

Taught

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DAMN, I THINK, as the cab moves leisurely uptown; it's going to be six bucks to get to City. To drag from one meeting to the next—I didn't need a Ph.D. in English to live like this. I try to use my learned devices to mentally erase the meeting I've just left at Baruch. As usual, my mind refuses to become a soothing blank. And what's it all for? To become an Associate Professor, stupid. And not even for the money. I detest the politics and the time spent preparing memos and reports which nobody has the time or interest to read. And I'm not interested in most of the paper which flies across my desk either. And the meetings. So what am I doing here? Kidding myself. The promotion matters. Teaching isn't enough. Promotions are there and other people are getting them. Enough reason.

My head begins to tighten; the spots over each eye converge slightly. Another headache. I'll be in Harlem after dark, and I'm not sure where the subway is. Even though I live on the edge of Bedford-Stuyvesant, there I'm not afraid. That's home, which makes me like everybody else—petrified of foreign turf.

I'd like to get to a bathroom. That becomes a matter of logistics between meetings. Three hours to meet and at least another hour to get home. And when I do I won't be able to look at my students' papers. For which I'm theoretically getting paid.

\$4.55. Not a bad guess, close to six bucks with the tip. I wonder what City College looked like when my father went to college? In later years it became, for him, a golden place, where he listened to Morris Raphael Cohen lecture,

a place where an immigrant tailor's son could begin to become a doctor.

The Harris Building today looks like the old elementary school I went to so long ago in Brooklyn; the walls are the same green, the stairways are surrounded by grating. Only the corridors and stairways are wider. Classes are in session, and students sit on the floor in the corridors waiting for the next period to begin. Overcrowded and paint-peeled this building, but these children of immigrants wait for their chance too.

I find the bathroom, three flights above the floor where we are to meet. Plaster is sprinkled liberally on the floor, along with toilet paper and crumpled tissues. Graffiti, not especially creative, are on the walls and, a touch of the twentieth century, an automatic hand dryer. For which I've now no time. I wipe my hands on my last bit of Kleenex, mechanically wipe on more lipstick, run my fingers through my hair. In moments I'm transformed, ready to be charming, professional, and only a couple of minutes late. What crap.

I go downstairs and enter the Writing Center. We'll probably not, in any case, be able to duplicate it at Baruch, not without more political hassles than I'm capable of getting into. Pity—it's probably the best way to cope with remediation in writing. I almost bump into her as I walk to the desk to find out where I'm supposed to be meeting.

"Dr. Lederman—what are you doing here?" And there she is, brown and smiling and, an overused word, radiant. I do not expect to meet anyone I know, and in my confusion I don't remember her

name. But I do remember, suddenly flooding my memory, a paper she once wrote after our Freshman English class visited "Harlem on my Mind" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"I'm supposed to be at a meeting to look at the Writing Center. How are you? How have you been? Do you see any of the other SEEK kids?"

"Oh, I see Ruby and Laura all the time. And do you remember Olga Alverez?"

"Do you ever see David Jones? I know that he came here after the SEEK Center."

"He was here, but he got into some kind of trouble, came back to school with a scar on his face. He had problems with his wife and, you know, sort of vanished. Louis Morales is still here and . . ."

"When are you graduating?"

"In June, so are Ruby and Laura. We've gone to summer school for three summers, but we're graduating on time."

I am finally speechless. Three years have passed since I taught them Freshman English at the University Center SEEK. It was an experimental first year; then they transferred to City College and I went on to teach at Baruch. I thought of them, of course, many times. But I have not seen them and, despite the thoughts, never called them. Ruby, Laura and Dolores (of course, she is Dolores)—they were so worried, my triumvirate, that our Center was "easier" than City College would be. I told them that if they got an "A" from me they could get "A" from anybody.

"How are you doing?"

"Oh, fine. I'm married and we just moved to Mount Vernon."

"What does your husband do?"

"He's an accountant. You know, I've gotten a few "C's" but mostly there've been "A's" and "B's." I've got a 3.7 average. Ruby is on the Dean's List. She got married about six months ago; Laura is

getting married in the Spring.

"Not to the men they were engaged to then? Which one was going out with that handsome policeman?"

"Laura. No, there've been several in between!"

She keeps looking, surreptitiously, at my left hand. I laugh. Yes, I've married again."

"How is your son? Does he still play chess? You know, whenever I look at the chess column in the newspaper I think of him."

What a memory from Freshman English—my son for whom I had no babysitter one day. "Yes, he's still playing chess. He's in the sixth grade now." We go on, leaping from one shared memory to another, trying to fill in nearly three years.

"Do you remember Julio Lopez?"

I know, before she says it, what she is going to tell me. He was a man, not a boy, when he was in my class, an angry volatile man with a wife and a six-year-old daughter. Before that he had spent some time in jail.

"He's in jail for shooting a judge. Can you imagine—"

I can imagine, I think, and though I know, with the professional judgment born in these past years, that I had expected something like that, I do not like the knowing, the confirmation. He had been a talented writer. Completely undisciplined, not able to spell or punctuate correctly, but he could write. We read *Down These Mean Streets*, and he said, "That's shit. Any of us could write better than that."

"Go home and show me," I had said. And he did. We published his essay in the school magazine at the end of the year. With punctuation and normal spelling it moved, beautiful and shocking. He was always in trouble with one or another of the teachers. He was insolent, they said, late, defiant. He cut classes. He wore a black sombrero and

tightly fitting pants. Costumes and masks were important symbols to us then. Somehow, we got along, although he was touchy about my criticism of his writing. I was critical; that's what I was there for.

One day, late in the afternoon, we were going around in the usual circles in conference. Finally, I looked up from his paper and said, "I'm white and Jewish, and you perceive me as an authority figure, don't you?"

"No, he answered, "I perceive you as an intelligent and beautiful woman." I looked up, but he was serious. It was no con and no pitch. I laughed and accused him of acting the part of the stereotyped Latin. But he began to accept some of my suggestions about his writing. He told me why he resented Jews, of his mother's life in the garment district, of the trouble with the unions. I am Jewish, but he told me things that came out of his life experiences. I argued with him about his acceptance of stereotypes and told him that I resented his holding me the "exception."

And now I know that he is in jail. His life was predictable; it could, I guess, have been predicted at many points even before I met him. As Dolores talked about him, I realized that he had, in the intervening years, become a kind of metaphor for me of what ghetto life can do. There was, in him, something beautiful which had been perverted. My husband would argue with me and say that each individual is responsible for his fate. Legally, Julio is accepting responsibility for what he did. Morally, all of us whose life touched his are also somehow responsible. The theory of individual guilt is a comforting one, but I think it's at least partly a lie.

I look again at Dolores, so chattery and so beautiful. I know that she and Ruby and Laura have also become metaphors for me. Once, when someone at a college faculty meeting quoted from the

Jensen report, I thought how irrelevant statistics are. At once, images of a few of my best Black students had passed through my mind. In their Freshman year these three girls had worked, slaved, hung on every word, argued, laughed, learned. They earned their "A's."

"Dolores," I ask suddenly, "what was your average in high school?" It had nothing to do with what we were talking about, but suddenly it was important to know.

She laughs, "I guess around 75."

I think of a debate that my white, lower- and middle-class Seniors at Baruch had on Open Admissions. How dreadful some thought it was that students with averages in the seventies were admitted to college. They debated whether or not Open Admissions and special programs like SEEK were working. I had said that we needed to redefine "working."

All three of these girls would never have been admitted to City College on their high school averages. All three had "made it" in every sense of the word. Dolores wants to go on to graduate school. She's thinking of going into social work. I hope, someday, that they'll decide that they want to teach. What difference has SEEK made in their lives? Is it only the statistics that are important? Despite those students who overcut, collect stipends and then eventually drop out, there are my three beautiful young women. And how many more? They will marry professional men and bring back to their society everything that they potentially were and have been able to become. How to measure this? How to tell this to my Baruch Seniors?

I look at her, and I would like to keep on talking. But I am already a half hour late for my meeting. She tells me that her phone has not been installed yet, but she takes my home and school numbers down.

"Please call me," I tell her. "I want to

see the three of you." I want to see them; I have a class that I'd like them to meet. And they are suddenly very important to me.

But they don't exist for me merely as illustrations of what "culturally deprived" students can achieve in college. It goes much, much deeper. My memory leaps back.

Towards the middle of the year at the SEEK Center some militant students and militant young faculty got together and began what turned out to be a revolution. It was the year for that, remember? Throughout the semester there were large, angry group meetings. Classes were cancelled and teachers met with students in large groups. I went to most of the meetings, not because I supported the idea of a rebellion; I was even then too cynical to think that this was a viable solution for us. I felt that I had an obligation to attend those meetings for which my classes had been cancelled. At one of these meetings, a particularly angry session, students distributed a long list of accusations against various teachers and academic practices at the Center. My Freshman English class was singled out because I had organized it around "ethnic" literature, including Irish and Jewish as well as Black and Hispanic literature. However, since the makeup of the SEEK student body was neither Irish nor Jewish I was accused of teaching something "irrelevant."

Ruby got up at this meeting and, as a student in that class, denied the charge. She mentioned that we had done things other than those indicated by my booklist. We had gone to see museum shows and films. We did read Black and Hispanic literature. She was magnificent. It was not easy for someone Black, at that moment and in that emotional climate, to defend a white teacher. But the young Black woman stood up and said what she wanted to say.

Hours later, after the meeting at the

Writing Center ends, I leave the Harris Building. I find the subway station and, on the train going home, I think again about the three of them. I wonder if the men they've chosen will make them happy. I hope they've chosen wisely and are, besides, lucky. I am suddenly protective. I would do anything I could to insure them productive, good, safe lives.

But they are Black women; if, in the next years, after they work and save money and try to move to my brother-in-law's block in a New Jersey town, their real estate agent will be accused of block-busting. I prefer, for the time, not to think about that. Now, at this moment, they seem to hold worlds in their hands. Such fragile worlds—yet, in a small way, I helped make them able to reach for them.

The rivalries of my college, the lure of promotions, the endless meetings of my life all merge and, for a moment, finally fade. The only reality is in their lives, in my classrooms. The only thing that I do that is worth doing happens there, if it happens at all. And when it happens, I may never even know it.

I think of images from my own past. My father, dead these four years, who would have been so proud to see me enter the Harris Building of his magical City College, as a colleague from another part of City University—who would have been so proud to see me talking to a former student in the corridors of the buildings he walked.

I think of the few English teachers whose anecdotes I sometimes remember, whose comments about a character in a story or poem sometimes leap, inadvertently, from my mouth as I face a class of my own. A few of them gave me something that I have treasured. I should write to tell them that one of their students went on to get a doctorate in English and is now teaching in college . . . now having some small influence on the lives of some of the generation

after her. What continuity, what relevance, what joy there is, lies in this.

And I feel, for a few moments, as the subway door opens, spilling me out with the crowd at my station, a willingness to

go upstairs and read my students' papers, a wild kind of exaltation.

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