was brewing. She could see the tension in his eyes, his shoulders, and his fists, as he charged to his seat. He was even pounding one fist into the other hand, an exercise that he had agreed to try when he felt like he was losing control. She knew from experience that if there was any hope of avoiding a dangerous meltdown, she had to act immediately.

Ms. Lora swiftly and calmly walked toward the door, asking Douglas to join her in the hall. Just as swiftly and much less calmly he charged back outside the classroom. The rest of the class hardly looked up, continuing their choreographed interactions with the pencil sharpeners.

She stood in front of Douglas in the hall, studying him. They stood in tense silence for a few minutes as Douglas looked at Ms. Lora's feet and rocked back and forth from one leg to the other.

After a few more seconds of quiet, in a practiced tone that was concerned but non-judgmental, Ms. Lora finally asked, "Douglas, are you ok? Is there anything you want to talk about? Is there something bothering you that you can tell me about?"

Douglas looked up and stared back to her, his face a portrait of anger. Ms. Lora lowered herself to her knees and gently put a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, Douglas, it looks like you're upset and I just want to make sure we have a good day, and that there's not anything I need to do to help you out before we have problems, ok? Can I help you somehow?"

As Ms. Lora rubbed his shoulder, there was a sudden, tectonic shift in Douglas's emotions and his body flinched with the change. He was not any more relaxed, but his eyes filled with angry, burning tears—tears that made Ms. Lora's eyes burn in sympathy. She held both his trembling shoulders at arm's length.

"What is it, Douglas?"

Through quivering lips, Douglas told Ms. Lora that his brother had been taken away by a swarm of police in his house the night before. Douglas had been at the jail all night with his mother. "My mom doesn't know where he is," he sobbed.

Ms. Lora felt Douglas's fear, sadness, and pain in her own stomach. She knew how he idolized both of his brothers. She knew how upset his mother must be. She couldn't imagine what his night had been like.

"Oh, Douglas," said Ms. Lora, never letting go of his arms, "I am so, so sorry."

She pulled him closer to her. She wanted to pull him into her arms and hold him, to somehow shield him, if only for a moment, from the pressures of the world.

Instead, she squeezed his arms in her hands.

“You must be so worried about him. And you must be so worried about your mother.”

Consumed by the losing battle to hold back his tears, Douglas only nodded and pulled away from her grip so he could cover his face with his hands. For about the hundredth time in the few months she had known him, Ms. Lora looked down at Douglas and had no idea what to do.

#### **Questions to Consider**

- (1) Imagine that Gerald had asked Aurora not to hold a class meeting. What advice would you give her about responding to Gerald? What alternatives would you suggest to her?
- (2) What do you believe is the appropriate role for Aurora when she learns Douglas’s news about his brother? To what degree are differences of perspective among teachers acceptable on that question?

## Chapter Six

### Turning Points (82-68 Days)

**Tanya (Year Three)—The Hospital.** While her class was at P.E. and Music, Ms. Lora drove quickly to the county hospital, toting a small bundle of gifts.

As she pushed through the doors of the main entrance, she was immediately struck by the building's dilapidated condition. The dim, flickering lights and the dank smell of chemical cleaners and urine made the place feel more like a train station bathroom than any hospital Ms. Lora had ever been in.

Having had virtually no contact with Tanya in the last week, Ms. Lora was 99% sure it wasn't her fault. But she still felt a little guilty that Tanya came down with pneumonia just days after Ms. Lora returned to school. Tanya had been gone two straight days when Ms. Lora called her house and talked to her grandmother.

"Yes, ma'am, pneumonia. She's in the hospital," the weak voice had said.

"Do you think it would be ok if I went to see her?" asked Ms. Lora.

"Oh yes, that'd be so nice," said Tanya's grandmother. "She hasn't had visitors I imagine."

Ms. Lora leaned on the counter at the nurses' station to get someone's attention. When Ms. Lora asked for the room number for Tanya Law, the woman behind the desk looked relieved. "I'm so glad you're here," she said. "That girl hasn't had anyone with her and has been so scared. Susan told me Tanya cried a lot last night.

Another nurse, without looking up from the clipboard in front of her, added loudly, "And she wouldn't let me turn on the lights this morning because she said that bad kids have to stay in the dark."

As Ms. Lora headed for the elevator, she wished she had ignored the visiting hours and come the night before.

Tanya's sunken face looked more surprised than happy to see Ms. Lora in the doorway.

"Can I come in?" Ms. Lora asked.

"Yes," Tanya replied, pulling the thin sheet up around her neck.

Ms. Lora took a seat in the cold, plastic chair by the bed.

After a long moment of silence, Ms. Lora began to recount, slowly and softly, some of the happenings in class and at school during the last few days. The yet-another fire drill. The "how to" presentations by each team in class. Tanya's first smile came as Ms. Lora described how most of the boys had surreptitiously eaten some fraction of their tortilla before the end of the fraction demonstration.

After a couple of moments, Tanya interrupted with a question.

"Whose class said the announcements?"

With that inquiry, Tanya's strong personality seemed to rush back into her weakened body. She sat up, asking question after question about what she had missed. She wanted details about moments and procedures that Ms. Lora had no idea Tanya had ever noticed, much less cared about. Who was Materials Monitor yesterday? What was written on the Class Objective board today? Was her bean plant still taller than everyone else's?

Tanya also asked questions about daily routines that Ms. Lora knew were important to her. Did Ms. Lora write something in Tanya's spiral journal even when Tanya wasn't there? Who took Tanya's place in the cooperative learning group at her table? What was for breakfast that morning? How was DeShavier?

Eventually, Tanya's energetic inquisition petered out. After a few moments of silence—silence that probably would have been awkward between two grown-ups—Tanya looked up at Ms. Lora and said "Why did you come see me?"

Ms. Lora was caught off-guard by the directness of the question. It's not that she hadn't thought a lot about the answer, but she had not thought about how she would articulate it out loud, not to mention to Tanya herself.

Before Ms. Lora could organize her thoughts, Tanya continued. "I thought you don't like me because I get in trouble every day."

"Oh Tanya," Ms. Lora responded quickly, "of course I care about you. I don't always like your behavior, but I want to help you with that. I've always cared about you as a person and I've missed you at school. I came because I wanted to make sure that you are okay."

Tanya's eyes glistened with tears and she turned away. Although Ms. Lora had seen dozens of her angry, teary outbursts in class, in this instance, at this moment Tanya did not want her teacher to see her cry.

Ms. Lora believed with missionary vigor that a teacher has to separate the child from the behavior. She also knew that it was much easier to talk about here than it was to act on during one of Tanya's disruptive outbursts in class. As many times as Ms. Lora had said similar words to Tanya, this exchange felt weighty and potent. As it was happening, Ms. Lora sensed a milestone in their relationship.

Ms. Lora's words had induced another stretch of silence as Tanya tried to inconspicuously wipe her eyes with her sheets. Ms. Lora offered the distraction of the small gift bag she had brought. Tanya thankfully pulled out the diminutive stuffed heart (with no arrow through it), the colorful candy, and the two books. She was taking turns manipulating each gift when an aunt of Tanya's, a woman Ms. Lora had never met, entered the room.

Thankful for another visitor, Ms. Lora greeted her and said her goodbyes. Ms. Lora hugged Tanya and asked her to get well and hurry back to class. Ms. Lora hurried back to school.

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Ms. Lora had wondered at the time whether that trip to the hospital would turn out to be a key landmark in her relationship with Tanya. The real turning-point, however, was not the trip to the hospital but instead a thirty-second conversation the morning of Tanya's first day back at school after being ill. Tanya marched right up to Ms. Lora's desk with a vigor that instantly reassured Ms. Lora about her full recovery.

"This book is my favorite," she said, setting Louis Sachar's *Holes*, the one Ms. Lora had given to her at the hospital, on the desk. "It's the best book ever. I'm going to let you borrow this so you can read it to the class. We can start today."

Tanya made this pronouncement with the gusto and smiling cheek-knobs that might have accompanied her self-declared mastery of three-by-two-digit multiplication. Ms. Lora's memory of a weak, bed-ridden Tanya was instantly wiped clean and replaced with the sure-footed bravado of Tanya at her best.

Although the tone of Tanya's voice indicated that she would not take no for an answer, Tanya did stand at Ms. Lora's desk, waiting for her agreement.

Ms. Lora told Tanya that she had heard that *Holes* was great but explained that she wasn't comfortable reading it aloud to the entire class until she read it herself. Ms. Lora promised to read the book that week and discuss with Tanya whether they could read it to the entire class on Monday.

To Ms. Lora's surprise, Tanya's visage remained positive. She leaned in toward Ms. Lora and said in a relatively muted voice, "No, this book is really good. I promise. You should trust me, Ms. Lora."

It might have been a lapse in judgment, but Ms. Lora thought for a moment, and then whispered, "Okay." She just couldn't resist the combined weight of recommendations from Tanya Law and Newberry.

A few minutes later, Ms. Lora announced that the class would be reading a book that came highly recommended by Tanya Law. Tanya reflexively stood up by her chair and beamed.

### **Anthony (Year One)—Signing On.**

"It's going to take lots and lots of hard work, Anthony."

Ms. Lora was on one knee in front of him, and he peered down into her eyes intently. She, once again, was playing the "prove it" card; Anthony really responded to the idea that he could prove his doubters wrong.

"You're going to have to make a decision, Anthony," she continued. "If you really want to prove it to people, I can help you. But you're not going to be able to prove it doing the regular stuff. You're going to have to make a choice to stay late and work harder than you ever have before."

This was probably the tenth time they had had this conversation. Anthony remained silent, but never took his eyes off of Ms. Lora. Ms. Lora stared back at him, trying simultaneously to suppress her mental doubts and to will into his mind a belief that he could excel academically. She was having to choose her words very carefully since Anthony's mother was still one of those people whom they needed to prove wrong.

Anthony maintained his lock on Ms. Lora's eyes.

"What if you're wrong?"

It was his first contribution to the several-month-long, otherwise one-way conversation. It struck Ms. Lora as unbearably insightful. Anthony had come to accept the idea that it takes hard work to do well; he just wasn't sure *his* hard work would lead to success.

Ms. Lora, once again, felt the absurdity that he must hear in her encouragement. Why in the world would he want to get his hopes up on the half-baked promises of some new teacher when everyone else in his life, including his own mother and previous teachers, has told him he cannot succeed?

Ms. Lora was trying to mentally process that challenge when Anthony asked another question.

"Do you really think I can do it?"

Ms. Lora responded quickly this time. "Anthony, I would not be here having this conversation with you if I didn't. We can do this together."

"OK," he said flatly. She longed to see him smile his dimpled smile, but instead his round face looked sad. He then pulled his backpack onto his full shoulders and lumbered out the door to find his brother.

**Douglas (Year Two)—The Kennedy Game.** Ms. Lora knew as she watched the team's fifth victory lap that she would always remember this as one of the highpoints of her teaching career. Douglas's outstanding performance in the championship game against Kennedy was a landmark not just for his eleven points and six rebounds, and not just for the resounding victory over Blair's arch-rivals, but also because Douglas worked so hard to control his behavior to assure his place in the game.

It was truly remarkable.

For two weeks, he was not suspended, he was not sent to the office, and he was rarely reprimanded in class. He was 100% focused on getting to play in that last, biggest game of the season. And with Ms. Lora's subtle encouragement, the rest of the class was pulling for him.

With a huge smile, and jumping up and down, Douglas waved from the court to her and the mass of his classmates who were in the stands as the Blair team accepted the championship trophy.

Of course, the peace of mind and sense of accomplishment afforded Ms. Lora by Douglas's behavioral success was just a secondary benefit. The real prize was the new-found instructional time in Douglas's days and weeks. With fewer and fewer suspensions, he really was learning, even in reading and writing, where he had for so long struggled and became so frustrated. With just a few weeks to go before the state exam, he was answering more and more of the multiple-choice diagnostic questions correctly. His essay writing was still problematic, but Ms. Lora was practicing with him every chance she got. She and he both could see progress in his last several drafts.

As Ms. Lora accepted her hundredth high-five from excited students who were swirling up and down the bleachers, she caught the eye of Mrs. Rogers who was down on the court waiting to congratulate Douglas. As if they shared some secret, the two women smiled and nodded to each other.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Obsessed with Holes.**

“Chris, this is the last time I’m going to ask you to please put your book away.”

Chris read one more second before sticking a pencil between the pages, closing the book, and putting it into his desk. Ms. Lora was as pleased as she was frustrated; she just couldn’t bring herself to punish students for sneaking reading time. She was pretty sure that Chris was reading the book for the second time.

While the hospital conversation was meaningful, it was this frenzy of interest in *Holes* sparked in every student in the classroom over the next few weeks that seemed to have marked a major breakthrough with Tanya. Her wide smile and bulbous cheek-knobs would reappear every time Ms. Lora had to reprimand another student for reading pages of the book in their lap during math, science, and social studies. She’d all but burst with joy when Ms. Lora lauded Simone for being resourceful enough to find another copy of the book in the public library after her classmates had depleted the school library’s copies. Tanya would laugh out loud as the rest of the class moaned when Ms. Lora shut the book at the end of Read Aloud each day.

“I know what happens next, but I’m not telling any of you,” she’d announce, standing taller than ever. Mimicking Ms. Lora, Tanya’s fourth-grade classmates would good-naturedly smile and shake their heads, watching for the next chance to sneak a peek at the next few pages.

**Douglas (Year Two)—Professor Urkel.** Ms. Lora, along with every other student in the room besides Douglas, was doubled-over laughing.

Douglas, for his part, was keeping a remarkably straight face as he stood at the board solving the long-division problem. He had hiked his pants way up to his chest, put a ruler behind his ear, and was snorting as loudly as he could. He was explaining the steps in his problem-solving process in a high-pitch, cracking voice, pretending he was the nerdy Steve Urkel from *Family Matters* on television.

Ms. Lora did not mind that the tears of laughter around the room were obscuring the other students’ view of Douglas’s thorough explanation of solving “158 divided by 14.” She knew that this costume, and the resulting uproarious response from the class, gave him just the cover he needed to enjoy the limelight, and risk the reputation, of being smart.

She wiped her eyes and cleared her throat as Urkel waddled back to his seat.

“Ladies and gentleman, could we have round of appreciation for Urkel’s help today!”

**Tanya (Year Three)—A Pledge.** Ms. Lora suspected that Tanya appreciated the irony of the situation.

“Ms. Lora, I’m not going to interrupt tutorial time anymore,” Tanya announced loudly from the door. The seven students whose tutorial was being interrupted for this announcement looked up from their various books, centers, and worksheets.

“I think other students need your help more than I do,” Tanya explained.

“Well, thank you for recognizing that,” Ms. Lora said, genuinely surprised and pleased. “Maybe when we’re covering an objective that you’ve already mastered, you could still come help us learn it.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Tanya said as she spun in the doorway and trotted off down the hall.

Ms. Lora directed her charges back to their assignments as she smiled to herself. Tanya was voicing sentiments that Ms. Lora was seeing and feeling in her behavior. Tanya still had a short fuse and

still demanded attention, but since her time in the limelight around the *Holes* recommendation, she had not had a major meltdown.

### **Roberto (Year Four)—Spelling Matters.**

“Psssst.”

Roberto lifted his head. He was painstakingly editing the introductory paragraph of Jose’s “How To” essay about making a bow and arrow. Ms. Lora looked down to see that Roberto had double-underlined a fragment in the first paragraph. Roberto looked up to see Ms. Lora crouched by his desk with one hand raised for a high-five.

He looked down at her other hand and saw that she had his latest essay. He could see the jumble of notes and questions written in Ms. Lora’s handwriting on the first page, but he knew immediately what the high-five was for. He reached up, and with the vigor that would have fueled his anger if he had received another zero, he slapped her hand hard with a loud smack. He then rewarded both of them, and the several classmates who looked up from their books, with another rare grin.

Roberto took the essay from Ms. Lora and turned to the rubric. He followed his finger across the Conventions row and stopped at the “1,” his very first.

“We’re making progress,” using Ms. Lora’s own words and still smiling.

“Yes sir, we are,” Ms. Lora whispered proudly as she stood up to hand out the rest of the essays.

Just that morning, Ms. Lora had once again consulted the state’s own grading rules for the fourth grade essays. They were both frustratingly and thankfully vague regarding the weight that spelling would receive when Roberto actually wrote the fourth-grade test essay. They indicated that spelling matters, especially to the extent that incorrect spelling interferes with the graders’ ability to understand the writing’s content. But they also encouraged teachers to tell students not to let uncertainty about spelling suppress the use of a particular word.

Ms. Lora’s interpretation of those rules was that her students could benefit from using the big words in their heads even if those words were misspelled and that Roberto’s spelling was still a major hurdle to his passing the state test. The state administrators probably did not have words like “then,” “your,” and “heat” in mind when they wrote rules that encourage the full use of a student’s vocabulary. A grader would certainly have to put in considerable effort to understand what Roberto was trying to say.

Roberto’s writing was continuing to progress, and once she got past the spelling issues, Ms. Lora could always see the implementation of the techniques and strategies she had modeled and taught in class. Dialogue, onomatopoeia, action words, sentence structure—all aspects of his writing were progressing behind a distracting veil of “unconventional” spelling.

#### **Questions to Consider**

- (1) This chapter was titled “Turning Points.” Consider the ways in which each student is at a turning point. How would you account for that status for each student? What has most influenced each thus far?
- (2) Aurora’s relationship with Tanya is complicated and a source of some confusion for both Aurora and Tanya. What would you tell Tanya about what she can and should expect of Aurora? What would you tell Aurora about the parameters she has drawn with Tanya?

## Chapter Seven

# Exceeding Expectations

(66-27 Days)

**Tanya (Year Three)—The Class Rep.** In a suggestively quiet voice reserved mostly for Tanya, Ms. Lora whispered, “Congrats Tanya! This is fantastic. I’m very excited to work with you in the Spelling Bee. Congratulations!”

“Yep, I’m going to win that too,” Tanya responded loudly, but following her voice out the doorway of Room 210.

As the creator, director, producer, and emcee of the Blair Elementary Spelling Bee, Ms. Lora had not actually given much thought to who might represent her own class in the school-wide competition. Now that she knew it would be Tanya, Ms. Lora was even more excited about this production. Tanya was no doubt bright, and she was a strong speller—much stronger, in fact, than most of her classmates. At the same time, in light of Tanya’s indelible impatience, Ms. Lora probably would not have bet on her to win her own class and she secretly had real concerns about Tanya’s role in the upcoming school-wide competition. Even the occasionally mature, academically-invested Tanya was still, at times, a mercurial and fickle pre-adolescent. Tanya seemed to be doing so well, trying so hard, and learning so much, but her complex social and emotional needs sometimes interfered with her perseverance.

Ms. Lora finished up the tutoring session and helped the children gather their backpacks and jackets. When the room was finally empty, she pulled down her “Spelling Bee Notebook” and looked over the word lists, trying to imagine Tanya on a stage spelling words.

This spelling bee had been Ms. Lora’s idea—or at least the resurrection of the Spelling Bee had been her idea. She had asked around Blair Elementary and gathered vague memories from teachers and administrators that “there used to be something like that” at Blair, but to a person, no one seemed excited about the possibility of bringing it back. The Spelling Bee idea really took off in Ms. Lora’s mind though when she learned from a teacher at another school that the district and city had in place a long-running and sophisticated Spelling Bee tournament system. It turned out that Blair had opted out of it years ago.

Last year, with little investment, Ms. Lora had tried to have a small, school-wide spelling bee, just as a means of improving kids’ spelling in a less obviously test-preppish setting. It was a complete disaster. Via morning announcements, Ms. Lora had invited interested spellers to sign up. The few kids who participated were so shell-shocked on the cafeteria stage in front of the dozen audience members that some of them refused to get out of their seat and walk over to the microphone. Essentially by default, Ms. Lora had chosen the two students she thought were probably the top spellers. They had advanced to the district Bee and been eliminated in the first and second round.

This year, Ms. Lora’s third year of teaching, Ms. Lora was much more organized, if only because she had this handy notebook. At the district Bee last year, she had taken pages and pages of notes, on everything from the basic rules of a spelling bee to the placement of the trophies. With a clear vision of what a Spelling Bee was supposed to look like, she had effectively campaigned for school-wide interest and involvement. She had already fired up many of the school’s upper-elementary teachers. (Blair’s representatives at district would have to compete with sixth and seventh graders—a note that Ms. Lora circled and starred in her notebook last year. Ms. Lora had therefore decided to just recruit from the fourth and fifth grade classes.)

Tanya’s involvement in this project was an unexpected, mostly positive, twist.

Ms. Lora closed the Spelling Bee Notebook and started loading her bag to go home.

**Anthony (Year One)—Saturday School.** Ms. Lora honked her horn as she passed them. They waved and started running after her car.

Ms. Lora parked and called back, “Good morning Saturday Scholars!”

She was genuinely energized by their presence. Not only was this the Saturday before the winter break, but it was also the second straight Saturday that Anthony and Cliff had made the walk to Blair for Saturday school. And they had both started coming to tutorials after school pretty regularly, and always as a pair.

“No Raul this morning?”

“No,” Anthony said. “He’s asleep. He’s lazy.”

Cliff chuckled at the irreverence.

“What are we going to learn today, Miss?” Anthony asked.

“Oh, its some good stuff, my friend. Good stuff. But its top secret.”

“Really?” Cliff was intrigued. Anthony was skeptical.

“Really,” Ms. Lora said seriously. “It’s heavy stuff. Do you want to hear a hint?”

“Yeah!” Cliff said. Anthony was becoming more interested.

Ms. Lora looked up and down the street, as if there might be spies trying to steal her information. She beckoned the boys to come closer. They inched toward her, but she didn’t say anything. She beckoned them still closer until both boys were standing right next to her at her car.

She leaned down and moved their heads together so she could whisper to both of them at once. Then she leaned down right next to their ears and waited for several seconds.

“You are going to learn. . .” She drew out her words in a whisper. “How smart you are!” she yelled and started tickling both boys vigorously as they squealed and laughed and jumped and scampered out of her reach.

“Ms. Lora!” they both yelled through breathless smiles.

Anthony reached over and took Ms. Lora’s backpack onto his own shoulder and Cliff took her box of books and they headed inside to revise a series of poorly written conclusions.

**Douglas (Year Two)—Refferal.** With debilitating disappointment and self-doubt, Ms. Lora filled out yet another referral to send Douglas to the office, this time for a loud, epithet-laden string of threats to harm another student—one of the original “calming influences” whom she had tried to sit him next to in the first weeks of school, months ago.

As she stood up to call the office and tell the secretary he was coming, Douglas grabbed the referral from her hand, tore it up, and threw the pieces at her. Out of sympathy for Ms. Lora and out of genuine, hard-earned camaraderie with Douglas, the rest of the class stared, sharing in Ms. Lora’s deep disappointment.

**Anthony (Year One)—Coach Buddha.**

“Hello, Ms. Lora,” Anthony’s twin brother said as his huge frame filled the doorway.

“Hi, Raul. How are you? Where’s Anthony?”

“He’s outside. He’s coming. He did all of the sixes, sevens, and eights last night, Ms. Lora.”

“That’s fantastic. Maybe you can run him through another round once he gets here. I’d like to watch him on those.”

“OK,” Raul said as he squeezed into a desk and pulled the homemade flashcards out of his backpack.

Raul wasn’t in Ms. Lora’s class, but he was in the other fourth grade classroom, giving the Vasquez twins the surprising distinction of being the only twins at Blair Elementary (out of five pairs) who

were in the same grade. All of the other sets had one member who had been held back at some point. Ms. Lora was sure this context only added to Anthony's self-perception as the "dumb" one.

Raul had first joined Anthony at after-school tutorials simply because the early-evening wandering around the neighborhood was lonely without his brother and Cliff. Raul wanted someone to walk home with so he came to tutorials with Anthony. For the first week or so, Raul had just lounged in the reading center and flipped through books, or sometimes he would water plants or file papers for Ms. Lora.

Ms. Lora appreciated the help, and knew that Raul's presence was helpful for Anthony. She started a surreptitious campaign to make Raul want to be there, even on Saturdays. She gave Raul important responsibilities, thanked him publicly and profusely, and privately told him how important his help was to Anthony's progress.

All of that probably helped, but Ms. Lora suspected that Raul had become a regular in Ms. Lora's classroom because of its inviting social scene. The other kids enjoyed having Raul there for his easy-going nature, his sense of humor, and his size. Raul was literally and figuratively a massive presence. Although Ms. Lora tried to subtly discourage it, Raul seemed to encourage the other kids' reference to him as "Buddha." Every time another student called Raul "Buddha," it would make Raul's face crease into a giant smile and Anthony bounce in uncontrollable laughter.

After a couple weeks of unobtrusively hanging out during tutorials, Raul was drawn into the lessons that his brother was working on and Raul had begun to complete Ms. Lora's supplemental assignments himself. Raul would sit right beside Anthony working on the same material, even though most of Anthony's assignments were easy for Raul. While the two rarely conferred, they both seemed inspired by each other's company.

Today, however, Raul filled the doorframe of Room 210 after school not as a student, but as a "coach." It was Ms. Lora who first offered the analogy, but both Raul and Anthony loved it. Raul was "Anthony's Math Coach." In a classroom where everyone had an exciting-sounding job and where title-inflation was the norm, both boys were quite impressed with the label. The title was a bit of a misnomer only because Raul coached more students than Anthony in more subjects than math.

Raul would usually sit between Anthony and Cliff and would help both of them with the day's supplemental lesson as best he could. He might just whisper guidance into their ears as they combined sentences. Or he might pull Anthony and Cliff over to the chalkboard to work a division problem that they were struggling with. Sometimes other students would ask if they could join "Buddha's group." Ms. Lora made a point of asking Raul if it was ok and he always seemed flattered and welcoming.

When it was time for learning-focused games, Raul would usually drop his coach persona and just join a team. Raul was particularly good with identifying and providing examples of various parts of speech, so as soon as the kids saw Ms. Lora pull down the Grammar Scategories game, shouts of "we get Buddha!" filled the classroom, followed by Raul and Anthony's contagious giggles.

At the end of the tutorial session, Raul would listen intently to Ms. Lora's instructions about how many of which flashcards Anthony was to do that night. Both Anthony and Raul enjoyed their role in this collaboration, and while Anthony struggled with math, his math skills increased steadily under Raul's coaching.

"Raul, before Anthony gets here, I have a favor to ask of you," Ms. Lora said quietly.

"OK," he said, getting up and ambling over to her desk. He clearly expected to be asked to move some boxes or file some permission forms or something.

Ms. Lora pulled out Anthony's Goals and Progress Folder and showed Raul the latest bar graphs showing Anthony's upward progress on the frequent benchmark tests she gave in reading, writing, and math. Raul was duly impressed.

"Wow, Ms. Lora. He's doing really, really good."

"He is doing well," she gently corrected. "I am so impressed. I'm not totally convinced that he even appreciates how much he is improving."

Raul looked at Ms. Lora, unsure if there was a request there.

“Could you help me keep encouraging him to work hard, Raul?” Ms. Lora asked. “He’s doing well, but he still has a lot to learn. Anthony needs to believe he can keep improving if he keeps working hard, and I need all the help I can get convincing him of that.”

“No problem, Ms. Lora,” Raul said.

“Thanks, Raul. Hey, can you keep a secret?”

“Yeah,” he said in a whisper.

Ms. Lora took her own voice to a low whisper. “I’m starting to sneak fifth grade work into Anthony’s reading folder because he’s doing so well on the fourth grade material.”

A smile, with its familiar constellation of dimples, spread across Raul’s giant face.

**Douglas (Year Two)—A Hard Floor.** Having received a call at work from the front office, Mrs. Rogers came directly to Ms. Lora’s classroom when she got off at 5:30 p.m. She was wearing her crisp, starched gas station attendant shirt with her name embroidered on the pocket. Even though there was no one in the room, she asked Ms. Lora if they could talk “in private.” Ms. Lora closed the door and they sat down, Ms. Lora at her desk and Mrs. Rogers in Douglas’s.

“There’s no excuse for what Douglas did this morning,” she said. “You are the only one that is going to help him and he knows it. There’s no excuse.”

Ms. Lora just listened.

“But, and I’m not making an excuse, but I just wanted you to know about things that he doesn’t like to talk about. You know how I work at the gas station?”

Ms. Lora nodded.

“I work double shifts when I can, but I just haven’t been making enough money and our electricity has been off. It’s been probably two weeks or something. Well, day before last they turned off the water too.”

Ms. Lora did not try to hide her surprise. Douglas had not said a word about any of this.

Mrs. Rogers continued. “So, I’m not saying he shouldn’t be in trouble for pushing somebody, but I just wanted you to know why he’s, you know, tired right now. We’ve been trying to stay at my friend’s house, but Douglas’s been sleeping on a hard floor. I know he doesn’t like people to know, but I wanted to tell you, Ms. Lora.”

She didn’t spell it out, but Mrs. Rogers clearly felt responsible for Douglas’s latest loss of control. As repentance, she came to Ms. Lora to swear that Douglas would do all the work that Ms. Lora would send home with him during this suspension. She’d help keep him on track, she said.

Ms. Lora thanked Mrs. Rogers for all her help and put together a packet of materials to send home with her.

**Roberto (Year Four)—The Man In Your Story.** Ms. Lora sat staring at a blank sheet of paper on her desk. Her last students had left the Saturday morning session half an hour ago. Roberto, as always, had been there, on this day working diligently to master the pesky apostrophe as an indicator of possession.

She picked up her pen, but didn’t write anything. She just wasn’t sure how to handle it. Should she engage him in a discussion about it? In writing or in person? Does Roberto even know what a “rapist” is? Is this the kind of thing a teacher should talk to the school counselor about? Is this the kind of thing a teacher should talk to *Blair’s* school counselor about, even if she publicly describes her job as getting as many kids into special education as possible? Should Ms. Lora tell his parents about this essay? What would she write?

She finally decided she’d sketch out a note to Roberto and see how it felt once it was done. This was a well-established means of communicating between them now. When Ms. Lora felt like the piles of extra worksheets were no longer pushing Roberto’s writing, she had suggested that Ms. Lora and

Roberto exchange letters at least once a week. Using her classroom mailbox system, they had by now passed each other dozens of notes, about everything from Ms. Lora's trip to the same part of Mexico that Roberto was from, to Roberto's responsibilities at church every Sunday. Ms. Lora was learning so much about Roberto that she felt more and more inspired by and worried about his academic progress. He was still struggling with basic writing skills. Ms. Lora would read and gently edit each letter from Roberto and send it back to him with a new letter in response.

While there were lots of factors contributing to his progress, Ms. Lora was confident that this constant written dialogue was working small wonders for Roberto's writing skills. She could now usually identify individual words, although they were more often than not misspelled. And he had fully grasped the concept that paragraphs are used to separate discrete concepts.

But Ms. Lora just didn't know whether it would be appropriate to discuss in these notes Roberto's fantasy about saving Jose from the "rapist." The class assignment had been to "describe one of your dreams." Ms. Lora had meant for her students to focus on aspirations, and most children had written about their dream to become a policeman, or to have a baby brother, or to play basketball with Michael Jordan. One girl had written about her dream to become "a teacher like Ms. Lora."

Roberto, however, interpreted the assignment to be about his dreams when he slept. He wrote, in great detail, about the "rapist" kidnapping Jose and tying him up in the apartment across from the school. While the story had no graphic or sexual content (and it seemed possible from the story that Roberto didn't actually know the true meaning of "rapist"), the setting and details were vivid and precise. In many ways, it was some of Roberto's best writing, but Ms. Lora hated to think about the fears that incited this fantasy. She also felt compelled to talk to him, or write to him, about it.

She picked up her pen again, and began to put words down:

*Dear Roberto—*

*Thank you for your note about your cousins' visit. It sounds like they were a lot of fun, and I'm sure they appreciate your helpful suggestions for places to see while they were here. Have they made it back to the Valley safely?*

*I also wanted to thank you for working so diligently on your essay this week. I read it last night and was impressed by your vivid descriptions and your use of action words. I will give it back to you with some suggestions for revisions later today.*

*Roberto, I also wanted to talk to you a little bit about the man in your story that kidnapped Jose. Is that a dream that you have sometimes? I'd like to hear about that. I hope you know that the school and the police have made the playground safe. We all have to be very careful with strangers, but I hope you feel safe at school and at home. I know you and Jose are careful when you walk to and from school.*

Ms. Lora looked back over the note. She stared at it for another few minutes before she crumpled it up and threw it in the trashcan.

### **Anthony (Year One)—Handsome Eyes.**

"I already talked to her. She knows you're coming."

Ms. Lora wasn't sure whether the embarrassment of accepting the generous donation was an affront to his pride or whether the thought of wearing the generous donation on his face was an affront to his dignity, but Anthony was reluctant to go meet with the nurse about his new glasses.

Ms. Lora leaned down over his desk, close to Anthony's ear, and said quietly. "Anthony, you're going to be amazed. These glasses are going to help you learn faster. Your bar graphs are going to jump up. I can't believe we didn't figure this out earlier."

Ms. Lora had always noticed Anthony leaned way over his paper to read and write, but in the last month or so she had noticed him squinting at the PowerPoint slides and at the chalkboard more and

more. When the nurse reported to her how badly Anthony needed glasses, she was temporarily furious at the principal and Mrs. Franklin for keeping Anthony locked away in the third-grade SFA group. Ms. Lora would have noticed earlier if Anthony had been in her group.

After that initial reaction, Ms. Lora quickly shifted that blame to herself. She should have noticed Anthony needed glasses.

“And,” Ms. Lora added in a hushed whisper, “you are going to be totally handsome in them.” She waited a moment and then asked, “Anthony, do you want to take Cliff with you?”

Anthony nodded and slid out of his chair. Cliff, who had been sitting in the next desk unapologetically listening to their conversation, stood up too. Without speaking, the two boys walked out of the room.

**Tanya (Year Three)—The Blair’s Best Bee.** If posters, flyers, and morning announcements were any indicator, Blair Elementary was a frenzy of excitement about this morning’s school-wide Spelling Bee. Ms. Lora’s Spelling Bee Committee members—made up mostly of those students who expressed disappointment not to have earned a spot on stage—had papered the campus with reminders of where and when to see “Blair’s Best Put to the Test.”

Ms. Lora had lobbied against that somewhat presumptuous, and, she thought, inadvertently insulting, slogan, but the Committee members were too proud of the rhyme to give in. So she acquiesced. As Ms. Lora headed to the cafeteria for the pre-game show with her nationally published list of spelling words and her precious notebook under her arm, Ms. Lora noted that the “Blair’s Best” slogan was now on every bit of available wall space that the Committee members could reach.

Most of the Bee’s dozen-plus contestants were sitting on the edge of the stage when Ms. Lora walked through the door. They represented each of the third, fourth, and fifth grade classes at Blair. (In most cases, a class sent two representatives.) Tanya was the only contestant standing, leaning with her elbows on the stage. She ran over to Ms. Lora as she entered,

“Are we going to use a microphone, Ms. Lora?!” Tanya was obviously excited.

“Yes we are,” Ms. Lora said. “We’ll practice in a moment.”

Ms. Lora scanned the now familiar faces. Almost all of them had accepted her invitation to come by her room after school and practice from the master spelling word list. She had given them all copies of the “easy” and “medium” words and asked them to practice at home as well. Tanya had spent hours after school in Ms. Lora’s room, often with her best friend DeShavier, spelling words that someone would read to her. Words Tanya missed were kept in a separate list. Tanya would periodically write those words three times and then re-test herself on them.

Ms. Lora stationed two members of her committee at the doors to hold off the crowd. She had already seen a number of parents with their black-and-yellow-striped invitations in their hands milling around outside.

“Would everyone please take a seat on the stage?”

Despite the obvious purpose of the single row of metal chairs on the stage, no child had presumed to sit in them yet. There was a sudden flurry of hopping, climbing, clanging, and scraping as the nervous contestants scuttled from the floor to the stage and sat in the cold, gray seats.

Ms. Lora took the more traditional route of the steps at one end of the stage. “Good morning, everyone,” she said once on stage. She was speaking into the same microphone that they would be using in just over an hour. Fourteen sets of legs swung and fidgeted in response.

“Welcome to the Blair Spelling Bee!” she said with natural excitement. “I am so proud of you all. You have achieved such an accomplishment to be here! Isn’t this exciting?” Ms. Lora watched the nervous smiles sparkle up and down the row of children. Tanya was on the far right, dressed in her favorite button-down white shirt with the oversized collar.

For the next fifteen minutes, using her notebook for guidance, Ms. Lora walked the contestants through the official Spelling Bee process. Most of them had no idea what a Spelling Bee looked like, as

many of the “first-round” contests in their classrooms had been much less formal, or in writing, or based on spelling speed, or nonexistent.

All the children drew a number from a wicker basket that Ms. Lora kept in her room for just such occasions. Then, in a transition that was much more chaotic than it needed to be, the kids rearranged themselves in the chairs by number. Joshua Bledsoe had drawn number one and danced his way to the first chair like an overpaid athlete. Tanya drew number eleven and eventually found her place between ten and twelve. Once in line, each child was given a cardboard-and-string necklace that displayed his or her number on his or her chest. The nervous fidgeting immediately migrated from contestants’ legs to their hands as the cardboard numbers—so carefully and proudly prepared by the Committee—were twirled, folded, tugged, and rolled.

In accordance with Ms. Lora’s careful and patient instructions, each child had a practice round. Ms. Lora would call a number and the speller (after looking down at the number on his or her own chest one more time) would walk to the microphone. The contestants’ personalities were glaring in that self-conscious walk to center stage. Some kids sheepishly dragged their feet, and others hopped and skipped. A few pushed both hands in the air, “raising the roof” as they approached the mic.

Once a child reached the microphone, Ms. Lora would give an easy trial-run word, just to practice the word-spell-word format of their answer.

“You,” Ms. Lora said when it was Tanya’s turn.

Attempting seriousness, Tanya all but swallowed the mike, and the room boomed with “You. Y-O-U. You.”

“Well done,” said Ms. Lora.

The room then boomed again with Tanya’s follow-up question. “Can I be the Mike Manager?” Tanya asked.

“I’ll manage the mike,” Ms. Lora said, taking it back from Tanya. “Thank you for the offer.”

Tanya flashed angry eyes at Ms. Lora, but held her composure.

After every child had practiced, and after a short period of questions and answers (including “Are there going to be people watching us?”), Ms. Lora signaled to the Door Guards to let in the crowd. The numbered contestants’ eyes widened and the fidgeting waned as people and crowd noise poured in the door. All of the third, fourth, and fifth grade classes, and a number of parents and families filed in and took seats at the cafeteria tables. To the extent it could with the tables out, the room filled quickly.

After her initial “Good Morning” into the microphone, it took several minutes of Ms. Lora’s blank-faced staring before the room fell fully silent. An aura of officialness immediately filled the space. Ms. Lora launched into her practiced laudatory introduction of the contestants and explicit request for “silence during the spelling and clapping after the judge’s decision.”

Then, Blair Elementary’s resurrected and refurbished Spelling Bee got under way. The kids looked just as nervous as Ms. Lora was excited.

And it was fantastic.

Stationed behind Ms. Lora’s podium on the right of the stage, the former Door Guards drew from the wicker basket a letter-number combination that aligned with Ms. Lora’s spelling lists. She would find the word and then read it to the waiting contestant.

The contestants and the crowd performed beautifully. Every child got rousing applause from the audience, even when the panel of three judges (one teacher from each grade) said the word was spelled incorrectly. In fact, the only difference in the reactions for a correct and an incorrect spelling were the sympathetic groans or encouraging cheers mixed with the clapping.

By design, Ms. Lora spent over ten rounds in the “easy” word list. She didn’t want too many kids to fall out too early. By the time Ms. Lora moved on to the “medium” word list, there were only five children left on stage.

Tanya was one of them, and she was a portrait of focus and determination, never taking her eyes off Ms. Lora, despite DeShavier’s animated attempts to get a wave from the stage.

Church. Staple. Warden. Lipstick. Virus. They continued to march through the medium words. Except for the occasional, “I know!” in a yelled whisper from somewhere in the crowd, Ms. Lora was thrilled with how smoothly things were going.

After twenty-something rounds—Ms. Lora lost count at some point—the field had been winnowed down to two. Tanya Law and Chris Gutierrez. Chris had been in Ms. Lora’s class last year and was now a fifth grader. The two of them traded successful words for three rounds, to the delight of the crowd. Cafeteria. Gingerbread. Homework. Liquid. Language. Hurricane.

The crowd was loving it, getting behind both contestants and cheering louder and louder with each successful word. “Gingerbread” elicited “oohs” of respect. “Homework” elicited a smattering of boos and giggles. Ms. Lora actually saw a whole row of fourth-grade audience members exaggeratedly nibbling the tips of their fingers. Another line of fifth graders did a ragged “wave” during a prolonged period of clapping. Even Tanya and Chris were smiling at the crowd reactions.

“Chocolate. C-H-O-C-H-O-L-A-T-E. Chocolate.” Whether out of respect of the rules or ignorance of the correct spelling, the crowd didn’t react until Ms. Sortero said “I’m sorry. That’s incorrect.”

Members of the crowd threw their heads back and groaned. “Awwwww!” Then there was an uproarious din of applause. Tanya stomped her foot and sat back in her metal chair on the stage.

Ms. Lora quieted the crowd, reminding them that under “official spelling bee rules,” Chris would have to spell correctly two words in a row in order to be crowned champion. When Ms. Sortero nodded after he correctly spelled the first one, “companion,” the crowd’s applause spontaneously morphed into a rhythmic constant beat. Even Tanya uncrossed her arms and got drawn in to the show of support.

Ms. Lora’s helpers drew the next slip of paper. Ms. Lora found the word on her list. “Flamingo,” she said to Chris.

Chris smiled. “Flamingo. F-L-A-M-I-N-G-O. Flamingo.”

Ms. Lora didn’t wait for Ms. Sortero. “The new Blair Elementary Spelling Bee Champion—Chris Gutierrez!!!”

It is inconceivable that the Blair Elementary cafeteria had ever been that loud. The place went nuts. Everyone, including Chris and Tanya, was clapping. Both in support for Chris and in celebration of the temporary cessation of civilization, a number of students in the audience were just screaming at the top of their lungs. Tanya shook Chris’s hand and Ms. Lora put her arms around both of them. Due to technical difficulties, the celebratory music planned by the Committee did not come on. But no one, outside the Committee members, cared or noticed.

By the time the clapping died down, Chris’s parents had made their way to the front and Chris leaned down off of the stage and into his father’s hug. Ms. Lora kept her arm around Tanya, whose father—undoubtedly standing in his yard across the street at that very moment—had declined an invitation to join them.

### **Anthony (Year One)—Triple-Dog.**

“You need a comma,” Anthony yelled out when Ms. Lora called on him.

The whole class silently held up their thumbs to indicate their agreement with his answer. That was two in a row.

“Fantastic!” Ms. Lora exclaimed, as much for Anthony’s right answer as for his contribution. His need for glasses had clearly been holding him back. Now, just six days into the new look, he was bursting with confidence.

As proud as she was of the culture of teamwork and community she had developed in her classroom, Ms. Lora had still been a little worried about Anthony’s debut with glasses. He was so self-conscious about having to wear them, and his fragile self-confidence had just gotten to the point where he would verbally contribute to class discussion.

Ms. Lora was relieved, and gratified, that not a single student seemed to notice when the bespectacled Anthony sheepishly sidled back in the room and took a seat. Ms. Lora was also thankful for

her students' lack of fashion sense, as Anthony's glasses were not the height of *chic*. They were large, plastic, square, maroonish frames that, even on their first day, slid down to the end of his nose constantly, so that he spent much of class tilting his head way back in order to see through the lenses.

"Anthony, are you going to take the triple-dog dare and go for three in a row?!"

"Go for it!" the class yelled in encouragement. Anthony still didn't talk to many of his classmates other than Cliff, but out of appreciation for his inexhaustible kindness, and perhaps out of respect for his stoic hard work, the class had really started to pull for him. In a strange way, despite his continued struggles with the fourth grade objectives, through his example of persistence, Anthony was becoming a silent leader of the classroom.

Anthony simultaneously leaned his head back and pushed his glasses up his nose. He accepted the "triple-dog dare" with a nod, and Ms. Lora revealed the next Mistake Finder.

"It should be 'Ella and I' instead of 'Ella and me.'"

Suppressed chirps of excitement bounced around the room as eighteen thumbs shot into the air. Anthony's face broke into a giant smile and turned the color of the frames of his glasses.

**Douglas (Year Two)—Alternate.** Ms. Lora was not overly disappointed. Or at least she appreciated the gravity of his decision. Everybody knew Chris Gutierrez was a boxer; he talked, wrote, read, drew, and dreamed about it every day. So it had not really been a surprise when he and his family came by Ms. Lora's classroom after school to apologetically decline his slot at the District Spelling Bee. The day of the Bee was the same day Chris would be traveling to Dallas to compete.

Ms. Lora's mild disappointment was mitigated by her new opportunity to tell Tanya that she would be the school's representative at District. Tanya was not exactly gracious about it.

"I can spell better than him anyway," she said, through a taut-cheeked smile. And that was it. Tanya sat down at the group-reading table and asked for some "seventh and eighth grade words."

**Anthony (Year One)—Yearbook Kindness.** Ms. Lora sat in her empty classroom reading page after page of well-considered compliments. The papers were creased with folds, but Anthony had clearly put hours of thought into the assignment. While many children had come back with a simple, one-line "She had nice hair" or "I like his shoes" for each classmate, Anthony had written several sentences for each student in the class and had artfully crafted compliments that appealed to each classmates' special interests. They were going to love reading them in the class "Yearbook."

Ms. Lora was not surprised, just impressed. Anthony was kind in a proactive way that many other fourth graders were not. She remembered back to his request for more leaves to put on the Tree of Kindness. He was always going an extra step to help his classmates, even though given his shy demeanor he did not really maintain many friendships other than Cliff's.

With deep satisfaction, Ms. Lora opened her laptop and started entering Anthony's contributions to the Yearbook.

**Roberto (Year Four)—The Lock-In.** Ms. Lora suspects that it was her idea, but as she considered how in the world she came to be sitting on a cold metal folding chair at 3:30 a.m. on top of a cafeteria table, wrapped in a blanket, literally holding her eyes open with her fingers, she could not bear the thought of having brought this upon herself.

Principal Werner had thought it was a great plan, and Ms. Lora had not flinched when she said they could only do it if two teachers stayed awake all night. So now, Ms. Lora and Mr. Solar sat facing each other like two miserable ice fishermen, surrounded by sleeping fourth graders, whispering to each other stories of the handful of other times in their lives that they had stayed up all night.

The “lock-in” had been enjoyable at first. At 7 p.m., Ms. Lora and Mr. Solar closed the cafeteria doors with great fanfare. The kids cheered and ravaged the pizza that had been delivered. Over the next two hours, the children moved around the big room playing test-skill games and winning prizes. At some point in the night, the super balls that were prizes at the Find-a-Frag game had to be confiscated, but other than that the whole show was running smoothly.

At about 9:30, the six chaperones had pulled out other games, including Battleship, Twister, and Monopoly. One of the highlights of the evening for Ms. Lora was when Roberto spearheaded a campaign to get her to go to her classroom and bring back the “Context Clue” and “Grammar Scategories” games she had made for students to play in class. Ms. Lora gathered a couple of blankets and two beanbag chairs as well, since not all the children had come with a sleeping bag or blanket.

Ms. Lora thought she had been tired when *Finding Nemo* began at about 11:30 p.m., but now, a full two hours after the last child fell asleep, it was torture to stay awake. She and Mr. Solar took turns taking brisk walks in the cool night air to wake up.

She rubbed her eyes and pulled the blanket closer around her.

“Battleship?”

“Sure,” Mr. Solar said, climbing down off the table to grab the game.

**Anthony (Year One)—A Pat on the Back.** At least once every couple of weeks Mrs. Franklin would show up in Ms. Lora’s classroom with some bit of important advice, or some memo about a new policy, or some breathless gossip about who was interviewing for other jobs, or was pregnant, or was getting divorced. These nuggets of news, however, were usually just conversation starters, as Mrs. Franklin’s real purpose was a motherly check on Ms. Lora. Ms. Lora always wondered what was going on in Mrs. Franklin’s classroom during these visits to hers.

The purported purpose of today’s visit was to tell Ms. Lora that a team from the “main office” would be on campus sometime during the afternoon. As a new teacher in several layers of certification and support programs, Ms. Lora had learned to all but ignore observers. For Mrs. Franklin, however, this news was about Big-Brother intrusions on the sacred space of her classroom.

“Thanks for the heads up,” Ms. Lora said, turning back to the small group with whom she was practicing quotation marks.

Mrs. Franklin smiled and walked back toward the door, veering off to one small group of students at the Grammar Olympics center in the corner. Four children, including Anthony, were wearing newspaper hats with the names of countries on them. Anthony was “Canada.” They were taking turns correcting grammar errors on handwritten note cards. By Ms. Lora’s devious design, each correct answer represented a different formula of points, so the children ended up spending the lion’s share of their time practicing, and monitoring each other’s, math skills to keep track of the score.

Ms. Lora listened as Mrs. Franklin leaned down to pat Anthony on the back.

“Ms. Lora tells me that you are doing better, Anthony. Is that true? That’s wonderful.”

Anthony looked up at her for only a second before turning back to his gold, silver, and bronze scoring formulas.

“And I hear you are coming to tutorials? That’s great. Are you really coming? You never came to mine. I’m glad you are trying.”

“Yes, Miss,” Anthony said, still looking down.

Mrs. Franklin, apparently assuming Ms. Lora would have been watching and listening, turned to Ms. Lora and gave a smile and head-nod before walking out the door. Ms. Lora watched Anthony relax as Mrs. Franklin left the room.

Ms. Lora had been making a concerted effort to invest her in Anthony’s progress lately. Ms. Lora wasn’t proud that she was gloating a little bit, but her loyalty to Anthony made her want Mrs. Franklin to see his progress for herself. Ms. Lora wanted Anthony to hear Mrs. Franklin be impressed by him. To that end, Ms. Lora had been telling Mrs. Franklin about Anthony’s accomplishments every chance she got. Anthony got an “A” on a math test that included word problems. Anthony wrote the most creative

ABAB rhyming poem the other day. Anthony has not missed a tutorial in two weeks. Anthony has the best cursive in the class. And then, the clincher: “Yes, Mrs. Franklin, Anthony really appreciates the acknowledgement of all of his hard work. Any chance you get to pat him on the back and mention his progress would sure be a help to me.”

Although Mrs. Franklin remained skeptical of Anthony’s progress, she loved that Ms. Lora needed her help. She could certainly give Anthony a pat on the back every once in a while if that’s what the new teacher needed.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Seventh and Eighth Grade Words.** After the Blair Spelling Bee, Ms. Lora had had a serious talk with Chris about how the next round, at District, was not just a bunch of third, fourth and fifth graders. He would be going up against sixth and seventh graders too. She had accepted Chris’s confident analogy that he had boxed and beaten kids older than he was.

Now, she gave the same speech—minus the boxing metaphors—to Tanya. Even more than Chris, Tanya was inspired by the role of underdog. The warning about “seventh graders” actually made her sit up straighter.

She also seemed to have naively considered Chris to be her toughest competition at the district level.

“With Chris out, I can win it,” she said. “DeShavier’s brother is in eighth grade and I betcha I can spell better than him.”

“Maybe so,” Ms. Lora agreed. “But, you know, these sixth and seventh graders you’ll go up against at District are really good spellers. Some of them are practicing right now, getting ready.”

“Well, so am I,” she shot back, apparently genuinely irritated, pulling the national word lists over in front of her. “Which ones are the seventh and eighth grade words?”

Ms. Lora could not have been more proud of Tanya in the last few weeks. Ms. Lora was thrilled the first time she saw Tanya’s Spelling Folder, with pages of checked and rewritten words. Everyday, Tanya would take home three or four or five words with which she had had trouble that day and by morning she would know them. She stopped by before school and stayed after school. Tanya kept in her folder all of the lists Ms. Lora had found. Life sciences words, Adjectives, Spanish-derived words, Tricky-to-spell words. Even “Most Commonly Misspelled Words.”

Almost daily, Ms. Lora and Tanya would sneak in some slivers of practice time during P.E., or after lunch, or during Ms. Lora’s morning monitor duty. When Ms. Lora wasn’t available to practice words out loud, she’d write them down, or bring in DeShavier, who would patiently endure Tanya’s constant correction of her pronunciations.

“You know, Tanya,” Ms. Lora said, emboldened by Tanya’s quick progress, I think we do need to put away the easy word lists now. Let’s focus only on the medium and hard words from now on. There won’t be many easy words at the district spelling bee.”

“Yep,” said Tanya, turning the pages of the word list.

As Ms. Lora binder-clipped several stacks of math sheets to take home to grade, she heard Tanya whispering loudly.

“Recruit. R-e-c-r-u-i-t. Recruit.”

“Plague. P-l-a-g-u-e. Plague.”

“Hey Ms. Lora, what’s ‘lacrosse’?”

#### Questions to Consider

- (1) Was Aurora’s revival of the Spelling Bee a good idea? Why or why not? What thought process would you go through before taking on some project like that?
- (2) What if the nurse had said that she could not get glasses for Anthony? What should Aurora have done then? What would you have done?

## Chapter Eight

### Pre-Test Hopes

(25-2 Days)

**Anthony (Year One)—Kings and Queens.** Even though the room, for the moment, was perfectly silent, most of the students were grinning with their hands pressed to their ears. As she did every Friday afternoon, Ms. Lora held a wrapping-paper tube to her mouth and broke the silence with what she called “trumpet” sounds. The kids called them “dying dog” sounds.

“Presenting the Weekly Spelling Court!” Ms. Lora yelled through the tube.

All the children who had made 100s on their weekly spelling test came to the front of the room. There were eight Kings and Queens in the court this week, and Ms. Lora, still yelling through the cardboard tube, dramatically introduced each one.

“His Royal Spelling Highness Soltero Pena!”

The class rose and applauded, only letting its applause ebb so that Ms. Lora could announce the next Court Member in her “dying dog” voice.

“Her Royal Spelling Highness April Perez!”

Ms. Lora did not spend a lot of time teaching spelling, but she did assign lists of words for the children to practice and work with as homework each week. Then, on Fridays, the class took a spelling test on the week’s words.

“His Royal Highness Anthony Vasquez!”

The applause turned Anthony bright red. Cliff blew spit all over this desk trying, unsuccessfully, to whistle through his fingers.

**Douglas (Year Two)—Pre-Test Progress.** Instinctively, she did not try to find out what was wrong, but instead tried to focus Douglas on the progress he was making.

“You know Douglas, I was looking back at your journals this month. You are really improving quickly. Let me show you something.”

She pulled out his journal and flipped back and forth between Douglas’s original account of the Kennedy basketball game and his most recent (and probably tenth) one.

Without a doubt, Douglas had had the most academically productive month of the year, if not his whole life. And yet, as the tension mounted in the weeks before the test, Ms. Lora felt like the ice under Douglas’s feet was getting thinner and thinner. He was trying to control his still frequent outbursts, he was focused on the test, and not a day would go by that he didn’t talk about how badly he wanted to pass so his mother would be proud of him. But at the same time, the increasing pressure kept him on edge.

This morning, Douglas had charged through the door in a sour mood. Ms. Lora felt her stomach sink the second she saw him; it was just too close to the exam for him to miss any more school time, and this was a face that threatened violent outbursts. She needed him to focus. As soon as she got an opportunity, she sat down with him for a pep talk.

“Look at this,” Ms. Lora said with authentic excitement. “You’ve got some good complete sentences. Excellent punctuation. Great supporting details. Fewer spelling errors. I am so proud of the work you are doing.”

“Me too,” he said, but still not smiling.

“Let’s keep this focus, ok?”

“OK,” he said as Ms. Lora stood up to circulate among the other children.

She was proud. She didn't know whether he was going to pass this test, but he was showing more improvement recently than ever before. And he was genuinely motivated to succeed.

She watched him from across the room, plotting distraction to get him through this day.

**Anthony (Year One)—Eddie Murphy.** While half the stories were about Britney Spears, Anthony's choice was Eddie Murphy. He loved *Dr. Doolittle* and thought that having Eddie Murphy stand-in as a substitute for Ms. Lora was an inherently hilarious idea. And it was really Anthony's best work to date.

"Would you mind sharing your story with the class?" Ms. Lora whispered. She was so proud of the effort he put into it. It had taken Anthony twice as long as the rest of the students, and many of his classmates had begun to notice and admire Anthony's ever-improving work ethic. Anthony had had to finish his essay during tutorials, but that was not just because he was slow but also because he methodically used all of Ms. Lora's brainstorming, webbing, and outlining techniques. The result was a solid first-draft story. Even this first attempt had an introduction, three big events that happened, and a conclusion. And each paragraph was composed of several related sentences. The results were truly impressive, and Ms. Lora imagined that a public acknowledgment of his work would build his confidence immensely.

Ms. Lora herself was tickled by the idea of Eddie Murphy taking over her class, even if most of his antics in Anthony's story alluded to scenes from movies she had not seen. She also thought it was funny that Anthony's last line, complete with near-perfect quotation marks, was Eddie Murphy announcing that "Teaching is too hard. I'm going back to acting." Ms. Lora would have to remember to show that to Mrs. Franklin.

Anthony thought for a moment about Ms. Lora's proposal, but shook his head. He was getting more and more confident in contributing to class discussions or answering direct questions in front of his peers, but this seemed like a little too much.

"Are you sure?" Ms. Lora asked. "I think you've written a great story and we could all learn so much if you would share it."

"Would you read it?" Anthony asked quietly.

Ms. Lora thought for a moment and said "Yes, that's a good compromise. I'll read it if you promise that someday soon you'll share some of your great work with the class."

"OK," he said, handing her back the Eddie Murphy story.

"Excellent," she said, holding up her hand for a high-five and setting off his dancing dimples.

### **Roberto (Year Four)—Raising the Roof.**

"Good day today, huh?"

Ms. Lora was still buzzing with the excitement of Roberto's latest essay. In a move that Ms. Lora would have said was totally out of character, Roberto lifted both hands in the air, "raising the roof" in celebration of his latest rubric scores.

Ms. Lora laughed and Roberto smiled at his own audaciousness.

A cost of Ms. Lora's strategy of teaching the art of writing in its many layers all at once was the anxiety of waiting for things to "click." In her four years of using this holistic method, she had become more patient and confident, but it was still nerve-wracking to wait for the amazing period for each student when all the learning seemed to come together at once and, in the course of weeks, students' essays would go from poor to good.

For Roberto, with the exception of his spelling, things finally clicked. With just weeks to go before the state test, it was all coming together. For months, his progress had been marked by a shift on the rubric from more-ones-than-twos to more-twos-than-ones. It was painstakingly slow and often frustrating to Roberto. After several study sessions during the winter break, after perfect attendance at

after-school and Saturday-school tutorials, and after innumerable revisions of every one of the dozens of essays he had written, Roberto's essays were now leaping forward in their sophistication, clarity, logic, and design. In terms of the rubric, Roberto received, for the first time, threes in Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, and Sentence Fluency.

Meanwhile, his spelling was also improving slowly and steadily, just not in the leaps and bounds that the other areas had.

"I'm very proud of you, Mr. Reyes," Ms. Lora said, unable to resist tussling his soft, short hair with both hands.

He squirmed away, thrilled with himself.

"Me too," he said. "And I'm very proud of you, Ms. Lora."

"Spelling?" she asked.

"Spelling," he answered and she pulled down the folder of words that he had misspelled in his last three essays.

### **Anthony (Year One)—I Believe You.**

"I believe you, Ms. Lora."

She had no idea what he was talking about. Anthony was sitting across the room, a pencil in each hand. It was Friday, and Anthony and Raul were the only students to come to tutorials today, although Raul had left a few minutes ago. This was the thirteenth straight day Anthony had come to tutorials, including Saturday School, and Anthony and Ms. Lora had just worked together for half an hour on using context clues to figure out word meanings. Now, Anthony was taking a context clues self-quiz using some worksheets from an SFA workbook while Ms. Lora did some grading.

"What?" she asked, looking up from the essays she was editing.

"I believe you Ms. Lora," he said again. Anthony seemed to think she didn't understand his words rather than his context.

"Believe what, Anthony?"

"I believe you that I can do it." Anthony was absolutely serious in this announcement. Satisfied that she understood, he leaned back over his worksheet and kept working.

### **Douglas (Year Two)—The Myth of Effort.**

"Douglas Rogers! Welcome back. Two days in a row!"

Ms. Lora decided to ignore that fact that Douglas had a Popsicle in his hand and just celebrate his increased focus on his writing.

"Let's edit that essay!"

For months, she and his mother had been working to establish his attendance as a routine, but he often snuck away during Ms. Lora's after-school duty, and on some of those days when he did show up, Ms. Lora had to send him home for disrupting the lessons.

Now, with the fourth grade test in sight, he seemed to actually be focusing on getting ready. The essay he was editing today was yet another account of how he passed the third grade test over the summer. The myth of his own effort and determination before that test had grown into legend, and Ms. Lora encouraged the retelling of it in writing. Today, they would edit that "adventure essay" for complete sentences and punctuation.

Douglas, still holding the Popsicle, slid into his seat next to Ms. Lora's desk. She put his draft in front of him with a pencil and gave him a checklist to use as he reread it. She promised she'd be back in a couple minutes after she got some of the other students started. Douglas put the Popsicle in his mouth, smoothed out the wrinkled essay, and started to read it quietly but out loud.

Ms. Lora kept an eye on him as she zipped from desk to desk, getting each student started on exercises that addressed their weakest skills. Saying the words out loud was a modification that she'd

found to be particularly helpful with math word problems, although even with that strategy he really struggled with translating words to solvable math formulas. Once the challenge was translated to number and symbol form, he excelled

The quick benefits of the read-aloud strategy had reawakened Ms. Lora's self-doubt, guilt, and frustration about Douglas's obvious special needs. At a well-resourced, well-designed, well-run school, she'd be clamoring for him to be in Special Education so that an expert could really identify his learning challenges and help him practice coping strategies. Ms. Lora felt like her own half-baked internet research and her pestering calls to friends of friends who were Special Education teachers had borne good advice and strategies, but when she allowed herself to think about the magnitude of Douglas's needs, she was wracked with uncertainty. She felt trapped between the insufficiencies of her own services and the insufficiencies of her school's.

As she leaned back over Douglas's desk to check on his progress, she saw that he had in fact identified one of the several sentence fragments in his paper. As they had practiced, the sentence fragment "I am goin to call my mom when I pass bcaus" was underlined twice in heavy, dark lines. She also saw that he had gotten a little comma-happy; his draft was dotted with circled commas between every third or fourth word.

## Chapter Nine

### Test Eves

1 Day

#### **Anthony (Year One)—Practice Mistakes.**

Ms. Lora gasped when she saw his mistake, and in a rush of frustration that she would later regret, she passed on her panic to Anthony. He was fully distraught, and crimson, when she told him about it.

“Listen Anthony,” Ms. Lora said, trying to retreat to the line between comforting and warning, “this was just a practice test. This is why we do these trial runs. You’ll certainly never make this mistake again, right?”

Anthony had buried his head in his arms, deeply enough that she could not see whether he was crying.

For some reason that Ms. Lora could only imagine had to do with test anxiety, Anthony had failed to fill out the official bubble-in answer sheet when he took the multiple choice part of the practice test. Even though he had taken less formal practice tests dozens of times, and even though Ms. Lora had discussed with the class the importance of bubbling and erasing clearly on the answer form, Anthony had marked his answers in the booklet and never translated them to the answer sheet.

Ms. Lora had explained curtly that he “would receive a zero and fail the test if this was the real thing.” She was sorry to have made him so upset, but she also wanted him to know the harsh reality of the situation. The state-mandated procedures for administering, collecting, and transporting the score sheets were unforgiving. A simple mistake like that could mean Anthony would have to repeat the fourth grade.

“Anthony,” Ms. Lora said softly to the round lump of shoulders and neck on the desk, “it’s ok. You made a simple mistake but you won’t do it again. Think about how lucky you are to have made this mistake on the practice test instead of the real one. Now, there’s no chance you’ll make this mistake next week.”

Anthony kept his head on his desk, and his neck remained a deep red.

#### **Douglas (Year Two)—Test Prep Pep Talk.**

“You’re going to get a good night’s sleep tonight, right?”

Ms. Lora was speaking to Douglas, but it was mostly for his mother’s benefit. Ms. Lora had asked Mrs. Rogers to come by to join her for a last minute pep-talk. Ms. Lora didn’t intend to stress either of them with last minute advice and strategies, but she wanted to impress upon Douglas the huge opportunity before him. She wanted him optimally focused tomorrow.

Mrs. Rogers stood in the doorway with Douglas leaning against her stomach; her hands were massaging his shoulders like he was about to go into a heavy-weight fight.

“You hear that, Douglas? No television tonight. We’re going to get a good night’s sleep, and eat a good breakfast, and be ready to roll over that test tomorrow.”

Douglas smiled.

Ms. Lora was pleased that he seemed confident. She wouldn’t want it any other way, but she was shouldering the anxiety for both of them. She just did not know whether he had made it. She was, all at once, so proud, worried, hopeful, eager, and scared for Douglas. She was privately proud of herself and his mother for moving Douglas’s thinking to a place where he really wanted to do well.

“Douglas, I am really proud of your hard work, self-control, and good choices during the last few weeks.”

Snuggled into his mother’s arms, Douglas looked younger, not older, than his classmates.

“You’re going to do your very best tomorrow, and not hurry, right?” Ms. Lora knew that Douglas could get impatient during the long writing assignment. “You have all the time you need.”

“Yep,” he said as his mother stopped massaging his shoulders and put both her hands on his head.

“I’m proud of you, Douglas,” Mrs. Lora said.

Mrs. Rogers leaned down and kissed him on the head and the pair backed out of the room to go home and get a good night’s sleep.

Ms. Lora *was* proud of Douglas. His last week-and-a-half before the test was relatively, if not highly, productive. While he occasionally pounded his fist into his hand, and often bit his bottom lip, he endured both reading and writing every day. He made a strong effort on the editing exercises. He came to several evenings of tutorials. For the first time ever, he even asked Ms. Lora if one of his essays was good enough to go on the Good Work Wall.

As usual, the place he really shined was math. Emboldened by the occasional Urkel impersonation, he strutted his math skills proudly. He tried to avoid having to do word problems at the board, but as the class reviewed chunk division or lattice multiplication or other methods built on straight calculations, he could usually outpace the other students.

After saying goodbye to Douglas and his mother, Ms. Lora made her way around her room rearranging the desks into a test-worthy configuration and cutting butcher paper to cover the student work on her walls, she thought about Douglas’s progress. She was proud. She was scared to death about tomorrow, but she was proud.

He might still be a long-shot to pass, but he was improving so much. She saw new light bulbs going off for Douglas every day. Maybe, just maybe, there’d be another miracle.

Ms. Lora too was starting to look forward to that phone call to Douglas’s mom.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Bee Eve.** She had made the announcement in class several times, but Ms. Lora hung her sign on the outside of her door and shut it.

NO TUTORIALS TODAY  
DUE TO TOMORROW’S SPELLING BEE  
GOOD LUCK TANYA!

Tanya never saw the sign. She was already in the room at the reading table with her many lists of words in front of her. Of her own accord, she had decided to spend this last day of preparation not on new words but just on shoring up the words she had missed in the last few weeks. Ms. Lora sat down with Tanya to read words and support Tanya’s amazing focus. Alfalfa. Alfalfa. Alfalfa. Crochet. Crochet. Crochet. Amigo. Amigo. Amigo. Sapphire. Sapphire. Sapphire.

Tanya just kept writing and rewriting her words in her notebook.

**Roberto (Year Four)—Prayer Meeting.** Sitting in the big, straight-backed chair, Roberto looked smaller and frailer than usual, but just as serious. Ms. Lora leaned over to him and whispered, “You ok?” He nodded, blank-faced.

“She just wants to give us both a peptalk,” Ms. Lora whispered.

He nodded again, expressionless. Based on her innumerable hours of studying them, she thought she could read some nervousness in Roberto’s eyes. It was an emotion she would have said he didn’t know.

The door opened behind them and the principal walked in. She quickly walked around the desk and sat in her high-backed office chair.

"Good morning, Roberto," she said, picking up a binder-clipped set of papers that Ms. Lora recognized as his latest practice tests. Ms. Lora had provided those at the principal's request. With just a few days before the test, Dr. Werner was having one-on-one meetings with all of the students who were still struggling with the skills they needed to pass. She wanted to impress upon them the importance of doing their best.

A little worried that the principal's brusque style and "must-win" message might do more harm than good, Ms. Lora had asked to join the meeting and had prepped Dr. Werner with descriptions of Roberto's hard work and unshakable focus. Ms. Lora had told Dr. Werner how Roberto had improved by leaps and bounds but that his writing was still weak. Ms. Lora felt a little traitorous given Roberto's own confidence that he could pass the test.

"I hear you've been working really hard, Roberto," Dr. Werner said. Roberto did not respond. "You've come to Ms. Lora's tutorials and to Saturday school?"

Ms. Lora answered for him. "He's never missed a Saturday session and Roberto always takes home extra work."

"That's fantastic!" the principal exclaimed.

"Roberto, what are you going to do in the last few days to be as focused and ready as you can be?"

He fielded that one himself. His eyes twinkled below his cap of thick black hair, but his face remained emotionless.

"I've been working really, really hard for a long time, Miss," he said with funereal sincerity. "I have the ideas and I have the organization and the paragraphs. And I include dialogue and my big problem is with spelling because of my difficulty with English. But I've been working so hard and I think the only thing left I can do now is pray."

Ms. Lora smiled knowingly.

"I'm going to pray a lot. And I asked Ms. Lora to pray. And my mother and my *abuelita* are praying. And tonight my whole church is going to pray for me for the test. That's it. That's the only extra thing I can think of I can do now."

Dr. Werner looked at Ms. Lora and smiled too.

"If it's ok with you, Roberto, I'm going to be praying too," she said.

He nodded, expressionless.

## Chapter Ten

# Test Days

## 0 Days

**Roberto (Year Four)—Test Day.** Ms. Lora felt a deep ambivalence about test days. On one hand, this was the day she and her kids had been working for all year long. This is the day that they could finally show the world all they had learned. On the other hand, the stress for all of them, teachers and students, seemed tortuous. Some children, many of them in fact, complained of stomach aches and headaches, although Ms. Lora could not dismiss them to go to the nurse without drastic consequences for their academic futures. The school nurse actually roved around the school comforting students' anxiety, trying to keep them from leaving their classrooms.

It was minor, but one other reason she hated this day was that her normally bright and vibrant room disappeared on test day. She had spent almost an hour last night covering every square inch of the decorated walls with white butcher paper, as instructed by the test administrators. Now, as she monitored her students' test taking in her room, she felt like she was in a strange laboratory with paper-padded walls. The combination of the room's lack of color and the students' high anxiety made her feel out of place.

As she wandered up and down the rows, she noticed Roberto's scratch paper. It was covered with words that he was trying to spell correctly. Some of them were written several times. Others were scratched out. Some were spelled correctly. Some were not.

Ms. Lora said a silent prayer that his prayers, and those of his entire family and church, would be heard and that his unwavering focus and hard work would pay off.

**Anthony (Year One)—Test Day.** With no idea what she would do if he was not filling in the bubble sheet, Ms. Lora could not help but glance over at Anthony several times. Her relief to see that he was transferring his answers to the scantron was immediately replaced by the more pressing anxiety that he perform his absolute best. They had made so much progress, but Ms. Lora just was not sure if it was enough.

As the test date had neared, Ms. Lora was more and more obsessed with what Anthony believed, even more than she was obsessed with what he knew. He was working long hours, but she just was not sure he actually believed he could succeed.

She watched from her position by the windows as he wrote paragraph topics in the margins of the booklet.

**Douglas (Year Two)—Test Day.** Douglas arched his back and stretched his arms above his head, letting out an audible groan. During silent reading time, such a display would have been purposefully calculated to elicit giggles from his classmates. Today, Ms. Lora could tell that he was genuinely struggling to keep his tense body and mind focused on the test. There were certainly no giggles from other students.

His eyes met hers and she gave him an intent stare and a nod. She intended to convey a message that he should focus, but she had no idea how he interpreted it. He did, however, nod back and curl back over his test booklet. She watched him for a moment, intently drawing out a web of ideas for his essay.

She thought about the chances that that essay would include something about his mother. As she watched his determination and intensity, she also thought about the chances he would pass the test. At this point, she would bet on him.

## Chapter Eleven

### Results

**Anthony (Year One)—The Scores.** Ms. Lora was standing on the sidewalk by the gate of the playground after school when she noticed several other teachers abandoning their far-flung posts and walking briskly toward the main building. Her stomach flipped and turned as she realized that the test scores must have come back.

She spent two more minutes at her duty station trying suppress her growing nausea before she headed toward the office herself.

She knew her kids had worked hard. She knew she had worked hard. She did not know if they had worked hard enough.

She thought back to those first virtually indecipherable diagnostic essays. She literally had to stop walking to settle her stomach for a moment. What if all her kids failed? Who would teach them next year? How would she ever face them again? Would she be fired? April, Sortero, Robert, Cliff, Anthony, Jennifer, David, Shawn, Shennelle, Danielle, Marco, Jason, Timothy, Monica. What if she had failed them?

Ms. Lora's breathing was shallow as she walked into the main office. Expressionless, two teachers were walking out as Ms. Lora walked in. Without saying a word, the secretary handed Ms. Lora a brown envelope with "Aurora Lora" written on it.

**Roberto (Year Four)—New York City.** Giddy, Ms. Lora reached in her file cabinet and pulled out Roberto's first essay. She remembered hoping against hope when she filed it away that she would someday have this moment.

She pulled it out and placed it on her desk. Her lips moved as she sounded out the words.

*MAi espCil dAI Is wen Ay hAf prTy. For mi brdAi. It is vri fun An itwas Cek An Ay Was et an Were Wen to Mxco for mi brDai.*

It was just unbelievable. She set Roberto's test essay, with its passing red "2" stamped on it by some state-hired grader, on the desk next to that first one. It was as if the two essays were written by different people.

She decided that when she met with Roberto in the hall tomorrow morning, she would first hand him this original essay and ask him to read it to her. Then she would hand him his latest work, scored by the state of Texas, and watch him discover that he had passed. She could not wait.

She'd probably ask him to read this latest one out loud too. It was just too good a story not to read out loud. For the third time in the last half-hour, she picked it up and read every word:

*My teachr likes to have contests in are class. Some times there are competicions for who can read the most books or who can get the most Accelratd Readr points. But I will never forgit August 24 when Ms. Lora said that we were having a contest for who can become the most improvd writer in our 4<sup>th</sup> grade class. What made this contest great was that she would take the winner on a trip to New York City. And, she said we cold go on an airplan to get there.*

*This was BIG. No one in are class had ever been there or even on an airplan before. We all wanted to win, but no one wanted it more than me. And I wanted it bad. So I set this goal to pass TAKS and be the most improvd writer so she would take me and*

*so I could go on an airplan. At first it was hard for me because we had to do all these compositins and I would get 0s or 1s at first because she coldn't read what it was saying. But I kept working and start coming to totorials afterschool where we would get snacks and play writng games and have fun. I liked it a lote, so I would always come to Satrday schol too and that was great becaus we would get breakfast and lunch and we could win prizes like books and calclators in the rafles. I learned how to use dialog and voice and word choice to make my writing better. Slowly it did. Some times she would even come to the cafetria to get kids for some extra totoring and I would always watch the door to see if she was coming and yell "TAKE ME!!!" and wave my arms if she was looking around. Sometimes she did, but only if it she was working on a area that I needed help in.*

*On TAKS day, I was kind of scard but when I open the book it was so easy. I had spend a long time on my essay and at the end I was smiling because I knew that I had got at least a 2 and passed because it was so easy. When the scores came back it was great because we had a big cerimony. Even thow I didn't get the highest grad in the class, I stil won the contest for most improvd writer because she was looking at where you started to where you ended. Of corse I had ben gitting all those 0s and 1s at frist sense I was triing to write in Inglish and that's when my Inglish wasn't too good. But sense I passed the TAKS writing and it wasn't in Spanish – that was just great. So I was very proud and that weeknd I got to go on the trip to New York City for a great adventure.*

*I put some cloths and snacks in my backpack and went to the airport with my teachr. We got to go in a jet and the lady made us put on setbelts and the engin was loud when the plane was lifting off the ground. Then we got some penuts and Sprite and I got to watch all the people down on the ground from the window. They lookd small like ants. I waved, but they coldn't see me.*

*In New York City we got to do fun stuff like go to a basebal game and see the Statu of Librty and go to that park with the birds like in that movie Home Alone 2. I got a t-shirt for my mom and a little statu for my dad so he could see what the Statu of Librty looks like. I took lotes of picktures on the trip so I would never forget my fun trip to New York. That was definitely my greatest adventure ever.*

**Anthony (Year One)—One by One.** For 190 days, Ms. Lora had done everything she could to ease students' anxiety about the test. She never downplayed its importance, but she also didn't want them to end up feeling like she did yesterday as she walked over to pick up the scores. Work hard and take care of business. That was her theme. Even when she was popping Tums in her mouth like candy, she was hoping to exude in her manner and create in her class a confident, calm, we-can-do-this intensity before the test.

Once she had seen the results, however, all she could think about was how to build the drama. She wanted to inflate their anxiety, just so she could allay it with the news. How could she make her kids understand how proud they should be to have passed—every single one of them—a test that seemed so far out of their reach in those first days of school? How could they sufficiently appreciate that no class at Blair had ever had 100% passing before? How could they appreciate that seven of their classmates had gotten a "3" on the essay and that was four more "3s" than the entire fourth-grade had last year? How could she tell them how sick she had felt when she read their diagnostic essays just six months ago, how she had had to steady herself against a wall on her way to pick up the results, how she had struggled all year to overcome her own doubts that they could really pull this off? How could she make her kids see these results as absolute, incontrovertible proof that they are smart, that they are capable, that they must not let anyone, including themselves, sell them short?

Ms. Lora had decided to tell the children one-by-one. She would let them gradually infer, student by student, that they had met their Big Goal of 100% passing. She was also eager to have that revelatory moment with each and every student. She wanted to tell them how proud she was of their work, their focus, their growth, and them.

Ms. Lora set the stage by standing silently in front of the class with the brown envelope in her hand. Given the school-wide buzz this morning, the students knew exactly what Ms. Lora was holding.

"Please take out your copy of *Bridge to Terabithia*," she had said. "You're going to read chapter three while I have individual meetings with each of you in the hall. I want each of you to know that no matter what your individual results, I am so, so proud of the work you put into learning and mastering your skills this year."

Very little, if any, reading got done during the next half hour. From the moment Ms. Lora called each name, all eyes were on the back of the student walking out the door, then all eyes were on the door for what seemed like an eternity, then all eyes were on the face of the student walking back in the door from his or her conference. With each smiling face, the watchful room got more excited. Those who already knew their own results were much freer with their verbal congratulations.

As alphabetical order would have it, Anthony Vasquez was last on Ms. Lora's list.

"Anthony?" she said with just her head poking through the door.

The room was perfectly silent. The fact that every student had passed so far, and that Anthony would seal the deal, was not lost on the class. Collectively, the students seemed more nervous now than they did before any results were given.

Cliff reached out for a knuckle tap as Anthony walked by, but Anthony didn't respond. His round face was deep red and he was making noises like he was clearing his throat with his mouth closed. The room full of fourth graders, transfixed by this drama, stayed perfectly silent and still as the door closed behind Anthony.

On one side of the door, a roomful of eyes was trained on its doorknob. On the other, Ms. Lora used the doorknob for support as she knelt down in front of Anthony. Ms. Lora was relishing this moment.

But only for an instant.

She looked into Anthony's eyes and they instantly filled with tears. She saw that his hands and shoulders were trembling.

"Oh, Anthony. . ." she started to say, immediately intending to rescue him from this misery.

But, through sobs, he began choking out his fears.

"I listened to you and you told me I could do it, Miss," he said. "I listened to you but what if you were wrong, and what if everyone else was right, and what if. . ."

It was Ms. Lora's turn to interrupt. She instinctively pulled his quivering arms toward her.

"You passed, Anthony. You got one of the highest scores in the whole school! You got a three on the essay!"

Ms. Lora watched his eyes. They grew big for a second, and then creased into their own smile-like crescents. The tears, the sputtering, and the sobbing continued, but under them all was a dimpled smile instead of a painful grimace. The only word he said was "Yes! Yes! Yes!" over and over.

And then, with his fear-turned-joy tears streaming down his face, Anthony surprised Ms. Lora for the second time that day. He did a cartwheel. Right there in the hall of Blair Elementary.

Anthony gave Ms. Lora another hug before he threw open the door of the classroom and raised his arms above his head. Room 210 instantly erupted in cheers of celebration. As he stepped through the door, Anthony had to duck under the mob of classmates that were hitting him on the back, tussling his hair, and high-fiving each other directly over his head. Ms. Lora pulled the door shut behind her and joined them.

**Douglas (Year Two)—The Cell Phone.** Ms. Lora felt her cell phone burning a hole in her pocket as she walked into the hall with Douglas. She had the test scores in her right hand. Her left hand was on Douglas's shoulder.

It was less than a year ago that they were in this same scene at the end of summer school. Their long, difficult road together had really begun with Douglas bouncing up and down in this very spot, clutching Ms. Lora's phone to his ear with both hands, experiencing his mother tell him how proud she was of him. Together, over the last ten months, Ms. Lora and Douglas had remembered, reconstructed, and reenacted that scene a thousand times, all in a bid to re-live it, right here today. It was his hope for this moment that had given him the focus to edit his own essay, the determination to keep trying to find the alliteration in the story, and the persistence to actually go back through and check all his answers on the test. Ms. Lora had watched him take the test carefully, and before seeing any scores, she was proud of his effort.

It seemed so long ago that he had turned in a goal sheet describing his dream: "To call my Mama to tell her I passed the fourth-grade test."

Ms. Lora felt paralyzed. It was hard to breathe.

"Douglas," she said, "I'm sorry, but you didn't pass."

Douglas froze. He stared up at her for just one second, and then he exploded into tears. She put her arms around him as the sobs overtook him and echoed up and down the hall. In the next few minutes, she only let go of him to wipe the tears from her own eyes.

He gasped and sniffled in her arms for a long time. She tried to imagine what thoughts he was having from the depths of his disappointment. She knew he'd been talking to his mom about it constantly. In fact, his mother had called almost daily to see if the scores were back. And Ms. Lora had told her how hard Douglas had worked, and that he had tried to use the strategies he'd learned on the test. She had watched him take his time and go back through the test when he was finished.

Ms. Lora finally stepped back from Douglas and lifted his glistening face up to look at her. "We need to call your mom," she said.

"I can't, Ms. Lora," he said, so choked up that he was virtual inaudible. "Will you do it, please?"

Ms. Lora wiped her eyes again, reached in her pocket, and got out her phone. She dialed the gas station, a number that she knew better than her own. Mrs. Rogers answered on the first ring.

Ms. Lora then felt her own tears start to flow as she explained the bad news. "I need to tell you some really disappointing news, Mrs. Rogers. The scores came back. You and I know that Douglas put everything he had into this and I really believe he tried so hard, but he didn't pass the test."

Ms. Lora explained that the test was divided into several sections, and that he failed each of them. Douglas had failed the math section by only one question. Mrs. Rogers listened in silence.

"Mrs. Rogers," Ms. Lora said, "Douglas is standing here with me now. He's really upset. Could you talk to him for a minute and let him know it's going to be ok?"

Ms. Lora handed the phone to Douglas. He wiped his nose on his sleeve and clutched the phone to his ear with two hands.

He couldn't speak to her. He just let out a little gasp into the phone. Ms. Lora could not hear anything she said to him, but Douglas held the phone to his ear, his eyes squeezed shut, his face contorted in pain. Tears dripped off his nose and chin.

After a minute or so, and never saying a word, he just nodded, closed the phone, and handed it back to Ms. Lora. Without saying a word, and without wiping his glistening face, he turned and walked back into the classroom to his seat.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Create a Buzz.** Ms. Lora and Tanya hurried out of Ms. Lora's room as soon as the substitute arrived. They both waved to Tanya's father as they pulled away from the school. He had refused Ms. Lora's persistent invitations and strong encouragement to come with them. Ms. Lora was thankful Tanya couldn't read her mind as he nodded back to them.

Both Tanya and Ms. Lora carefully avoided talking about spelling during the ten-minute drive to the district office. As they pulled into the parking lot of the big, imposing building, Ms. Lora looked over at her passenger and held up her hand for a mini-high-five. Tanya tentatively responded, placing her own hand gently against Ms. Lora's for a second.

"Can you believe it?" Ms. Lora asked with a grin. "It's showtime."

Tanya smiled and pulled her backpack into her lap.

The big event would be held in an auditorium that was usually used for teachers' in-service training. Ms. Lora had survived an interminable session on health benefits in that very room. But when they walked through the doors, she hardly recognized it as the same place.

The walls were covered with streamers and posters. Most of the posters, which appeared to be of varying vintage, involved smiling bees of some sort or another and included goofy, pun-tortured messages like "Bee-st of Luck!" or "Create a Buzz, Super Speller!"

The setup of the room was precisely as Ms. Lora had arranged things at Blair, except the stage was bigger, brighter, and cleaner, and the room didn't smell like sour milk. Of course, there were also about three times as many chairs on stage, set up in three rows on risers so that you could see all of the contestants from the audience.

Tanya tried to keep her game face on as they walked in, but once inside the huge auditorium she craned her neck like a tourist. She took in the walls, the high ceiling, and all those many seats—seats that were already filling up with kids, teachers, and families. Each little group was saving one seat for their competitor, just in case he or she wasn't the last one to leave the stage.

Ms. Lora, herself overwhelmed by the big, bright glare of the setting, sat down in a row toward the front with Tanya and told her how proud she was of her.

"Isn't this awesome?" Ms. Lora playfully hugged her and Tanya squirmed away from her. "Look at this place. I am so proud to be here with you. I'm so proud of how hard you've worked on these words, Tanya. You are a Rock Star!"

Tanya smiled. Ms. Lora often called students "Rock Star" when they did well on something. Tanya had recently heard kids calling each other "rockstar" on the playground.

"I'm nervous," was Tanya's only verbal response.

"Me too," Ms. Lora said. "But I sure can't wait to see you up there spelling those words."

Just a few minutes later, participants were called to the stage. Ms. Lora watched as the emcee walked the kids through a dry run, just like she had done at Blair. Tanya drew number twenty-two and sat in the back row on the top riser. There was certainly no way to tell she wasn't a seventh or eighth grader.

Ms. Lora waved to her. Tanya let her cardboard necklace number fall onto her chest and waved back.

The District Spelling Bee looked similar but felt different from the Blair Spelling Bee. All of the pieces were the same, but the harder words and more atomized crowd made for an equally intense but less raucous experience. For the most part, the audience clapped politely for each student, but the handful of supporters for each student were too dispersed to really create much atmosphere. Even more affecting, the District Bee didn't waste much time with the easy words, so many students were culled out in just the first few rounds.

Given that no one cried at all during Blair's contest, there were also infinitely more tears at this level. Several of the early-exiters were wiping their faces as they descended the stage steps.

After about forty-five minutes, the field was down to twelve and Ms. Lora was still sitting next to an empty seat. Tanya had empty seats on either side of her. Principal Werner, who was in the building for a meeting, stopped by to see how things were going.

"Where's Tanya?" she whispered to Ms. Lora.

"On stage," Ms. Lora told her with pride.

Principal Werner’s jaw dropped. She knew how much these other schools invested in their spelling programs, and in this competition in particular. She was shocked that Tanya was still a player almost an hour into the competition. She sat down in the seat Ms. Lora was saving for Tanya.

Tanya was calm, cool, and collected on stage. Audition. Scholar. Diagnosis. Triceratops. Mosaic. Word by word, Tanya stayed in the game while other kids sniffled off the stage to sit with their cheering/condolence sections. Ms. Lora watched Tanya mumble the spelling of the words assigned to other contestants. She was in the zone.

Now that Tanya had made it this far, Ms. Lora was getting much more nervous with each round. Ms. Lora was literally sitting on the edge of her seat.

After just fifteen more minutes, after a spate of dismissals that seemed sudden, Tanya was one of two students left on stage. It was just Tanya and, appropriately enough, an eighth grader. Ms. Lora resisted the urge to high-five her Principal. This was amazing.

“C’mon Tanya!” Ms. Lora yelled during the prolonged applause when the field was narrowed to just two. Whether Tanya heard her or not, she didn’t look up.

And then, just as suddenly, Tanya’s adversary misspelled a word. He put two i’s in “nemesis.” Ms. Lora gasped, along with most of the crowd. The age difference between the finalists was not lost on the audience.

The official quieted the crowd and gave Tanya her next word.

“Alibi. A-L-I-B-I. Alibi.” Tanya smiled as she spelled it, knowing that one well.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the next word is for the District Championship,” the emcee said. “Please remain silent until the competition is concluded.”

Ms. Lora couldn’t have made a sound if she had wanted to. She was leaning over the people in front of her, peeking over her two hands covering her mouth and nose. Principal Werner was leaned way back, her hands clasped under her chin, as if, or in, prayer.

“Amigo,” the emcee said, and Ms. Lora jumped to a standing position—a reaction she would later attribute to Tanya’s influence. Principal Werner looked up at Ms. Lora, confused. Ms. Lora whispered back, “She just won!”

Through a gigantic smile, Tanya nailed it. “Amigo. A-M-I-G-O. Amigo.”

The room filled with applause. “District Champion, Tanya Law!” The emcee held up Tanya’s arm like a boxer, and her face shifted from surprise to pride. The eighth grader, tear-free, walked over and shook Tanya’s hand. A whole table of trophies—trophies that looked like an Oscar reading a book—appeared on stage. Tanya was swarmed by officials and flashbulbs. It was Ms. Lora’s turn to dry her eyes as Tanya waved to her from the stage, holding the biggest of the trophies in her other hand.

After hundreds of congratulations, five celebratory donuts, two high-fives from Principal Werner, dozens of back slaps, at least twenty photos with the trophy, one interview for the HISD newspaper, and about fifty hugs from Ms. Lora, Tanya and Ms. Lora pulled up at Blair Elementary.

Ms. Lora’s giddy high vanished when she saw Tanya’s father standing in the yard across the street. There was just no way to avoid interacting with him right now and there was just no chance he would show even a fraction of the appropriate appreciation of Tanya’s triumph.

DeShavier unknowingly saved the day. Whether she had permission or not was unclear, but DeShavier came running from the classroom building to Ms. Lora’s car. “You won! You won!” she yelled. “Girl, I told you so!” The two of them embraced in a spinning, jumping, squealing hug, Tanya still clutching the trophy in one hand. In all of the excitement since her victory, this was the most emotion Tanya had shown. Tanya’s father watched as Tanya and DeShavier ran, arm in arm, from the car to the school. Ms. Lora walked in after them.

The good news had spread, via the Principal, and the school was primed to welcome Champion Tanya home. Tanya’s class applauded her, teachers stopped by to say congratulations, and the Principal gave a surprisingly exciting play-by-play description of Tanya’s victory on the afternoon announcements. Ms. Lora got chills listening to the clapping up and down the hall, thinking of Tanya smiling, and standing, in her fifth grade classroom.

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Ms. Lora noticed the school marquis as she turned the corner.

Located not one hundred feet from where her father stood while she beat that eighth grader, it read "Congrats Amigo! Home of the District Champion Speller Tanya Law."

## Chapter Twelve

### Ends of Years

**Douglas (Year Two)—Another Path for Douglas.** The meeting had begun with a big warm hug from Mrs. Rogers. Douglas had arrived with her, but Ms. Lora had asked him to wait in the library until they were finished talking. Mrs. Rogers herself had insisted that the meeting not include Douglas, but somehow Ms. Lora’s gentle suggestion to Douglas that he wait in the library felt wrong.

The mood was somber when they sat down at the table in Room 210. Mrs. Rogers sat next to Ms. Lora and the Special Education Coordinator and Principal sat across from them.

Mrs. Rogers had taken the news that Douglas would be held back in fourth grade almost as hard as Douglas had taken the news that he had failed the state exam. Even though she knew he had not passed the exam, she had convinced herself that the great strides he had made and hard work he had put in would convince the school to let him be a fifth grader. She had called Ms. Lora in tears when she got the letter.

Somehow, Mrs. Rogers’s disappointment had not, however, translated into any less admiration for Ms. Lora. In fact, it was Mrs. Rogers’s unshaken faith in Ms. Lora that had finally brought her to the table to discuss whether Douglas should be in Special Education.

On the phone, in a voice so choked up that Ms. Lora had to strain to understand her, Mrs. Rogers had virtually begged Ms. Lora for help.

“Ms. Lora, I know you did your best. And I know how good you did. If Douglas couldn’t pass that test with you being his teacher, then I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do. You’ve got to help him, Ms. Lora. Should he really be in special education?”

Ms. Lora had felt as worthless then as she felt right now. She knew that Mrs. Rogers was going to ask her in a few minutes whether she really thought Douglas should be in special education. As she had so many times before, Ms. Lora imagined Douglas with a specialist who could help him unpack his anger and who could more effectively modify his lessons to address his reading difficulties. And then, as she had so many time before, Ms. Lora imagined Douglas in the special education system at Blair, languishing without the attention he needs. There had to be another path for Douglas.

Ms. Lora just did not know what to say.

**Tanya (Year Three)—Both Hands.** Ms. Lora’s distrust of the maze of one-way streets downtown meant that they left unreasonably early. The good directions that came with the registration materials meant that Ms. Lora, Tanya, and DeShavier pulled into the ten-story parking garage over an hour before Tanya had to check in. It was Ms. Lora’s suggestion that they stop in at the pizza place to kill time.

“C’mon, it’s tradition that the coach buys the contestant and her friend pizza before a big bee,” Ms. Lora said. She had watched both Tanya and DeShavier eye the big slices of pizza but refuse to order because they didn’t have any money.

The three of them sat down at a booth, each with a giant slice of pepperoni pizza in front of them. Ms. Lora and DeShavier helped Tanya stuff about a dozen napkins into the neck of her white, button down shirt with the over-sized collar.

Ms. Lora noticed—and was a little self-conscious—that both girls watched her intently to see how to eat the pizza. She set aside her fork and picked up the sloppy slice with both hands.



"I haven't even won anything yet!" Tanya said into the cloth bag. DeShavier shoved Tanya aside and peered into the bag as well. They were both blown away by the dictionary, thesaurus, pens, pencils, and CD that came in the gift bag. Ms. Lora was blown away by the magnitude of the event.

The Houston Regional Spelling Bee was held in a huge theatre downtown. As if the red velvet curtains and gold ropes weren't enough, everywhere they turned there were television cameras. There were hundreds and hundreds of people.

"What number did you get?" Ms. Lora asked.

Tanya had put the card around her neck without looking. She studied it upside down. "Seventy-three."

"That's a good one," said DeShavier.

Ms. Lora had convinced the Principal to excuse DeShavier for the day after trying in vain, once again, to convince Tanya's father to come see her compete. Mr. Law had politely but firmly refused the invitation. He did, however, make the first explicit mention of Tanya's mother that Ms. Lora had ever heard from him. "Tanya's mother was sure a good speller," he said as he reopened his cell phone and turned back into his yard.

Ms. Lora had her hands on Tanya's shoulder as they pushed through the red doors into the theatre. Tanya and DeShavier both audibly gasped. The walls were layer after layer of beautiful red curtains, accented with more gold ropes. The ceiling was painted like an evening sky and featured a chandelier the size of Ms. Lora's classroom. The stage went on forever. Eighty chairs sat empty on risers. TV cameras were set up just in front of the stage.

"Girl, you are famous," DeShavier said breathlessly.

Ms. Lora was awe-struck too. It was an amazing setting, a stage that had hosted opera singers, heads of state, Broadway musicals, Macbeth, and now Tanya Law. Ms. Lora joined the girls in long stares at the stage, the curtains, the crowd, the cameras, and the ceiling. Ms. Lora couldn't take her eyes off the ceiling.

Tanya must have noticed Ms. Lora's rapture because she preemptively held up her hand for a mini-high-five.

Ms. Lora and DeShavier both offered Tanya great big good-luck hugs. Tanya handed her bag to DeShavier and marched purposefully to the stage.

**Roberto (Year Four)—The Explorer.** The entire room was eating pizza and laughing about the rat that ran out of the treasure chest at the beginning of the year when Ms. Lora noticed that Roberto was sitting off to himself, clearly upset, banging his fist on his desk. She slipped out of the circle of students and asked him what was wrong.

"I left your card at home," he said, tears streaking his cheeks. Partially in Spanish, Roberto explained that he had made Ms. Lora a card at school, but he had taken it home to put his picture in it. He had forgotten to bring it this morning. Now it was the last day of school and he wasn't going to be able to give it to her.

"Hey buddy," she whispered. "I'm going to be here a while after school. Do you think you could run home and get it for me after school? I won't leave before you get back."

He nodded.



It seemed like mere seconds after the final bell that Roberto came running back into the classroom. Ms. Lora was still posing for pictures with various groups of students and pizza crusts were still strewn around the room.

After saying good-bye to the other students, she went over to where he had been standing waiting by his desk. Without comment, he handed her the card.

It was made out of red construction paper that had been laminated. It said “Lora the Explorer— You’re My Best Friend” in Roberto’s boxy handwriting on the front. Inside, Roberto had taped a cross that he had made out of string and a school picture of himself that must have been at least two years old. It was tattered and torn on one edge. No smile, of course. He had written “Love, Roberto” across the bottom of the card under the picture.

Ms. Lora reached down and gave him a big hug.

“I’m so, so, so proud of you, Roberto.”

“Thank you, Miss,” he said into her shoulder.

And he walked out of Room 210 and headed home.

### **Tanya (Year Three)—Good Luck to You Too.**

“Ms. Law, you better be practicing hard next year ‘cause I have some tough fifth graders coming after you.” Ms. Lora kept a perfectly straight face, but only for a couple of seconds.

Tanya made no attempt to play the joke straight. She threw her head back and laughed, yelling “Aw Ms. Lora, no fifth grader is going to beat a sixth grader.”

Ms. Lora was thrilled that Tanya had stopped by. They had not seen much of each other since the regional meet. Tanya had misspelled “conscience” in the fifth round, ending her amazing run.

She never would have predicted it during the first few months of their relationship, but Ms. Lora was going to miss Tanya immensely.

“Well, maybe no fifth grader is going to beat *you*,” Ms. Lora said more seriously. “Good luck in middle school, Tanya.”

“Good luck to you too,” Tanya said, also in a suddenly serious voice.

Ms. Lora walked toward her for a last hug before summer vacation, but Tanya turned and ran down the hall.