

(UP)ROOTED

by

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ABSTRACT

In this project, I combine my love of creative writing with my experience as an Education student in aim of producing a compelling narrative depicting the complexities of the American bilingual education system and experiences of the diverse students therein. The narrative follows the first-year teaching experience of Jean Darling in an English Language Learner classroom in Southern Texas, incorporating the topics of immigration policy, bilingualism, multicultural student backgrounds, and relocation

Ami Harris
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Dear Ami,

It was a pleasure to meet you Saturday at lunch! The work you do for the school board is incredible, and I hope to attend more forums. Please read my enclosed story, *(Up)rooted*. I think it will appeal to your mission of publishing literature about social issues, as well as your background in education. This is the nonfiction account of my time teaching bilingual students in a Texas high school (all names changed for privacy), how the students impacted me, and how it sadly came to an abrupt end. I have incorporated footnotes throughout my narrative to explain jargon to readers who may not be aware of specific education concepts.

I currently reside here in Dallas, where I continue to teach high school and have recently taken up writing. I hope to get this story published to bring to light topics in the bilingual education system. I have no agenda other than to make sense of my year -- the stigmas my students faced, my attempt to relate to culturally and linguistically diverse students, plus all the usual anxieties of a first-year teacher thrown into the midst of teenagers. Most of all, I think I hope to keep my students with me in a way, as most of them are now living elsewhere.

Sincerely,

Jean Darling

August

A new city is thrilling until you realize just how deeply you have been uprooted. The comfort of the same grocery store, the curve of the roads, all wiped clean. The foundations of your entire existence suddenly change, creating an uneasiness that slowly becomes the new mundane. You have the sense that your entire self has metamorphosed, a chameleon taking on characteristics of the new environment.

My morning reverie on the drive to work made me think that moving to San Antonio may have been a dumb idea, but it was too late to turn back. I would teach at Rancho High School, and I would do a damn good job of it.

I pulled into the faculty parking lot and found my numbered spot: 57. Fifty-six other teachers had their routine here, their spots in the break room, their hallway banter, their usual vending machine order. I decided mine would be C7, as long as C7 happened to be peanut M&Ms.

My hands were a little shaky as I put the car in park, and I told myself it was the over-sugared coffee that probably made up half of my bloodstream by then. The same coffee in the cup that, as I stepped out of the car and grabbed my bag, slipped to the ground and splashed blonde roast all over my pants. I thought this faulty cup was grounds for a lawsuit, then laughed at my accidental coffee pun, then remembered my ankles were still soaked.

Once inside, I took off one of my ballet flats to assess damage. It was definitely soaked through, but at least it smelled like Arabica beans. I steadied myself on the nearest doorframe and worked the saturated shoe back onto my foot, cringing at the feeling. Suddenly, the door pulled open and a man walked out -- the principal, I recognized from the Skype interview before

I moved out here. He scanned me for a second, taking in the entire hot mess of me. I chewed on my lip, until his skeptical face settled into a warm smile.

“You must be Jean!” he said, holding out his hand.

“I’m afraid my hand is covered in shoe coffee, sir.” With a nervous smile, he put his hand back in his pocket.

“Oh right, yes, that’s quite okay. We’ve spoken previously, but I should officially introduce myself. I’m Dr. Keating, the principal of this fine establishment.” He regally regarded the linoleum floors and trophy cases.

Dr. Keating wore a suit with a slightly oversized jacket and had curly hair at his temples. He looked like the kind of boss who made too many jokes and desperately wanted the approval of the teachers, which I didn’t mind. I followed Dr. Keating to his office. The only light inside was from the large window, and the room smelled like old books.

As he began writing on his small whiteboard, I imagined my dad sitting behind the heavy wooden desk, rubbing his temples and pouring over records with too many numbers to ever have interested me. I can’t imagine what he would have thought of my becoming a teacher rather than an accountant or attorney. Long after he had passed away, I was too scared to wander behind that desk in fear of messing something up. Every paper was meticulously placed, and he probably would have come right out of the clouds to yell at me for disturbing it—

“Okay, Jean, what do you think?”

I snapped back to the whiteboard.

“Um ... could you explain it one more time?”

Anyone else would be annoyed by my lack of attention, but Dr. Keating seemed elated to get to explain this lesson model again.

“Okay. Two, one, los dos. That part is Spanish. How clever is that?”

I nodded, feeling like a parent waiting for their child to explain an unintelligible crayon drawing.

“The first third of class, you teach in their second language – English. The second third, you teach in their first language – Spanish. And the last part, you translanguage.¹ They’re developing both languages, *and* getting content!”

“Translanguage? Isn’t that just Spanglish?”

“Oh no, definitely not. It may appear like that to someone who doesn’t know what’s going on. But in the brain of a bilingual child, they’re simply utilizing all of their vocabulary without worrying about which named language² it belongs to. Got it, dude?”

Realizing I was the dude to whom he spoke, I nodded.

It really didn’t sound like too bad of a system, but I couldn’t match Keating’s elation even if he told me there was free sushi in the break room every day. I smiled as reassuringly as possible, hoping he didn’t mistake my low energy for disinterest. After I understood enough of 2-1-LD³, Dr. Keating sent me off to my classroom to set up. The whole lesson model was easy in theory, but there was no way he should be trusting me with actually applying it to high schoolers’ intellectual growth and wellbeing. I could barely match my socks each morning.

¹ Translanguaging, or Spanglish to common folk, is far more than it seems. This is the practice of speaking in one’s entire vocabulary, even if said vocabulary is in multiple languages. Puede paracer confusing, pero it can really help students learn. The more words they are able to use (whether in Spanish or English or Chinese), the more content they can learn to build their understanding. Entiendes?

² Named language is just the super enlightened way of saying an idiolect which we prescribe to a single geographical region or nation. Your idiolect, or collection of words in your vocabulary, may transcend a single named language. This is where a common negative view of English Language Learners comes from: many say they are not “good” at either of their two languages, but their overall vocabulary between the two (or more) languages likely exceeds that of many native English speakers.

³ Developed by Professor Steve Daniel Przymus

On the way to my classroom, I looked diligently over the notes Dr. Keating had given me. How would I apply this to every subject in my classroom? Did I need to order Spanish versions of every novel as well? Was my own Spanish even good enough for this?

“Ain’t that a look?”

I snapped up from my papers to see a short woman in a polka-dot blouse. She had short hair that flipped out just under her ears, and she smiled at me like we shared an age-old inside joke, so I smiled too.

“Trust me, honey, we have all been there,” she continued, glancing at my coffee-stained pants. “First day?”

I nodded quickly and stuck out my hand.

“I’m Jean – Jean Darling. I’m the new ELL⁴ teacher?”

She shook my hand and, although I had to look down to meet her eyes, her grip was far tighter than my own.

“I’m Laura Abaroa. I’m a not-new English Language Arts teacher.”

Mrs. Abaroa scrunched her nose when she smiled, as if she had a secret she wanted both of us to be excited about, but wouldn’t let me in on.

One coworker befriended, 55 others to go.

“Now, those pants are just not going to work. Follow me.”

Without waiting to see if I would protest, Mrs. Abaroa spun on her heels and marched down the hall. I stood dazed for a moment before speeding after her, one shoe sloshing with

⁴ ELL stands for English Language Learner (widely replacing the term ESL). Representation in separated ELL classrooms varies by school district, but is often incorrect. Many Emergent Bilingual students do not receive the support they need, and many students who have been speaking English for years are placed in separate ELL programs.

every step. We entered a classroom at the end of the hall. There were big black tables down the center, sinks on every wall, and shelves of glass containers of every shape.

“Brian, we have a first day problem,” Mrs. Abaroa said as she approached the desk at the back of the room.

“What did you set on fire now, Laura?” retorted a plump man in a track suit, peeking over a newspaper. He wore small glasses perched at the end of his nose and rested his white tennis shoes on the desk, reclining so far back I thought his office chair would tumble any minute.

“Oh, hush. Be on your best behavior for our newest hire.”

Brian noticed me for the first time now and immediately took his feet off his desk.

“Don’t mind me; I’m the resident grump. And what will you be teaching, miss...?”

“Jean Darling. I was hired for the new ELL program.”

“*And*, she can’t hold a coffee cup,” Laura added. “So we came to get some warmups that she can wear to setup her classroom today.”

“Of course. Go ahead and raid the closet.”

Brian turned to face me.

“I’m glad they’re changing things up with the ELL program around here.”

“What was it like before?”

“The only reason we had a program was to follow the law, but we had no qualified teachers. Those poor kids sat in a classroom all day without learning a bit of English *or* content.”

“Well, I hope that can change this year.”

Laura emerged from the closet triumphantly holding the most revolting pair of green sweatpants I had ever seen. What else did I expect the track coach to have in his supply closet? At least students wouldn't be here until tomorrow.

I spent the rest of the day hanging decorations in my room and rearranging desks, trying to ignore the *swoosh* of the sweatpants with every step I took. With today's fashion atrocity, the first day of classes could only get better.

For about the 50th time that morning, I straightened the pristine rows of desks in my classroom, because I noticed one was a quarter of an inch farther to the left, then returned to my desk to assess my work.

Now it was too far right.

I sighed and marched back over to the desk in question.

Suddenly, into my room burst a lone adolescent, clutching his books, hood up. In Texas. In August. He found his way to a desk and slid into the chair quietly. *Crap*, I thought. *Should I have made a seating chart? Is that what the good teachers do? Or will they think I'm cooler if I let them choose where to sit? Or will they just get distracted? Or will they be grateful that I treat them like adults in a world that otherwise treats them like highly educated cattle?* It was too late now anyway, so I had to stick with my decision to give them freedom.

The kid with the hood had wisely chosen the far side of the room, about halfway back. Not close enough to the front to appear eager, but not too far back to hear the teacher. With fifteen minutes left until the first bell, I realized I should talk to him.

"Hey there, buddy!"

Seriously? Buddy? Now that's starting off on an awkward foot.

I held my breath waiting for his response. The boy looked up suddenly and removed his hood, revealing a pair of earbuds.

“What was that?”

He hadn’t heard me. I had a chance to redeem myself for “buddy.”

“Oh, I was just saying good morning, man.”

Man? Not much better than buddy, but I’ll take it.

“What’s your name?”

“Alejandro.”

“Welcome to class, Alejandro. Are you excited for the first day of school?”

“I guess.”

“You guess?”

“I’m happy we got a new teacher. That way I could get into the normal classes soon.”

Alejandro didn’t seem LEP⁵. I was surprised he was even in my class, but maybe his Spanish was more developed.

“En cual año de escuela esta?”

“Miss, I speak English. And I’m a sophomore.”

“Oh, I know. I thought maybe you’d be more comfortable with Spanish conversation.”

“I mean, my parents talk to me in Spanish. I usually respond in English though.”

“Got it. English.”

“You don’t gotta be nervous.”

“What?”

⁵ LEP = Limited English Proficient. The term we education professionals like to stick on students who don’t live up to our standard of knowing English. Too often, this means sticking them in a separate classroom or pulling them out of class part-time until they can pass a test.

Alejandro looked down, and I realized I had been tapping my foot since I began talking to him. *Don't start an earthquake.*

“Oh, I guess I am a little nervous. I’ve never been a teacher before.”

“You’re nice, so you’re already better than half the teachers I’ve had.”

I couldn’t help but smile at his reassurance. The bell rang for students to start filing into class, and I took my place at the front of the room, stopped fidgeting, and stood with both feet forward.

October

“Alright guys, it’s test time.”

I walked around the room quietly, the swoosh of my sweatpants from my first day replaced by the rhythmic clicking of heels on the linoleum.

“Someone remind me of our test strategies.”

Estella’s hand shot up.

“Process of emanation.”

“That’s elimination, Estella. Elimination. But yes, excellent.” I jotted down the words on the whiteboard.

“Keep track of time,” called out Jacqueline.

“Perfect.”

I continued until we had a short list of strategies – the extent of love and support I would be able to send with them into standardized testing. The real TELPAS⁶ test would take place in the spring, but I needed to prepare them for the kinds of questions they’d be asked and quell some test anxiety now. As I began passing out the stack of practice tests, I felt the floor shake rhythmically and looked around for the source. At his desk, Alejandro was bouncing his leg up and down nervously, and his hands were pressed against his cheeks. I continued making my way up and down the rows of desks, keeping an eye on him to make sure he didn’t implode.

⁶ TELPAS stands for Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System. A summative assessment is administered in the spring, and it measures listening, speaking, reading, and writing of students who are deemed “limited English proficient.” I enjoy administering the test about as much as students enjoy taking it, but my worth as a teacher is determined by how well my students perform.

By the time every student had a practice test, Alejandro had not snapped out of his nervous trance. I walked over and crouched in front of his desk to break his line of sight. Still nothing.

“Hey man,” I said, forcing my voice to be as calming as possible.

Finally, he looked at me.

“Yes, Miss?”

“Ya know, people can’t bubble in their answers very well if you’re causing a small earthquake.”

“Oh.” He suddenly became aware of his leg and brought it to a halt.

“What’s making you so nervous?”

“I don’t know, Miss. I just gotta do good.”

I waited a second for him to catch it.

“Well,” he corrected. “I gotta do well.”

“You’re going to be fine. This is just to help me teach you better.” *And to keep my job, but I don’t need to tell you that and freak you out even more. You’d think being defined by tests ended when you graduated.*

He seemed unfazed. I leaned in a little closer toward Alejandro, making sure I looked very conspiratorial.

“What if I told you I had something that would help you?”

“I’m already on Ritalin...”

“No! Oh gosh, no. Don’t you dare tell anyone I tried to give you drugs. I have something better than drugs.”

He raised an eyebrow as I walked to my desk and retrieved a small llama. It had colorful woven fabric across its back, and a little loop of string where you could hang it on a Christmas tree. I had just gotten it on vacation last summer, but now the trinket needed to realize its true identity.

“Here. This is the Lucky Llama. No student has ever held him in their hand during a test and failed.” *That’s not a lie.*

Alejandro rolled his eyes.

“Miss, I thought you meant something real.”

I feigned offense. “The Lucky Llama does not deserve such hate! This method is tried and true!” *That’s a lie.*

At my dramatic response, he chuckled quietly and grabbed the llama from my hand.

“Alright, alright, I guess I’ll take it. If I fail, it’s on you though.”

That was also not a lie.

I patted the llama’s head and left it on his desk.

Halfway through the test, I looked up to see Alejandro’s hand gripping the Lucky Llama tightly. He chewed his lip nervously, but at least his leg was stationary and he was bubbling in answers.

At the end of the day, the classroom was typically a scene of apocalyptic-scale interruption -- stray papers scattered on desks, chip bags and stray notes, books left haphazardly on the shelf. If someone were to fall asleep and wake up in my classroom at 3:30, they would believe themselves the last person on earth. Grading worksheets in the afternoons, I often

questioned whether other people existed -- and sometimes, I was abruptly reminded of others' existence.

I was pulled out of my grading trance as my phone rang one afternoon. After frantically moving every paper and book on my desk, I finally located from where the vibrating was coming. I was excited to see the name "Mom" on the screen.

"Hey, what's up Mom?"

"Oh, I just wanted to check in. I haven't talked to you in a while."

"It's nice to hear from you. How's work?"

"Good. It's good."

"That's good."

I could tell she wasn't saying something. If she had no reason to call, she would be chatting endlessly; it was only when she had too many words to say that she was quiet.

"What is it, Mom?"

"I put the house up for sale."

Yeah, I could've lived without those words.

"You *what*?"

"It just doesn't make sense to keep anymore, with one income. And it's so big for just me."

"No, that makes sense. I just didn't see that coming."

I pictured a big white "for sale" sign in our little green lawn. The last time I saw one, Dad was pushing me up the driveway on a dolly while mom laughed at us over the stack of boxes in her arms. Then, out of my nostalgia came a spark of hope: Mom carrying boxes up my driveway

here, settling into the extra bedroom, us cooking dinner together. The best parts of my childhood could combine with the best parts of my life here.

“So, are you staying in California? Or I mean, you could move here if you wanted.”

“I’m not sure. This is the place I know, and it’s where I have my job. I don’t see a reason to move so far.”

“You don’t see a single reason?”

Me. I should be a reason.

“It just doesn’t make sense.”

Then again, she should have been a reason for me not to move.

“Okay, well, I need to go finish grading. I’ll talk to you later, Mom.”

“Sounds good. Have a good day.”

“You too.”

After we hung up, I buried my head in my arms. Not only was I disappointing enough to move states away from my widowed mother, but now I couldn’t even keep up a simple conversation on the phone. *Daughter of the year, Jean.* I grabbed my stack of half-graded worksheets and tossed them across the room. As they fanned out across the carpet, I saw an endless procession of filled-in words and circled letters. I grabbed the papers and began jogging down the hall.

More tired than I should have been for the distance I ran, I burst into Laura’s classroom, marched to her desk, and threw my stack of papers in front of her. She looked at me over the top of her reading glasses, but did not seem at all surprised by my sudden outburst.

“I see you’ve been grading as well.”

“It’s all wrong!” I did not use my inside voice.

“What’s wrong? Their answers?”

Mom selling the house. Mom not moving here. Me moving here just to make teenagers circle correct answers.

“No, my questions!”

“Honey, that sounds like a personal problem -- and not one worth giving me paper cuts over.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to endanger you.” I gathered my papers. “The questions are fine, but I don’t want to just be asking questions. I want to give them something they care about.”

Laura took the papers from my hand and dropped them in the trashcan.

“Then let’s get creative. Let me show you some things.”

She led me to a wall at the back of her room lined with picture frames of all shapes and sizes. Inside every one of them hung students’ work -- not a single circled letter or filled-in blank. Some were creative writing or essays, some were poems, and even others were drawings.

“How do I do stuff like this in an ELL classroom? There are tests they need to pass, and the tests look nothing like this.”

“Worksheets aren’t the devil. Just mix it up with other things too. Teach them to love the language. If they can communicate their ideas effectively in English, the multiple-choice answers will follow.”

“How do I teach them to love it?”

“Meaningful language⁷. They’re surrounded by ways to learn without even noticing.”

⁷ Meaningful language -- surprise -- is language that is meaningful to students. Theories say that using a language in the context of using it *for something* (rather than just for the sake of memorizing it) improves acquisition. For example, practicing grammar in Mandarin will not help me learn the language as well as if I were to write this story in Mandarin. Sorry to disappoint, but my Mandarin translation will not be coming soon.

“What if I can’t think of anything creative?”

“I have just the thing.”

Laura cracked open the storage cabinet on her wall and reached in slowly. She fished around a bit, reaching until her whole arm was hidden. I leaned forward, eager to see what miraculous fix she had for me.

“Ah, here.”

She pulled her arm out of the cabinet, and *bang*. Laura’s palm hit me square in the forehead like a V8 commercial.

“Stop making it so complicated. If you’re excited about it, they’ll be excited about it.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Now, what’s actually bothering you?”

Then I told Laura all the things I couldn’t say to my mom on the phone.

Thanks to Laura’s swift palm to the forehead, I came back on Monday with the motivation of a gym-goer in early January. As usual, my day began with the age-old question:

“Miss, what are we doing today?”

And today, I answered differently:

“We’re going outside.”

The classroom immediately erupted into cheers as my students jumped from their seats.

“Okay, hold on for one second. I still need to explain what we’re doing outside.”

They composed themselves just enough to listen.

“The athletics teams all have practice during this period, so we’re going to do some journalistic investigating. I want you all to choose a team, and the coaches have agreed to let you

come to their practices today. You will write a feature on the team: describe the practice, the work they do, and interview players and coaches as well. They might even be featured in the school newspaper. Sound good?"

Twenty-three nods in response.

"Awesome. Let's go!"

In order to relive my own glory days, I joined Estella and Michelle with the cheer team. The girls sat on the bleachers, diligently taking notes as the team practiced stunts. Watching the flyer reach greater heights with every basket toss, I realized why my mom always looked so nervous from the bleachers. As exhilarating as it was to be the one falling into your teammates' arms, it was far worse to *watch* the person falling.

"Miss, how do they throw each other in the air like that?"

"It takes a lot of practice. I used to do that in high school too."

Estella and Michelle looked at one another in disbelief.

"No way. You're just so old now."

"You're right. Twenty-three is *so* old," I said, clutching my back. "My joints hurt. My vision is bad. Who am I even talking to? Is that you, Enrique?"

I squinted dramatically as both girls laughed.

"You guys keep writing, and I'm going to check on the ones outside."

Several boys were passing a soccer ball on the side of the field, penning notes between each pass, and another group was sitting on the hill watching as the track team practiced hurdles. Brian, who had been timing the kids on his team, made his way to where I was standing.

“Recruiting your kids for athletics? We aren’t even in-season yet, but I’ll gladly put them to work.”

“Actually, this is for class.”

“Class outside? *Definitely* an improvement to the ELL program. I could’ve used more of that when I was in high school.”

“Me, too. I’m glad your kids are interacting with them as well.”

We both looked over at the track team taking their water break. They were all crowded around talking, along with four of my students. I couldn’t tell what they were saying, but if I didn’t know better, I would assume they were all in the same class.

“They accept one another as much as we allow them to,” Brian said.

By the end of the day, I had twenty-three features on my desk detailing, in greatly improved English, every sport at Rancho High School. After sneakily getting them to interact with students in general education classes through the interviews, I was basically in the running for Teacher of the Universe award. I left the stack of papers in the newspaper teacher’s mailbox as I went home for the day.

November

Thursday morning before school started, I heard a quick knock on my open classroom door as Dr. Keating walked in, drawing me out of my essay-grading trance.

“Good morning, Miss Darling. May I please speak to you for a quick second?”

“Sure! What’s going on?”

He glanced around my classroom at the few students doing last-minute homework or sleeping on desks.

“Would you mind coming to my office actually?”

This was not a normal Dr. Keating visit.

“Of course,” I said, my pulse beginning to speed up, and followed him out of the room.

I did something wrong. I must have screwed up unknowingly, ruined a student beyond saving or angered a parent or produced catastrophic test scores and now I was finally being fired. After the grueling one-minute walk down the hall, we got to Keating’s office. He folded his hands on-top of his big desk and tried to start speaking a few times, but seemed to change his mind. Finally, he found words.

“Miss Darling, was Estella in class yesterday?”

“Yes ... why?”

“Did she seem upset about anything?”

“Not really. She was outspoken as usual, but nothing out of the ordinary.”

I suddenly thought back to yesterday’s class and everything Estella had said. Had I been insensitive and missed something? She had disagreed with everything the other students said during our *House on Mango Street* discussion, but she always thrived on disagreeing.

“Well, Tuesday night her parents were arrested by immigration officers. Estella came home from her after-school job to find them gone.”

My hand covered my mouth as if to hold in the breath. “And she came to school the next day?”

“As if nothing had happened. She didn’t know what else to do.”

“Well where is she now? She’s a citizen, right?”

“She can’t stay here alone. Her parents are being deported back to Mexico, so she’ll move with them.”

I felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer right to my chest, collapsing it from the inside out, and my heart was either beating faster than ever or had completely stopped. She would have to start over now, just like I did in August -- and that was my choice. How much harder would it be when someone else was making that choice for you? Estella would be uprooted, unanchored, collateral damage in a war that was not her own.

“Can’t we do anything?” I was frantic now.

“I’m sorry Miss Darling. It’s out of our hands.”

“Well, maybe you aren’t trying hard enough.”

“You know that isn’t true.”

I became more restless with every word exchanged. Dr. Keating, a completely reasonable and compassionate person, was being anything *but* reasonable or compassionate.

“She was *our* student. We can’t just let her go.”

“Yes, and it is extremely sad to have her leave. However, we still have hundreds of students in our building that need us to focus on them. They deserve that. Let’s focus on what’s still in our hands rather than what’s out of them.”

I stood up to leave the office, not sure what else to say.

“Oh, and Miss Darling--”

I turned around on my heels.

“I think it’s safe to say this won’t be the last situation of the sort that we’ll be encountering this year. The president is terminating Temporary Protected Status for many of our students’ families. They weren’t kidding in college when they said it takes a strong person to teach. Just be ready.”⁸

I couldn’t get out of that office fast enough. How could Dr. Keating just let this happen without even trying to fight it? Had years of being a principal made him apathetic? My cheeks burned as I rushed back to my classroom and I wanted nothing more than to go home and give up. Dr. Keating’s warning about more deportations pushed everything else out of my mind until it was the only thing left. But I still had twenty-three other students that were very much present and very much expecting a teacher. I helped them with essay revisions and tried not to get too distracted by the empty seat at the front of the room.

By the time the weather caught up with Alejandro’s hoodie addiction, he had made himself a regular in my pre-8 a.m. classroom. He looked gloomily out of place amidst my warmly colored Thanksgiving décor. Beyond our initial conversation on the first day of school, he didn’t seem very interested in interacting with me. I wasn’t sure he spoke to *anyone* at the school, for that matter.

“Hey man,” Enrique strutted into the classroom saying. “Where have you been?”

⁸ Temporary Protected Status has been granted to individuals from various countries in precarious situations (war, natural disaster, etc.) for individuals to temporarily work and live in the United States. Multiple presidents have renewed this status for decades, but throughout 2019, TPS for over 400,000 individuals may be terminated.

“I had to finish homework again.”

I had never once seen Alejandro doing homework in the mornings. In fact, he always turned in his homework for my class days in advance.

“How did you not finish? Homework isn’t that hard when they put us in the dumb class.”

“I’m sorry Enrique,” I cut in. “Are my assignments not challenging enough?”

“Oh, no, Miss,” he said, his cheeks turning red either from embarrassment or from the cooler weather. “It’s not you; it’s me. I am just way too genius for this work.”

“Mhmm.”

“Really! We love your homework. We meet up every morning just to talk about how much we love writing essays for your class.”

“Thank you, Enrique, for enriching our learning environment by being so full of crap.”

“My pleasure.” He laughed as he slid into his seat.

Later, as the students filed out of the door for lunch, Alejandro was still putting books in his backpack.

“How are you doing this week?”

“Good, Miss.”

“Nothing’s wrong?”

“No, everything’s good.”

“Alright. Now, go get some lunch. I heard it’s pizza day.”

“Thanks, Miss.”

He walked out of the classroom with his hands in his pockets, and I soon walked over to Laura’s room with my lunch.

“Alright, why don’t my students like me?” I said more dramatically than intended as I entered.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t expecting Miss Drama Queen today. What is this all about?”

Laura pulled a sandwich out of her lunch bag as I marched into her classroom.

“Alejandro only says 5 words to me, tops. I try to help him as much as I can, but he really doesn’t seem to want it.”

“Honey, you’ve got to remember what teenagers are like.”

“What?”

“Did you ever want adult attention in high school?”

I thought back to the days of rushing through the hallways unseen. Any adult attention meant attention from everyone else as well, which was more than 16-year-old Jean could handle. Quietly slipping into classes and not causing trouble meant no one was putting me under a magnifying glass. Now, I was in a profession that involved having attention on me constantly, so maybe Alejandro would grow out of it too.

“Just keep doing what you’re doing, and don’t take it personally if he isn’t enthusiastic in response. He knows you care.”

I let out a deep sigh. “I spent so long studying teaching methods that I forgot what living, breathing teenagers are like.”

When the class came back from lunch that afternoon, I decided to try talking to my students without an expectation of reciprocation. No matter how they responded, I would not assume they hated me.

“How was lunch, guys?”

Then, nothing short of a miracle occurred: among the general mumble of neutral responses, Alejandro removed one earbud and said, “It was pizza day.”

For the first time in my nervously talkative life, four words felt like enough.

December

“I have good news, and I have bad news. Which do you want to hear first?”

The whole class chimed in favor of the good news. *I have so much to teach them.*

Everyone knows you always ask for the bad first.

“The good news is, we are having a Christmas party the day before break starts.”

Enrique’s hand shot up.

“Will there be pizza?”

Ah, to have the concerns of a 15-year-old.

“Never-ending pizza, I can assure you.”

The morale in the room immediately improved, and I dreaded the fact that I would have to destroy it yet again.

“The bad news is, we have to take another TELPAS practice test on Thursday.”

A collective sigh came from the class like a bike tire suddenly losing air.

“Miss, that isn’t fair! That’s more tests than we were supposed to take!”

“I know. It isn’t fair, but that’s what the district wants in order to prepare you for the real test. I don’t want to give you an extra test any more than you want to take it.”

“Then why don’t you stop it? You could just not give it to us.”

“Because I know this isn’t something I am able to change. Sometimes it’s better to focus on the things you *can* change.”

I suddenly paused, Dr. Keating’s words echoing in my head.

“Let’s focus on what’s still in our hands rather than what’s out of them.”

And then I understood him. Realizing I still had twenty-three students staring at me, I continued.

“And in this case, I can only change how well I prepare you for the test. Because of that, we are using some meaningful English today.”

This would have been the perfect moment to have all of them rip up textbooks and start calling me “Oh Captain, My Captain!” but let’s face it: that’s a waste of paper and I much prefer being called “Miss.”

“What are we doing?”

“Just studying,” I said as I pulled a plastic gavel out of my bag.

“Are you going to hit us?” Enrique gasped.

“Only kids who are out of order in my courtroom.”

He gave me a startled look as the room became quiet.

“Thank you. Now, I have officially hired you all as district attorneys, and you have a very important case that you might want to look at. This half of the room must defend the case, and this half must refute it. Your client is the TELPAS assessment.”

I was met with groans.

“Would you rather question the validity of the test, or study with flashcards??

No more groans.

“That’s what I thought.”

I wrote the specific requirements of their arguments on the whiteboard and set a timer. My classroom instantly became a clamorous law firm, full of lively young attorneys scanning documents, asking questions, and taking notes. I walked around, listening to my usually-quiet 8 a.m. class.

“Look -- this website talks about the test,” Diego pointed to his laptop.

“That’s a blog, stupid. We can’t use that! Hurry and find a good site.”

The time limit was clearly motivating them. I hadn't seen any of my students this worked up since Dr. Keating had promised free lunch to the students with the ten highest Lexile scores⁹. As I stood and sipped from my mug, I finally understood the meaning of method in the madness. Anyone who walked past would probably think I was just letting my students govern themselves, but I was completely sure they would come through. It was vastly different from the pin-drop silence and resistance to discussion that permeated the room in August. After some time, I banged the gavel and the clamor died down.

"Alright, who's ready to share?"

"Miss, just five more minutes *please*," begged Enrique.

"Extension granted."

After five more minutes, the students returned to their seats, still scouring their notes. We flipped a coin to determine who would present their opening statement first; the anti-test group was up.

"Miss, we have a lot of reasons why the TELPAS should be reviewed," Paola began.

"Can one of our vocab words fit in that statement?"

She whispered to her group before turning back to me.

"Ample. We have ample reasons, and we plan to prove why we should not have to take the test. It is bad for students, teachers, and the school."

The other half of the class clapped in half-hearted support for their opponents, and sent Enrique up carrying his notebook.

⁹ Lexile is a measure of students' reading abilities and helps determine which level of texts are appropriate for students at different ability levels to read. Michelle was my one student that ended up having one of the top scores, but everyone in my class jumped significant points within that timeframe. They're about as motivated by food as I am.

“Miss, I didn’t wanna take the test this morning, but after our diligent research -- that’s a vocab word, so make sure I get points for that -- after diligent research, we plan to defend the TELPAS test as a good measure of learning. It ain’t so bad.”

“Thank you to both sides for your statements. Plaintiff, you’re up.”

Diego came to the front now as his team looked on nervously.

“First, I wanna point out that the test causes stress for students. Most of us have sports or jobs after school, and homework, and studying adds extra stress and makes our parents mad at us if we get a bad score. Second, the test isn’t good for you either. You could do fun stuff like this every day, but you gotta make us do practice tests and teach us test strategies. I don’t think that’s very good for you. Third, if we don’t do good enough, that’s not good for the school. It makes Dr. Keating look bad or get in trouble, and we like Dr. Keating so he shouldn’t get judged on our test scores.”

He pretended to drop a microphone as he walked back to his seat, and Alejandro came up, his teammates quietly cheering him on.

“Defendant, you may present your argument.”

“My opponent made many okay points, but we have more to say. First, the school needs to be able to see if we are getting better at English. If we didn’t take the test, they couldn’t really tell. Second, it isn’t that bad for your teaching. You teach us testing stuff, but we do still get to do fun stuff too, which I think is good. Also, the TELPAS tests reading, speaking, writing, and listening, so that’s pretty fair. We aren’t graded on only one thing. I really don’t like tests, but I think the TELPAS is worth it to keep us on track because we can’t just get rid of tests.”

Alejandro’s team cheered as he returned to his desk triumphantly. I gave each team an opportunity for counterargument before concluding the debate.

“Now, I would like you all to evaluate your teammates as well as your opponent. Complete this form with how well you think your team contributed to the work, and write what you think the strongest point of the other team’s argument was.”

They all sped to complete the evaluations, eager for me to reveal the winner of the debate. After collecting the papers, I made sure to draw out the suspense as long as possible. A teacher needs to have a little fun, too. The room was completely silent, and they sat at the edge of their seats.

“After much deliberation, Judge Darling has made a decision. Based on the number of assertions made, vocabulary words employed, and credible sources included in their arguments, the team that came out on top was the defendant of the TELPAS.”

The left side of the room immediately jumped out of their seats and cheered, as if they’d just been awarded free cars. They high-fived one another, then filed out as the lunch bell rang. I looked out at a sea of crooked desks, and for the first time didn’t compulsively fix them. It was just evidence that my students had fully engaged in the lesson. I would end up straightening up at the end of the day, but for now it could wait.

“Good morning!” I sang in a voice that even annoyed myself.

As twenty-three sleepy students slid into their seats, I bounced with energy at the front of the room. It was not the buzzing fluorescent lights that excited me so, nor was it the gray sleet falling on the windows.

“I have a surprise for you all,” I announced, stepping aside to reveal a lurking shape on my desk. A plain bedsheet was draped over a jagged shape, appearing roughly like a three-foot mountain. “Drumroll please.”

My kids rhythmically tapped their desks as I grabbed hold of the sheet and quickly pulled it up, revealing a marvelous little Christmas tree.

“Alejandro, I believe you have something to add to our new classroom foliage.”

His eyes lit up with recognition as he reached into his backpack. He walked up to the tree and carefully inspected for the perfect spot before hanging up Lucky Llama.

“Lucky Llama could use some friends, so I want each of you to bring something to hang on the tree that represents you in some way. It can be as creative as you want.”

Michelle raised her hand.

“Isn’t that kind of childish, Miss?”

“Well, yes, but that doesn’t mean you can’t still enjoy it when you’re older. If that were the case, I would contribute a lot less money to the mac-and-cheese industry.”

“That is a good point.”

“Any other questions? Alejandro?”

“Can I bring an ornament for Estella too?”

After three months, the empty desk at the back of the classroom had become part of the landscape. I no longer expected Estella’s laughter or raised hand in its space, and I suddenly felt guilty for letting her absence become the norm.

“Oh, yes. Of course. I think that is a great idea, Alejandro. Thank you.”

They still noticed the empty desk.

February

The microwave beeped incessantly, cutting Laura off from her lively story about her students' comments on the Greek mythology unit. After retrieving my leftovers and silencing the microwave at last, I joined her and Brian at the table in her classroom.

"How is that new lesson model going?" Laura said as she mixed her salad.

"I'm really starting to like it. Some kids speak up more in Spanish, others in English. It gives them all an opportunity to comfortably participate."

"Maybe I need some of that translanguaging to rub off in my classroom. Discussions in an English class are like pulling teeth."

"Who knows? Maybe Dr. Keating will want to implement it in Gen Ed¹⁰ classes next. He *has* been observing a lot."

"Dios mio," she exclaimed. "En ese caso, necesito practica mi español."

"Practicar," I corrected.

"See? My point exactly!" We both laughed.

As usual, Brian sported his dark green track suit and leaned back in his chair.

"How is the track team?" I asked.

"We suck, but we have fun doing it."

"Hey, that's all that matters."

"No, winning matters. But I'm just here for the stipend, so I win either way."

"Hush," Laura cut in. "If anyone tried to stop you from coaching, you'd throw a fit."

"Maybe, but don't let the kids know I like 'em."

¹⁰ Gen Ed = General Education, i.e. not ELL classes. Sometimes teachers use cool lingo too. Just let us have this.

My phone buzzed in the chair next to me, displaying a text from my mom. Not wanting to stress about the house situation, I turned the phone off.

“Well, Jean’s students know she likes them,” Laura said, pulling me away from a text she hadn’t even seen.

“That’s only because I bug them constantly.”

“They don’t know which hard decisions you had to make to be here with them, but they can tell you care.”

My throat tightened.

“I don’t know if hard decisions are always right ones.”

“They aren’t. This one is. Other people would agree. Isn’t that right, Brian?”

Brian, who had been nodding off, brought his attention back to our conversation.

“What’s that? Sure, I agree with whatever it is.”

I wondered if anyone outside of the classroom would agree.

One time each week, the sun angles through my window, and the birds’ squawking outside becomes angelic singing. All I need is a Beach Boys song playing in the background as I hop out of bed and tap dance my way down the hall. Once a week, I am released from the manacles of makeup and hair brush, no longer behind the bars of business casual. This day is Saturday. Nothing could go wrong in Saturday Jean’s world. My one contingency is that I do not encounter anyone I know on my sacred day.

This particular Saturday, I opted to let myself wander the aisles of Target uninhibited by a shopping list, then went to lunch. As I walked in the doors of the burger joint, met by the hospitable scent of French fries, I glanced around the restaurant. At a table in the corner sat two

very familiar slouched figures -- Enrique and Alejandro. Two skateboards were leaned against their chairs, and both boys were laughing. Alejandro, typically reserved in class, was blowing straw wrappers across the restaurant. I had a split-second to decide whether I would engage or quickly retreat.

“Hey guys, what’s up?”

They looked up, slightly surprised.

“Miss! I didn’t recognize you. You look--”

“Be careful how you finish that sentence, Enrique.”

He thought for a moment.

“Young. You look like a teenager.”

Alejandro kicked him under the table.

“Dude, that’s not a compliment.”

“Chill. My mom always wants to be called joven.”

“I don’t think you look young,” Enrique said. “I think you look tired.”

Oh, the honesty of teenagers.

“A little tip: tired is *definitely* not a compliment. Young would be a compliment if it didn’t mean I look twelve. Next time, options include, but are not limited to, thin, refreshed, or smart.”

“Those are good ideas, Miss. Very smart.”

“I’ve trained you so well.”

Through the window by the booth, we saw a minivan pull up. The woman inside had dark hair pulled back in a bun, and she waved a thin arm enthusiastically out the window. Alejandro’s eyes widened when he noticed her, and he dismissed her with a wave of his arm.

“That’s my mom to pick us up. We have to go before she starts playing her music really loud.”

“Alright, tell her she looks muy joven for me.”

Alejandro and Enrique grabbed their skateboards and hopped into the back of the van. Alejandro’s mom smiled politely at me as they drove away, and I remembered being in the front seat of my mom’s car, slouching down at red lights as she dramatically danced to ABBA songs. I wondered how many people appreciated her dance moves and polite smile as I begged her to “just be normal.” I made a mental note to thank her for failing to be.

March

I slammed my palm down on my alarm clock as it incessantly drilled into my consciousness on Monday morning. Immediately, roaring static came out of the speakers, along with the muffled voice of a newscaster.

“ICE continues to crack down on small towns across the United States. This morning, officials raided another workplace”

After fumbling around for the lamp, I finally turned the clock off. I shuffled into the bathroom and washed my face. It didn't help. I spent the morning on autopilot, everything a blur of eyeliner and slacks and car keys.

I walked into my classroom and immediately collapsed into my chair. The PA system came on, as unwelcome as my alarm clock had been.

“Teachers, please report to the auditorium,” said the secretary in a high-strung voice. “Immediately, please.”

An all-faculty meeting before school couldn't be good, especially considering how nervous the announcement sounded. A million possibilities ran through my head, including every worst-case scenario -- none of which compared to what met me in the auditorium.

I walked into a room full of teachers with all the same questions as me. Buses of students would be here any minute, and no one knew how whatever we were about to hear might affect them. I found a seat next to Laura and tried not to add to the nervous energy of the room. After a few minutes of chatter, Dr. Keating came in. His hair was messier than usual and he looked around the auditorium frantically, unsure where to focus. The room grew quiet.

“Good morning, teachers,” he said hesitantly, as if he were suddenly unsure whether we were actually his teachers or spies who had replaced the entire faculty overnight. “I received a call this morning from one of the students’ parents. There has been an ICE raid at a store in town. I’m not sure how many parents were taken, but it’s not looking good.”

Not looking good. As if it were the score of a youth soccer game and his four-year-old had just kicked the ball in the wrong goal. Then again, no words could sufficiently carry the weight of the news Dr. Keating had delivered.

Suddenly, I flashed back to my alarm clock and the man on the radio. He was talking about the raid that had happened less than an hour before I woke up. Before I had even brushed my hair that morning, many of my students’ lives were altered completely.

“Do the students know about it?” someone asked.

“Some, I’m sure. The parents who were taken didn’t have a chance to call, and one of the few at the store who was documented called me right after it happened. That’s the problem: our school is about to be filled with teenagers, many of whose parents are gone without their knowledge. Ms. Darling, your class will be most affected.”

By the time the students got to class, word -- and panic -- had spread. None of my textbooks in college explained how to console students when you needed consoling yourself, or how to teach a class when all you want to do is have a crying party. It seemed the only way was to just do it.

“I know you guys have a lot of questions. I do too.”

Not a bad start.

“Yes, Michelle?”

“Are my parents gone?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know.”

I was met with 23 concerned faces, at least 17 teary eyes, and 6 audible gasps. I sat down on the table at the front of the room and took a deep breath.

“Listen, I know as much about this morning as you all do. And I don’t know what you’ll be going home to. But I’m not leaving it on your shoulders.”

“What can you do about it? No offense, Miss, but you’re just a teacher.”

“You’re right. But none of you are going to be left at an empty house tonight. I think I have a plan.”

I immediately called Dr. Keating to frantically pitch my idea.

“I know you’re probably going to say no, but this time we *have* to help. We can’t stand by while these students’ lives crumble around them, just like--”

I cut myself off before saying her name, but Estella’s name hung in the air like a forgotten party balloon drifting to the rafters. I bit my lip in fear that I had said too much and offended Dr. Keating.

All he said was, “I know. I’ll set it up.”

The rest of the morning, not much work got done. We all waited in anxious silence, tapping pens or breathing deeply, unable to focus on the mundane. When the lunch bell rang, I noticed a timid figure at the edge of my desk.

“What’s up, Michelle?”

“Miss, why do you want to help us?” she asked without looking up from the ground.

“What do you mean?”

“Your family is from here, so it doesn’t really matter for you.”

“Well, I won’t ever understand what it’s like to be you, but that doesn’t mean I can’t care about your situation. It’s something all teachers should do. Plus, can I tell you something, Michelle?”

She finally looked up from her shoes expectantly.

“My mom is kind of far away. No one took her away, but I do know what it’s like not to be able to see her. I don’t want that same choice to be made for any of you. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, it does. Thank you.”

As Michelle walked out of the classroom, I picked up my phone and called the only person who could possibly make me feel any better, even from miles away.

That afternoon, we all walked with our students out to the buses. Each bus would wait at their stops until every student had gone home, found out who was home -- or who wasn’t -- and report back to the bus before it moved on. If no one was home, they would get back on the bus and come back to the school.

For over an hour, we waited in silence. The day was too bright for its occurrences, and I angrily squinted the sun out of my eyes. Dr. Keating paced back and forth, and I thought back to his words from November: “*we still have hundreds of students in our building that need us to focus on them.*” That was when Estella was a special case. Now, the other hundreds of kids were meeting the same exact fate, and we had no choice but to focus on it this time. Fifty-seven teachers sat side by side on the curb outside the school, kicking rocks and pulling at strings on our sleeves, but not saying a word. Not until --

“They’re back!” someone called from the other end of the line. Fifty-seven heads turned in unison to the road, and, as promised, 15 buses came trailing around the corner. As they wheeled past the curb, we all tried to mentally calculate just how many faces were looking back at us through the windows. I gave up after 100. I saw too many familiar faces, slightly changed from that morning. They were all suddenly a little older, the last drop of childhood gulped down greedily.

The students filed off the buses without looking up from their shoes, and we led them to the gym. All the cots and sleeping bags we could gather were laid out in rows, like a hurricane shelter, but the disaster that hit Rancho was far from natural. Waves had carried away members of the community, but we couldn’t mourn them with flowers or funerals. Their only eulogies would be a mechanical voice asking if their children would like to accept a call from a detention center.

As I walked up and down rows of makeshift beds, I came across a familiar hoodie and hung head. He held Lucky Llama in both hands, examining its pattern closely. I sat down on the empty pallet across from him, and assumed he would be listening to music. Instead, he heard me sit down right away and looked up for probably the first time since he got off the bus. He looked at me through puffy eyes with an expression like he had just asked a question I wouldn’t answer. I didn’t know how to answer any of this. I wished so badly to speak, but *I’m sorry* was about as flimsy as a lawn chair in a hurricane.

“Lucky Llama may not work with life, but I promise he still works on tests.”

“What works with life then?”

There was the unspoken question he needed answered.

“No charms, just you.”

“I can’t do anything. I’ve never been able to do anything.” He spoke a little louder with each word. “*Someone else* chose to put me in the ESL class. *Someone else* took my parents. No one has ever asked me what *I* want.”

“What do you want?”

“I want things to stop changing. I want my future not to depend on a politician. I want my parents not to flinch every time they hear a siren on the street. But what am I supposed to do?”

Kid, I’m struggling with that myself.

“I wish I could tell you. But all of us,” I looked around the room at the teachers and administrators, whose families were gathered around dinner tables while they paced the rows of displaced students to get everyone settled. “We are here to help you figure it out.”

“I knew you would be.”

I turned and began to make my way farther down the row.

“Wait, Miss!” Alejandro called after me.

“What is it, Bud?”

“Does this mean we don’t have to do our homework for tomorrow?”

“I suppose it does.”

Smiling then felt as if it had begun slipping from my muscle memory, still attainable but a little bit foreign. But Alejandro and I chose to grin regardless.

As I drove home late that night, the feelings finally left me. The interstate was fairly empty, and I watched the needle reach toward 80, 90, 100 miles per hour, still no match for the speed of my thoughts and the events of that day. I have a theory that adults are not allowed to be reckless nearly often enough, because all I wanted to do in this moment was scream or run

around or drive fast for a very long time. Everything felt suspended, like my tires were just spinning in the mud, until I flew straight past my exit. I turned around and made my way home, my car going slower but my mind still racing.

Once I pulled into the driveway, it took all of my strength to just pull the keys out of the ignition. My shoulders were sore from holding up the weight of the world and all I wanted was to sleep. That hope melted away when I stepped onto the front porch and saw a suitcase. Just to the left of the suitcase sat a woman -- specifically, the one who raised me. Upon seeing her, I broke down in the way that only seeing your mom after a traumatic day can make you do. Although I'm slightly taller than her, she hugged me so tight I felt like she was holding all my loose pieces together. She rocked me back and forth for several seconds before leaning back, still holding me by both arms.

Seeing the combination of relief and confusion on my face, she said, "What? You called me this morning and didn't expect me to book the next flight? Let's go in so I can make you tea."

We always drank tea not so much for the flavor, but for the emotional support it provided. Mom sat her bag down inside the door and turned on the kitchen light, stunning my tired and tear-stained eyes.

"You go take a hot shower. I'll find where everything is at."

Without a word of protest or bewilderment, I did as she said. The water melted off most of the day's stress, excluding the image of devastated faces (too young to know devastation) staring at me through school bus windows.

I wrapped myself up in a blanket and shuffled back toward the kitchen, met by the smell of peppermint and the sound of off-key humming. I closed my eyes and listened to the melody,

overtaken by the presence that had dominated much of my childhood and only recently been removed from my life. I hadn't realized how much comfort I had missed for the past 9 months. I sang along quietly.

Through it all, through it all it is well. Something my mom had never stopped believing. Throughout her whole life -- after Dad died, after she lost a job, and I'm sure after I moved out -- this hymn never left her lips. I wished I could sing it as confidently as she did, but I always seemed to forget the words when life got hard.

I sat at the barstool and buried my head in my arms. I was seconds from slipping into sleep when a mug clanked onto the counter in front of me. Smelling the peppermint immediately alleviated my nerves slightly.

"When I called, I didn't expect you to just pick up and fly out here."

"No, but a girl needs her Momma."

I took another deep breath of peppermint.

"I did. I miss you."

"I miss you every second of every day. Who wouldn't miss the greatest accomplishment of her life? More than that, though, I'm proud."

At that, I had to laugh a little. *Proud? Of a daughter with student loan debt and a teacher's salary? Moving to a small Texas town wasn't exactly the same as the Hollywood Walk of Fame.*

"Proud of what?"

"I'm proud that I raised a daughter bold enough to help others when it's hard. You're strong, Jean, but you forget where you get your strength from. It's in your roots. You didn't break me by making that bold choice."

I thought I had cried all my tears for the day, but now more threatened to break the dam.

“You know, this house does have two bedrooms.”

Mom smiled over her steaming mug of tea.

“That sounds like some prime real estate. I might have to make an offer.”

Now it wasn't the mug in my hands that was warming me; it was love pressing in from every corner of the room. It demanded to be noticed, like the sun shining through the windshield while you're driving in January, warming the legs of your jeans just when you forgot that star contained that kind of power.

April

I walked down the middle of the street in El Hueco, praying that it wouldn't be what I expected -- that somehow, every family would be undisturbed. I would be welcomed by children playing soccer in the street and pass the ball back to them. Enrique's or Alejandro's family would be sitting in a circle of lawn chairs, laughing at a story I hadn't heard before I walked up, and they would offer me dinner, which I would politely refuse at first, but ultimately accept because, let's face it: it's Sunday evening and they made plenty of food for the whole neighborhood and Mrs. Moreno's tortillas are better than anything I could dream of cooking. Somebody's tío would find my pronunciation of one Spanish word particularly humorous and repeat it to the circle, contorting his mouth in his best dramatic rendition of my American accent before throwing his head back in laughter again and patting my shoulder as if I were telling his favorite joke. I would stay until mosquitos started preying on me and everyone had begun dancing in the yard dimly illuminated by the light from the kitchen window. Instead, I found the hollow shell of a neighborhood where such gatherings may have once occurred.

I came upon a soccer ball by the curb and looked around for its owner, but no one was outside. The ball was fraying along the seams, red and green paint chipping off. I dribbled it along the street for a few yards before abandoning it again. I passed house after house with closed blinds and wind chimes. A lawnmower sat in the middle of one yard, abandoned half-way through its job. Finally, I came upon number 817 -- Enrique's house. A window on the front of the house was open, and thin white curtains blew out of it into the wind. I could hear water running somewhere in the house and the voice of a man on the radio, saturated in static as he announced the next song in the lineup.

I stepped onto the porch and rang the doorbell. The door opened, and through the outer screen I could see Alejandro.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I was looking for Enrique’s house -- I have a meeting with his parents.” I turned around to step off the porch.

“You’re at the right place,” Alejandro said, opening the screen door to let me inside.

As I stepped into the entryway, a small woman in an apron met me, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

“You must be Miss Darling,” she shook my hand enthusiastically. “I’m Lorena.”

Alejandro and Enrique inhabited a small green couch in the corner, enthralled by an X-Box game. They mumbled a “good morning, Miss” at me without breaking their eye contact with the television screen, and it didn’t sound much different from their monotonous morning greetings at school.

“My husband, Luis, should be home any minute,” Lorena continued. “Can I get you anything? Coffee?”

Before I could answer, an accusatory voice from the living room dramatically blurted out, “Hijo de puta!”

Lorena turned to the source quickly, causing her dark ponytail to whip around her shoulder.

“Enrique!”

“Ma, this guy on my team shot me!”

“*Enrique.*”

“Lo siento,” he whined.

“I am so sorry,” Lorena turned back to me now.

“No worries,” I laughed. “I would be concerned if teenage boys behaved any differently.”

Lorena untied her apron and hung it over a hook on the kitchen wall.

“So, was that a yes to coffee?”

I nodded.

A few minutes later, the sound of work boots on the porch announced Luis’s return. He rubbed his brow as he poured the remaining coffee, and when he introduced himself I noticed he had the same calculating eyes as Enrique, but his hair was flecked with gray. I sat across from the two of them at a small yellow table.

“I’m so glad to see the boys hanging out. I was worried Alejandro would withdraw with everything that’s been happening.”

Lorena and Luis looked at one another as if deciding who would voice the information they shared. Luis lifting his coffee cup to his mouth gave Lorena the signal to talk.

“Actually, they have to be together a lot. I was good friends with Alejandro’s mother, so when his parents were taken...”

She let the sentence trail off, hoping I knew how to fill in the rest.

“He came to stay here.”

“Yes.”

“Hasn’t that been hard on the two of you?”

“Hmph,” Luis grunted in affirmation. “But things were always hard. Looking out for each other is what makes it easier.”

I thought back to the empty rows of houses I had just walked through, wondering which one Alejandro called home. Was it his lawnmower left out front? Or was his the porch swing going un-swung? Each of those lives put on pause still belonged to someone, whether here or

there, whether sleeping on a friend's couch or waiting for visitors in an orange jumpsuit. I was hit by a wave of grief for El Hueca, reaffirming what I was here to do. I pulled out a small notepad and flipped to the first page.

“Can you guys tell me about the day the raid happened?”

Lorena looked from me to my pen, then back again before starting.

“Yes. Of course. It was at the garden store in town. Most of the people in our neighborhood worked there unloading trucks or stocking really early in the morning. I'm a cashier there, so I was the last person to see most of our neighbors.”

I scribbled profusely in my notepad, and Lorena waited for me to look back up at her before continuing her account.

“I remember it was early. Enrique was just crawling out of bed when I left for work. It was probably the same for most of the parents -- the ones who didn't come home from work. Their last minutes with their children were only in passing.”

Lorena stopped and looked out the window then, and her mind was somewhere else.

“Anyway, I had just gotten to work and was tying my apron when I heard someone knock at the door. I was annoyed that a customer couldn't wait until 6:00 to buy their bag of soil, but then I looked up. Two officers were standing there. Not regular officers -- they had these thick vests on. I unlocked the door and tried to smile big enough that they couldn't tell how nervous I was. They came in with their hands on their hips and looked around the shop.

“They said, ‘Ma'am, would you mind showing us where your other workers are at?’

“I couldn't find any words, so I nodded and walked quickly to the back room. I saw Jacqueline Moreno stocking, and widened my eyes in warning. She froze immediately, but it was too late for any of us to do something. She put down her box and followed us. They gathered all

of us in the back room and I stood close to Jacqueline. She was whispering the Lord's Prayer under her breath. I can't pray it anymore without thinking of her..."

I remembered seeing Alejandro's mom the day I ran into the boys at lunch -- waving out the window as she pulled into the parking lot. I couldn't picture the same woman fearful.

"The officers asked all documented citizens to move to one side of the room, and everyone else to the other. Several people looked to me, so I translated for them before we were at opposite sides of the room, with what seemed like miles of concrete floor between us. They kept us standing there after the store was supposed to have opened. Eventually, the officers cuffed everyone across from me, and slowly led them to the door like sheep to an altar, knowing exactly what their fate was. As Jacqueline passed me, she was still whispering.

'Hágase tu voluntad

hágase tu voluntad

hágase tu voluntad.'"

Lorena trailed off and stared solemnly into her coffee.

"What happened after that?"

"Nothing. They were gone. That's when I called Enrique and then Dr. Keating."

I put down my pen and looked over at Alejandro, still laughing with Enrique. What weight did he carry of the last time he saw his mother? Had he sleepily refused her hug that morning, or had she ruffled his hair as she rushed out the door? Had they wordlessly gone about their morning routine, expecting there to be words that afternoon when the sleepiness had sunk out of the room? Did he pray for God's will still, just as his mother did as she was led from her life and family?

Luis' words stuck with me: "Looking out for each other is what makes it easier." This neighborhood wasn't defined by what had happened. Every family had grown deep roots here, and being gone couldn't change that -- Alejandro would be taken care of, and those absent would not be any less loved. They didn't become past-tense just because they were in a different place. Then, I thought about my mom. I had felt guilty for leaving her in California, but that changed nothing about our relationship. I was in another place, but not less loving or less loved.

As I left El Hueco, I looked again at the empty houses. The lives interrupted were no longer only tragedy -- they were evidence of lives that were full. The lawnmower in the yard might have been a husband's gesture to take care of the house while his wife worked. The porch swing may have been hung by a couple years ago, their children growing faster than the paint could fade. The houses had fewer people, but were still filled with evidence of love in the present-tense. How ironic that a testament to injustice could also be a testament to something it could never touch.

Only a few students remained in the halls after school as I made my way to Dr. Keating's office. I wasn't sure why he wanted to see me, but I figured it would have to do with curriculum now that my class looked a lot different. His door was open, but I still knocked on it as I walked in.

"Good afternoon, Miss Darling. How are you doing?"

"I'm holding up. How about you?"

"Doing what I can."

Dark circles underlined his eyes, but otherwise I would never suspect any upset had occurred.

“What did you want to talk about?”

He sighed.

“How many students do you have left in your class?”

“Three.”

“And how did they do on TELPAS?”

“Extremely well, actually. I was very pleased.”

“That’s what’s worrying me.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“The only students left in the ELL program are ready to be moved to mainstream classes. You won’t have any class left at all.”

“I see.”

“I want so badly to move you to another department, but we are maxed out on staff. I’m afraid we can’t afford to renew your contract for next year.”

I didn’t know what else I had expected, but I was still shocked.

“I understand if you’d want to move back to California, but if you decide to stay in the area, I can recommend you to some other high schools. My good friend works at a school thirty minutes out, and they’re looking for a Language Arts teacher.”

“Actually, I would appreciate that. California will get on just fine without me.”

June

After the last bell rang – the *last* last bell that gave students two months of freedom – I packed my belongings into a small cardboard box. All my books, a few cards from my students, a hand-painted sign that said, “Teachers change the world.” *Whoever painted that never met this particular teacher*, I thought bitterly. I took down my students’ work from the wall one staple at a time and stacked it in my box.

Where Alejandro had once sat, nearly tipping his desk over with eagerness, chirping “Miss, Miss, can I read?” there was an empty seat with all four legs placidly on the floor. Where there used to be the sounds of Estella’s gum smacking and warm Spanish vowels, just the buzzing of fluorescent lights. One of the desks was slightly out of line, but I let it be this time.

Rancho High School would continue to exist; classes would resume in August, voices would call across classrooms, life would pulse through every hallway. But inside those stucco walls, a major organ of the school would be missing. They would be missed, even mourned for a few months, but eventually the school would continue functioning as normal. Like one of those lizards that, upon being picked up by a little kid, simply detaches its tail and makes its getaway.

My kids – *my kids* – were gone, and all I could do was pack up and leave. Finished packing my box, I turned around to see Enrique.

“Miss, are you okay?” He raised his eyebrows at me.

“Oh, yes. Yes. I just had a bad day, kiddo.”

He looked at my box of belongings, then back at me.

“They miss you, you know? We’re all gonna.”

Don’t cry in front of a student. Don’t cry in front of a student. Keep one ounce of dignity.

“I miss them, too.”

“Alejandro left to meet his family last week. Had to go pretty fast, but he wanted me to give you this.”

Enrique held his palm out, revealing Lucky Llama.

“He said to tell you it’s your turn to use it, Miss.”

I held the llama in my fist and picked up my box.

“I was just heading out anyway. Do you want to walk out with me?”

Enrique nodded and closed my classroom door behind the two of us. Walking down the hallway, it was easy to forget the absence we were both experiencing. It could have been a Tuesday afternoon just before buses were leaving, students rushing to sports practices and climbing into their parents’ cars. I could be carrying a stack of assignments to grade at home, where I would snack on peanut M&Ms and laugh at the phonetic spellings my students used.

It could have been that day, until we got to the front of the school. Most of the kids had already left, eager to start their summer vacation. None of my students were there to see off, and very few cars were left in the parking lot. As I said goodbye and walked away from Enrique, I finally started to cry.

I hung Lucky Llama from the rear-view mirror of my car and drove away from Rancho High School one last time. The air conditioner circulated heat like warm breath, and I hummed along to “Closing Time” on the radio. I still felt the absence of my kids, but knew I would have emails from at least a few of them when I got home, telling me all about their new schools or the aunts and uncles they were staying with. *Gone, but not past-tense*. After an emotionally-taxing day, I simply looked forward to dinner, accompanied by Mom once I got home. As I drove, Lucky Llama bounced up and down with every pothole. I tapped it with one finger and sent it spinning.