

Empire of School

By

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When a 250 pound teenage boy falls out of a chair and hits the ground, he makes a surprisingly loud sound, especially if he crashes into chairs on either side of him and emits an elongated and girlish *aaaaahhhh!*, which is what Walter Hudson did the day I announced that we were going to read an essay by George Orwell.

I rushed over to see Walter's legs jerking, arms twitching, hands over his face as if fending off an attack by killer ants. Was he hurt? Was he having a seizure?

"Please," he groaned. "Not another essay! Can we not read anything today?"

I was in my third year of teaching at an inner city high school, and I realized as I watched Walter thrash about, that I was about to have another terrible day.

For a few days leading up to this incident, my seniors had been working on a reflective essay, an assignment that I hoped they might actually like. All year long, they'd hated every assignment, every reading. And who could blame them? Peruse the table of contents in the senior English book and you will find: Beowulf, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge, lots of dead white men; though, there were two token world writers, still living, at the back of the book: Chinua Achebe and Margaret Atwood. The Margaret Atwood poem was about mushrooms. Every time I asked students to open this textbook, half the class would sit there, immobilized, while the other half lifted their hands and let them fall like an invalid's to the book's hard cover. It was worse after lunch. "God," some would complain loudly, "she's making us read *again*." That was a good day.

When I asked my students to write, which was basically every day, they'd shake their heads ruefully. "*This class*," some would say. In my mind, I would finish the sentence for them. *This class is torture. This class doesn't teach me anything I need to know. This class is boring as shit because all we ever do is write paragraphs about dead white guys when all we want to do is text someone.*

Doggedly, I would ignore their complaints, a smile stretched tight across my face, but sometimes, more often than I liked, I would lose my cool. I would say things like, "Whether you like it or not, English is the language of power and if you ever want to access some of that power, if you want to participate fully in American life, or, at the very least, want a better job, you are going to have to master that language." I said this to students who, at home and in the hallways, spoke Spanish, Hmong, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Korean, Tagalog, students who were born in this country but spoke English with accents.

I often felt that on any given day only twenty percent of the class was listening, but on that day, everyone heard me. "English is the language of power, right Ms. S.?" some of the Mexican boys would jeer at me months later, until I was red faced and ashamed. I had not meant to deny the beauty and importance of their native languages, but that's what I had done.

"Look," I would say, "the reason I want you to learn to write is because you are unique and special and what you think matters. And the best way to communicate what you think and believe to a larger audience is by writing," at which point half the class would yawn or roll their eyes. *There she goes again.* Still, I would soldier on. "Sometimes, when you write, you discover something you didn't know you knew. You surprise yourself."

All year long, I'd tried to convey to my students how writing might enrich their lives, but most of the assignments were just not that interesting. The reflective essay would be different, I hoped, because it centered around a personal experience, though it must go beyond mere narration, a freshman level assignment, to express a universal truth about human nature, what it means to be alive. Though the reflective essay is personal and unique, it also says something illuminating about people or society and should make the reader feel enlarged, even grateful, to have read it.

"You have to be brave when you write this essay," I said on the day I introduced the assignment. "You have to be willing to look at yourself and other people, at the messy part of life." I said this without a smidgen of irony, as if they'd never been brave a day in their lives and now, in an English classroom, were being called upon to summon reserves of courage they didn't know they had, as if walking into their blighted, gang-ridden neighborhoods was itself not a daily act of courage.

We came up with a list of general topics, all dull as a warranty – resolving a problem with a friend or parent, getting in trouble, coping with failure. I asked them to free write about some of the topics that interested them the most, to see what came up, and as they wrote some raised their hands. In hushed voices they asked if they could write about various traumas – one girl's dad was in jail for life for his third sexual assault, another witnessed her father's murder on the lawn outside their apartment when she was eight years old. "That's the only thing I can come up with," she said. Three more asked if they could write about the time they were shot. The first, Antoinette, had been shot in the eye at a house party and missed a month of school. She came back after the winter holiday with a pirate patch; now, though, she had a glass eye. "I hate it so much," she whispered when I complimented its likeness to her real eye. The other two, boys, surprised me. I'd had no idea. Do you want to see my scar? Both of them asked. And before I could answer, they pulled up their shirts. *You have to be brave*, my own words ricocheted back as I looked at the puckered, red marks. What did I know about bravery?

Despite the dark nature of their subject matter, I felt buoyed by their response to this assignment; they weren't hating it or complaining too much. We read two sample student essays while I highlighted and marked them up using a transparency, trying to show them the features of the genre. Some students actually took notes. The student samples, though not bad, were simple pieces of writing and I wanted them to see what a more experienced writer could do, and so I decided that we should read Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant." I had high hopes that they would admire this essay, or at least be pulled along by the suspense of a rampaging elephant. I even thought that they might be able to identify with Orwell's plight. Yes, he was another dead white guy, but hadn't they all faced peer pressure or done things they deeply regretted?

"All right," I said with my usual forced cheeriness. "Get out your textbooks. We're going to read an essay today." A collective groan rumbled up the aisle. Almost half the students put their heads down, several more slumped over, and Antoinette took out her compact and began to reapply eyeliner around the fake eye.

I swallowed hard. "This is a great essay," I said. "It's called 'Shooting an Elephant.'" I forced myself to smile at the 90 pound gangbanger named Marisol in the back of the room who took aim at me with her eyes. If I could get her on my side, the others might follow, but her

eyebrows, dark and painted on and scowling now, looked even more like ninja weapons than usual, as if she might rip them off her face and hurl them at me.

“You guys will love this essay,” I said. “It’s my favorite reflective essay.”

That was when Walter Hudson hit the ground and commenced his thrashing.

“Walter!” I said, hoping my sharp tone would convey my irritation, though I was more than irritated. Walter Hudson was one of the reasons why I worked at an inner city school. He’d gotten decent grades and even won a football scholarship. He was getting out, getting an education, but here he was rolling around the classroom floor like a three-year-old and all because I’d asked the class to read a five page essay. How on earth will you get through college with that attitude? I thought. I could take defiance from the rest of them, but from Walter?

I gave him my best teacher glare. “Walter, please get up and turn to page 870.”

Walter continued to roll back and forth, knocking into the chairs on either side of him, until all the other kids, the slumpers, even the sleepers, had sat up and taken notice. Two boys in particular - Keylin and Q (short for Quentin), often defiant and not college-bound, were grinning. Keylin pointed, then slapped his knee, and hooted. Q leaned back in his chair, lifted his arms and rested his head in his hands. I recognized the gleeful look on his face. His face said, *You have lost control of this classroom, lady, and good luck getting it back.* And Marisol? For the first time in a month, she was smiling. I could actually see her teeth. Not a single book was open.

I felt the blood rush to my face and my heart speed up. I was “swimming upstream,” the metaphor my principal used to acknowledge the challenges of working in an inner city school, especially one with the lowest test scores in the district. “What we have to do is lock arms,” my principal would say in staff meetings. Alone in my classroom though, fighting the rising tide of apathy or defiance, those words rang hollow. Now, as Keylin, Q, and the rest of class looked on, two trickles of sweat rolled down my sides into the waist band of my pants. I was in flight or fight mode and was probably incapable of making a good decision.

“Get up,” I pleaded.

But Walter was enjoying the attention. Several more kids laughed and pointed. The entire class, even the good kids like Eli and Giselle, who always raised their hands, were conspiring to waste time, to run out the clock.

“Walter, you’re acting like a freshman. Get up.”

Walter merely covered his face with his hands and only moaned louder. “Please! Not today! Can we not read anything today?”

“Yeah,” said a couple of kids accusatorily, “you always do too much.”

I ignored them. I knew I could not simultaneously fight two battles, the immediate battle of getting Walter back in his seat and the larger battle of getting the rest of the kids to *want* to do too much. That was the heart of the problem; I had failed to inspire them to want to work hard, not for me, not even for themselves. Standing over Walter, the constant refrain I’d heard at the back of my head for three years grew a little louder: *you are a terrible teacher.*

“Walter, if you don’t get up, I’m going to send you out. I’m going to write *a referral.*” A referral meant that Walter would go to a special room where the Dean of Students might give him a stern talking to. Maybe he would get a detention. But probably not. Probably he’d just sit in a room with the other trouble makers and take a nap.

From across the room, Keylin began to narrate the events like a sports commentator.

“Awww, she just said referral! What’s he gonna do?”

“Send him out!” Q shouted.

I didn't want to send Walter out, but now that the word referral was out of my mouth, I could not take it back. If I backed down, I would look "soft." Q and Keylin would have those satisfied smiles all day long and I absolutely could not have them tell everyone how I had lost.

I walked primly to the door, my heels clicking. I opened it and stood there. "Out," I said. Slowly, a look of mock contrition on his face, Walter stood up. He grinned at Keylin and Q on his way out, but then just after he crossed the threshold, he turned to me in earnest. "Can I come back in after a few minutes?"

"No," I said. "Not today."

He hung his head and leaned against the metal banister. "Please, Ms. S. I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

I hesitated. I wanted to let him back in and I felt that if I did, he would go directly to his seat, open his book and would not be a problem for the rest of the period because at his core, though he sometimes fought me, he wanted to learn.

"I got a football game tonight. Coach won't let me play if I get in trouble."

"You should have thought of that," I said.

He put his hands together in a pleading gesture, a beseeching look on his face.

I could feel my resolve weakening. I was a softie, a pushover, and they all knew it. Then I looked back in the classroom and saw Q and Keylin smirking, Antoinette's one good eye watching, the rest of them calculating what they could get away with the next time I assigned something they hated.

"I'm sorry, but you will have to go to see the Dean." Ridiculously, I pointed to the building where the Dean's office was, as if Walter didn't already know, and then I watched as, slowly, he descended the steps.

After class, limp from the dregs of adrenaline, I sat at my desk and opened my notebook to a fresh page. The students, I wrote, were making my life miserable with their incessant complaints and attempts to get out of work. Why couldn't they see that I was on their side? Why wouldn't they read? Why were they so rude and downright mean? Why was it a fight every day to get them to care? I was not their enemy! I was on their side! I filled several pages with these self-pitying, righteous thoughts and then a blow-by-blow account of the conflict with Walter. And therein came a disquieting feeling. I went back to Orwell's essay and began to reread.

Orwell, who was stationed in Burma as a police officer towards the end of the British Empire, had been called upon to track an elephant that had rampaged through the streets and killed a man. Orwell hated his job because he'd realized "imperialism was an evil thing." Secretly, he was for the natives, but those same people made his job a misery. They often committed small, passive aggressive acts against their oppressors in the petty ways that people who have no power sometimes do – spitting on a white woman's dress, tripping Orwell on the field, laughing and jeering. He felt stuck between his hatred of the empire he served and the native people who made his job so impossible he sometimes wished he could "drive a bayonet" into the guts of a Buddhist priest. And then came the incident with the elephant, which helped to clarify Orwell's thoughts about the white man's "dominion" in the east.

It is the "condition" of the white man's rule, Orwell says, that he has to do what the "natives expect," and it is in this capitulation, that he "destroys" his own freedom. Like Orwell, I was "seemingly the lead actor," the one in charge, but in reality I "was an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will" of students like Keylin and Q. or some of the girls who intimidated me

with their scornful glares and bored yawns. Orwell did not want to shoot the elephant that was peacefully eating a clump of grass, but he knew that if he didn't, the "crowd would laugh" at him. He had committed himself to the act when he'd sent for a rifle just as I'd committed myself to sending Walter out when I'd said the word "referral."

My God, I wrote, I am George Orwell! I had "shot" Walter Hudson, though it had made me sick to do it, just as surely as Orwell shot the elephant. "A sahib has got to act like a sahib," writes Orwell. Likewise, a teacher has got to act like a teacher. Did I have any agency or control at all? I sat there for a minute, my hand poised over my notebook, this thought and many others swirling around until I began to put them on the page where I could look at them more objectively.

I didn't want dominion, I protested. All I wanted was for my students to do what I said and, once in awhile, to do it with a goddamn smile on their faces. Was that too much to ask? Okay, maybe I did want dominion, but not because I wanted to rule, but because I wanted them to learn to think, to one day become active participants in our democracy.

I stopped at that word. There is nothing democratic about high school. On the contrary, there is something almost colonial about high school, especially an inner city school with its brown students and mostly white teachers. The school district is an empire in miniature with its hierarchy of officials and chain of command, in the way that it ignores the needs of students and teachers, and instead exhorts its subjects to *listen to us, we know better, do what we say*. Or maybe it has less to do with race and more with age – older people trying to restrain and mold the next generation. In either case, what we are asking, demanding, is that students conform to our social norms and bend to our will.

I wish I could put this in less stark terms, but the page demands my honesty. Nine years after that incident, I still believe that teaching is a form of oppression. An idealistic reader might assume that I am merely being crusty and burned out, or worse, cynical. But let's consider for a moment what we expect students to do all day long: to sit in their chairs and not get up unless with permission, to read and respond to random, often irrelevant subjects, to write and talk on command and have interesting, insightful thoughts, to collaborate with each other, even people they don't like. If they are extroverts, they need to be more introverted; if they are introverts, more extroverted. When they cross the threshold of my door, they must ignore whatever dramas with friends or boyfriends they might be having and get to work. They must ignore their growling stomachs; they must ignore their own fatigue because their baby brother, sick again, howled for half the night. They must ignore the lure of text messages blinking in their laps. Sometimes we even ask them to ignore the weather. At the start of this school year, the air conditioner in my room was broken for three weeks. Triple digit temperatures, the air like a lead blanket, and still I expected them to take out their notebooks. Or, take for example, a day this January, when one afternoon, the sky darkened, the light in the room went dramatically flat, and fat bullets of rain slammed into the school. It was loud, relentless, and after three years of drought, utterly beautiful. We all turned to look out the windows. Two boys ran to the door, cracked it open, and stuck their heads out. Now, with the door open, the sheer force of the rain, of nature, put us all in our place. "Dang," someone said. Dang was right. We were in awe. It was natural to want to run out there, to enact a primal dance of gratitude, to splash around, spin and laugh, cartwheel through the puddles, and what I made them do next was unnatural. "Come back to your seats," I said finally, "and sit down."

To be a high school teacher then is to be a killjoy.

Rereading this list, a part of me thinks, *Well, so what? What is so bad about all that? You can't text when you feel like it? Well, neither can I. You have to read two pages today and write a response? You have to take a test? Boo hoo. I did it. We all did it. We all survived, didn't we?* In one sense, all we are trying to do in school is train students to meet their responsibilities or to learn to delay gratification because the world will make its demands and in much harsher and more exacting terms than any English teacher.

Still, they are teenagers. A teenager has got to act like a teenager, right? It is their job to rebel and it is my job to pull them along, to cajole, to plead, and on a good day, to inspire them to be better than they want to be. "You might not know this," I tell them, "but there was a time when kids worked in factories for twelve hours a day. Do you know that people worked for decades to pass child labor laws and thanks to their efforts you have the privilege of sitting here in an air conditioned room and you get to, not have to, *you get to* read poems Tupac Shakur wrote when he was 15." Sometimes I appeal to the girls. "Did you know that in some parts of the world, girls are *killed* for going to school?" I have Malala's book at the front of the room where I can point to it. "She was shot in the head!" I tell them what is basically the equivalent of *eat your broccoli because there are children starving in Ethiopia*.

The day after I wrote Walter a referral, I was nervous. I'd been nervous and on edge all day. I didn't know how my realization would change my practice or what I would say to Walter. Finally, with a minute to spare, he trudged up the steps and into my room. Head bowed, he approached my desk. "I'm sorry about yesterday, Ms. S." He smiled shyly. "I won't act like that again. It was immature."

"I am too," I said. "To be honest, I wish I had handled the situation differently." I wanted to take him aside and tell him what I'd learned, but he hadn't read "Shooting an Elephant." He wouldn't see the connection.

But after class, another boy lingered. When almost everyone was gone, this boy, Eli, said, "So I was thinking about that essay we read yesterday." I'd been organizing some papers on my desk and I stopped. "It's weird," he continued, "what happened with Walter. It's like we enacted the whole essay."

I looked up. I was holding my breath.

"Like we're the natives in that story. And well, you're the elephant killer. But it's not like you want to be the elephant killer," he rushed on. "That's the whole point. You have to act a certain way in here."

"I know! Right?" I said. "I was pretty much thinking the same thing." I wanted to clap my hands and laugh. He had gotten it. And because he knew that I knew that he had gotten it, a veil between us had been lifted, and for a moment we were seeing each other as something more than just teacher and student, we were seeing our relative positions in the empire.

I wish we could have had a longer conversation, but the bell rang. Had Eli stayed longer, maybe we could have discussed the crucial difference between an empire and a school system, which is love. No one works in an inner city school because she wants to get rich or is trying to exploit an entire group of people for her own gain. I am still a petty officer in the empire of school because I want, in my own small way, to empower kids who have seen a far darker side of life in their scant fifteen years than I ever have. I want my students to experience the beauty of language, of an image, of an idea. I want them, one day, to take their rightful place in our

democracy. The challenge is to keep loving them even when they are, actively or passively, overtly or covertly, working against you. And to resist the “absurd puppet” act and be a full human being in the room, which is what they need the most.

I’m not sure that I would have figured any of this out if I had not sat at my desk and written about it. It was the act of writing, following one line of thought to another that allowed me to make these connections and to surprise myself. So that is one final thing I want to leave my students with – the page. The blank page, best teacher I ever had. Even now, the page is teaching me what I think. I write a line of words, trying to catch the essence of an idea, and the page whispers, *no that is not quite right, try again*. I scribble, erase, rewrite, scribble, cross out, rewrite, each time getting a little closer to what it is I actually believe.