
Method Teaching

JESSICA SIEGEL HAS arrived at the shank of the semester. She has finished her lessons in note taking, composition, and autobiography. She has passed the holiday interruptions of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Columbus Day, settling into a sequence of five-day class weeks. She has zipped her summer clothes into plastic garment bags and arranged her winter plumage in the closet beside her bed. And today she will begin teaching American literature to students who are often new to America and just as often indifferent to literature.

Rain falls from low, creased clouds as Jessica pushes a metal cart of textbooks into Room 336, where her English classes meet. Heat hisses from two blue-gray radiators, and the air above them dances like a desert mirage. Jessica opens a window to moderate the blast, and when she looks down on Grand Street, she can see only one or two skeletal poplars, reddening with the season. The coming of hard, deep fall on the Lower East Side is better signaled by the foliage on Orchard Street, the cold-weather coats newly hung outside storefronts, strung low enough for eyeballing and too high for shoplifting. Among Seward Park's fashionable, the summery "Surf Club" jersey has given way to the Troop Jacket, a Korean-made variation on the traditional letter jacket, affixed with a fictitious school name and ornamented with embroidery enough to busy a score of seamstresses. The students wear them outside and they wear them inside, unbuttoned and

dropped to the elbows, for they distrust Seward Park's boiler or its lockers or both.

Jessica notices that graffiti is building up within the classroom. The chalk signature of a certain "ae" slashes across her corkboard display, while "Redjack" marks a door. Like every other teacher, Jessica recently received from Helen Cohen a graffiti bulletin, with samples from Seward Park's most prolific scribes and a plea that she advise the proper authorities if she identifies offending handiwork on any tests or notebooks. Such sleuthing does not rank highly among Jessica's priorities. She consults her watch and writes on the blackboard, "Journal Topic: Why Did My Relatives Come to This Country?"

By now, Jessica can characterize her classes as classes, as collective personalities. Journalism is a disaster. She rushes through a huddle with her six advanced students and then faces a mutinous crew of beginners. They are so accustomed to Seward Park's standard desks, bolted in place facing front, that sitting in a room with normal chairs and computer terminals elicits the third grader in them all. She turns her head and they launch so many paper planes the room needs an air traffic controller. The Lower East Side class with Bruce, usually a source of satisfaction, is a misery of truancy and listlessness. Twice already, Jessica has had to dispense spot quizzes when she could not deliver her lesson because not a single student had done the preparatory reading. And the reading is rarely more than five pages overnight.

Jessica's salvation is second-period English 7. Wilfredo Ayala, José Santiago, and Lun Cheung all impressed her with their autobiographies. But as with *Seward World*, the class's real mainstays are Dominican girls, their teased hair and tight jeans belying restive minds. Aracelis Collado, wise and dependable, Jessica knows from the newspaper. Raquel Tamares, only sixteen years old as a senior, possesses an adult's emotional depth. And Addie Severino, insecure about her own substantial abilities next to those of her older sister, Daisy, seems almost an embodiment of Jessica's younger self. At the same time, of course, almost half the class is in danger of failing, and one Chinese boy is running a lucrative football betting pool, collecting \$20 bills every Monday morning, cutting the next three days, and appearing on Friday with the coming weekend's odds. Jessica cringes, especially when she sees José Santiago, husband and father, paying his debt.

First-period English 7, despite the absences that always plague an early-morning class, is not at all bad. Mary Tam, surely the smartest kid in the group, attends only infrequently and speaks hesitantly when

she does. In her stead, the engines are two boys with little in common but eccentricity. Angel Fuster, *Seward World's* business manager, is as sensitive and witty as he is short, which is to say very. Jessica had to howl the other day when he dashed into class late, a pair of pajama bottoms wound around his neck Charles Aznavour style. Ottavio Johnson is quite Angel's opposite, a wide, hulking member of Seward-Park's weight-lifting club, the Dog Brothers. The willful child of an Italian-black marriage, Ottavio is bright and aware but something of a sophist, awarding himself nicknames like "The Lion" and " $E = mc^2$." He dropped Jessica's journalism class because he cared little for revising what he considered his perfect prose, but he had no choice but to stick with English 7, a requirement for graduation, and he gradually came to respect the teacher who refused to indulge his act.

Jessica turns from the board and sees both boys in their seats. Angel has left the pajamas home this morning and wears his usual leather jacket unadorned. Ottavio, his pectorals almost bursting a Gold's Gym T-shirt, inhales a breakfast of Doritos and orange soda. Jessica allows him to dine during class because she knows he travels an hour each morning from the Inwood neighborhood at Manhattan's northern tip; she just wishes he would discover one or two of the major food groups. About fifteen other students trickle in, meaning that half the class has yet to arrive. In other words, the norm.

She turns sideways, pointing with her left hand to the board and with her right hand toward the class. "Well," she says, "why *did* your family come to America? Manny?"

"It was for a better life."

"Luis?"

"To find a better job?"

"Mike?"

"To live with their relatives."

"They have relatives in other places, too," Jessica says, right hand on her hip in a posture of challenge. "Why here?"

"Better life."

"Mary?" She is here today.

"I'm here alone," she says, eyes averted. "I came to study."

Snickering surrounds her.

"Steve?"

"So me and my brothers could have advantages they never had."

"Now," Jessica says, "suppose we went back to the fifteen hundreds, sixteen hundreds, seventeen hundreds." She raises the forefinger of

her right hand. "What would be some of the reasons those people came here?"

"To get away from their political system."

"To make money."

"Is that true?" Jessica asks.

"They came looking for gold," Angel says.

"Ottavio?"

"They came as slaves."

Jessica crosses her arms and nods. Only Ottavio would have come up with that answer. For all his bullshit, he really thinks, and he really knows his own history.

"The point I'm trying to make," Jessica says, "is that most of us came here by choice." Ottavio flings up his hand like a first grader in need of a bathroom pass until Jessica adds, "With the exception of slaves." He subsides. "Most of us came for a reason. Including my grandparents."

"The potato famine," Ottavio shouts.

"Wrong ethnic group," Jessica says. "That's the Irish. I'm Jewish."

She moves to the blackboard and writes the words "New World."

"What does that suggest to you?"

"A change."

"Absolutely new to them."

"New *World*," Jessica says emphatically. "Not New *Land*." She swivels on her heels to face a student who has not yet contributed.

"Roberto?"

"Um."

Jessica waits.

"You know."

Jessica plants her feet, leans back, and grabs the rope in a pantomime tug-of-war. "Why do I feel I gotta pull this outta you?" she says. The class laughs and Roberto blushes.

"They came here to find a lot of space," he ventures. "They could have bigger farms."

"What else? 'New World.' Those are important words."

"Starting fresh."

"Totally different."

Jessica grins in triumph. Her tug-of-war is not only with Roberto. It is with the class, and it is with the subject. American literature is not accounting or metal shop or any of the more practical courses Seward Park offers. American literature does not indicate a vocation or prom-

ise its master a livelihood. Part of Jessica does not believe she can ask teenagers with very real financial worries to embrace the abstract of scholarship for scholarship's sake. Part of Jessica believes that embrace is an absolute necessity. She seeks to identify the element in a poem or story or novel that may touch a student's life in 1987 on the Lower East Side, and then to exploit that connection, luring the student through character and narrative ultimately into art.

"Relevance" was a favored term among the young educators of the 1960s, but "relevance" came to mean teaching only material reflective of daily reality. It condescended to a student, particularly an inner-city student, assuming one could recognize only the image in the mirror. Jessica, in contrast, taught more by the theatrical principles of Constantin Stanislavski, the Russian director who held that an actor has to plumb his or her past and there discover an emotional analog to inform the fictive character. For want of a more descriptive term, Stanislavski's theories became known as "The Method." What happens this morning in Room 336 is not dissimilar. Jessica does not preach the doctrine of American literature as "important" or "valuable," because value and import are best discovered along the way. Instead, she reminds her students that as immigrants of the 1980s, they may share some common feelings with immigrants of the 1680s, if only the desire to tell one's tale. Call her style "Method Teaching."

Up to this point, all the reading assignments have come in the form of rexos. To the delight, no doubt, of the two dozen teachers with whom she shares one duplicating machine, Jessica now dispenses texts. The book is an anthology of American literature, from Indian narratives to contemporary poetry, that was edited by two high school teachers from suburban Chicago. Each copy weighs four pounds and spans 944 pages; many copies carry such marginalia as "Breakfast Club 87—Philip, Gil, Jhon, Paul, Street." A few students heft the book in their hands like a general-store grocer weighing a chunk of cheddar, and they groan. One advantage of doling out rexos is that no assignment intimidates by dimension alone; there is no disguising this slab of verbiage, nearly two inches thick.

Jessica riffles the pages, as if exploring it for the first time. "Some people think no American literature existed before seventeen seventy-six," she says with calculated nonchalance. "Any ideas why?"

"No America."

"So if you were walking down Grand Street in sixteen-eighty and asked someone what they were, what would they say?"

"British."

"Dutch."

"Irish."

"French."

"Puerto Rican."

"Little too early," Jessica says, laughing. "But there *was* writing before seventeen seventy-six. American literature didn't just emerge. We're going to discover the kind of writing there was before there was an America at all."

She writes the numeral "1" on the board and to its right the word "Indians."

"Did the Indians have a literature?"

There is silence.

"Why not?"

"They didn't write."

"Why not?"

"No pens."

"The Indian tribe is small. They talk a lot."

"You know those Indians," Jessica says, rolling her eyes in mock exasperation. "Can't shut 'em up."

"I meant they pass it orally."

"Good thinking, folks," Jessica says. "I'm impressed."

She proceeds through the next few categories—explorers with their adventure yarns, settlers with their reports to the crown, religious leaders with their sermons and parables, slaves with their fables and songs and autobiographies. This lesson is working well until a voice issues from the intercom.

"Attention, attention, this is Mr. Levine. In three minutes, we will have a fire drill. Please move in an orderly fashion into your stairwell."

Jessica sits and drops her chin into her palm.

"We have to go on this?" Angel asks.

"No," Jessica says sourly. "We can stay and burn up."

Three clangs resound, and the students follow Jessica into the hall and down the nearest stairwell. They linger for several minutes, with Jessica impatiently jostling a pen, until three more clangs order the class back into Room 336.

"Next time," one student says, plopping into his seat, "I'd rather fry."

Jessica twists the comment to her own end. "So you don't like the fire drill," she says, linking hands behind her back and beginning to

pace. "What else don't you like? If you could change one thing about this school, what would you change?"

"This book."

"So you want to change it. What could you do?"

"PTA meeting."

"Petition."

"Steve?" Jessica says. She hears the rustle of a newspaper being crudely folded and stashed beneath a desktop. A distracted voice says, "I like the book."

"Angel?" He looks up. He is chewing on a toothpick. "You were the one who hated the book."

"No, Miss Siegel. That was Elvin."

"Elvin?"

"It was Angel."

Ottavio raises his hand and says, "Advertise."

"What do you mean, advertise?" Jessica says.

"You don't like something, you advertise to tell people how bad it is."

"You *convince*," Jessica says. She sits on the front corner of her desk. "You write a letter to Miss Jon. You write a letter to the *Seward World*. That great paper. Of which I happen to be adviser." She stands. "You *write*."

She loops the lesson back to the slaves. She asks why they depended so heavily on oral tradition.

"They weren't taught to write."

"Why?" Jessica asks.

"They didn't go to school."

"So you can only learn to read or write in school? You're giving us teachers too much credit."

"The white people," Angel says. "They wouldn't teach the slaves to read and write."

"Right," Jessica says, nodding assent. "In fact, there were laws against it." She leans forward, hovering over the students in the front row. "Because if you know how to read and write, what do you have?" She waits a beat. "You have power."

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Lugging a black tote bag, Angel Fuster walks into the English office to the waiting Jessica. "This," he announces, dropping the bag to

thudding effect, "is The Entity." The Entity bulges with college catalogues, admissions forms, and financial aid applications. Angel has tried to tame The Entity by donating some of its contents to his pet hamsters "so they can make little hamster houses," but even in slightly diminished form, it haunts his slumber, sprouting legs and baring teeth and chasing him around the room until he jolts awake. And daylight does nothing to temper his trepidation about college. He calls it "the 'C' word."

Angel knows that he goofed off for too many terms, and the proof shows in his 75 average. A lot of teachers consider him a "get-over," a dissembler who devotes more energy to avoiding assignments than he would have spent in completing them. Being a good student would be easy, Angel claims, but it would be boring. He would rather pass a hygiene course on manufactured sympathy, telling the teacher his girlfriend is pregnant and refusing to have an abortion, and soliciting excused absences for imaginary visits to Planned Parenthood. "Angel," says Bonnie Kowadlo, a business teacher who became one of his mentors, "could sell tuxedos to penguins."

"Getting over," however, has a second connotation, at least on ghetto streets. It means sustaining yourself or your family by whatever methods necessary. From age twelve, Angel has worked clandestinely to augment his divorced mother's welfare check, beginning by handing out leaflets for a supermarket at ten dollars a day, seven days a week. When welfare authorities learned of a later job, flipping hamburgers for minimum wage at McDonald's, they reduced his mother's aid. Deception and survival, then, commingle in Angel's morality, and as much as he desires success on his own merits, he doubts his ability to achieve it. Angel feels uneasy both in his extended family, where relatives ridicule his spotty Spanish, and in the larger white world. A suburban girl once refused to shake his hand on the podium of a statewide conference of Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA) chapters, and when he gave her the finger in reply, he was nearly ousted from the organization. Bonnie Kowadlo found him alone that night, convulsed in sobs, more despondent than she had ever seen any child.

Jessica pulls out chairs for herself and Angel, and they commence disemboweling The Entity, organ by organ.

"Eugene Lang College," Jessica says, grasping a folder. "You don't want to stay in New York, do you?"

"No." He pauses. "Just in case."

"LaGuardia Community College, out. College of Staten Island, out. Hofstra, in. Cornell." Jessica faces Angel. "Let's get real."

"OK," Angel says. "Out."

"Marine Corps, out."

"They sent me free socks."

"Give 'em to a teacher for extra credit."

She resumes the digging, and the two piles grow, blocking the path of anyone entering the office. Emma Jon is the first who tries to pass. She gazes critically at the two paper mounds rising from the linoleum. Then she looks at Jessica, expecting an explanation when none is forthcoming.

"Did you type that letter for me?" Emma asks.

"Not yet. I'll do it before I leave."

"All right."

Irritation infuses Emma's voice, but Jessica is so engaged with Angel she seems not to notice. Or not to care. She continues dividing the college materials like a croupier.

"Bryn Mawr?"

"What's the problem?" Angel asks.

"It's a girls' school."

"Good odds."

"Fordham," Jessica sputters through laughter. "Do they have dorms? Yes? OK. Syracuse, in."

"I have dreams about Syracuse," says Angel, suddenly quite serious. "I'm driving in a jeep with the top down."

"I thought it'd be a red convertible," Jessica says.

"Snows too much up there. It's snowing in my dream. And this girl's at my side, and we're driving past this bell building."

Angel takes the glossy brochure from Jessica's hand and points to the photograph of Crouse College, a classroom building with a pipe organ and tower chimes. Then he opens the front of his leather jacket to display a T-shirt.

"Orange," he says. "Just like Syracuse." His eyes brighten. "I oughta wear this when I do my videotape."

"Videotape?"

"My videotape. Paint my room orange. Put on a suit. Stand in front of a bunch of trophies. I've wanted to go to Syracuse ever since I was a lad."

"Gimme a break."

But Angel is not done. He retrieves the Manhattan telephone book from atop a file cabinet and races through the pages, seeking the listing for the Young Democrats.

"I thought I could join up," he explains to Jessica. "Not do a lot. Just put down on my application, 'Longstanding member of Young Democrats.'"

"Angel," Jessica says, sliding from soprano to baritone across two elongated syllables. "You don't need hype."

"It couldn't hurt." He continues paging through the book. "'Young Democrats of Chinatown,'" he pronounces in triumph. "Angel Ying Fuster."

Jessica suppresses a laugh, and when she recovers she suggests that Angel see Hal Pockriss. Hal is a guidance counselor assigned to College Discovery, a program providing special classes and extra counseling for students who lag more than two years below grade level in basic skills but have demonstrated reliable attendance and healthy study habits—in all ways, the antithesis of Angel. But Hal is also one of Jessica's fellow travelers in placing underachievers in college, and he is her friend. As Jessica dials Hal's extension, Angel moves from his chair to the long work table. He scribbles on a piece of scrap paper the numeral "4" and the letter "H." Jessica, by now off the phone, asks Angel what the 4 and the H mean. Angel's not planning to join the 4-H Club—at least as far as she knows. He explains. Four years at Syracuse, majoring in political science, and then law school at Harvard. He is not joking.

"Then I open up my practice," he says, "and I come back to Seward to start the Angel Fuster College Fund. Because I know that after I leave, there'll be someone else here like me."

"You can do that, Angel," Jessica says, drawing close. "You're the kind of person who really thinks about things, and asks questions. If you'd only trust that."

Angel stares at the floor, uncomfortable with the praise.

"Let's face it," he says. "I fucked up. I'd rather say I got a seventy-five because I was in Young Democrats than say I got a seventy-five because I had to go to work every night. If I was a college admissions officer, I wouldn't let me in. It's like the guy said, 'I wouldn't want to join any club that would have me as a member.'"

Jessica lowers her head, forcing Angel's eyes to meet her own. In social encounters, her eyes often roam and dodge. In school, they aim and fasten like a staple gun.

"If you want to get into Syracuse," she says, "you can start by revising your autobiography. You can go to see Mr. Pockriss. We'll make a time. You've got a lot going for you, Angel. You're in DECA. You're the business manager of the paper."

"And I'm a long-standing member of the Young Democrats of Chinatown."

"Enough with the hype, Angel," Jessica warns. "Remember: I'm your bullshit detector." Now she grins. "What would you do without me?"

"That's what I'm worried about."

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Jessica rubs the sleep from her eyes as her second-period students write. The journal topic asks, "What Is Your Favorite Possession? Why?" This personal inquiry will serve as the preface to her lesson on Anne Bradstreet's poem, "Upon the Burning of Our House." Jessica plants her palms on her cheekbones and massages each closed eye with three fingers. She has been satisfied with the literature classes thus far—two on the Indians, two on the European explorers—but bearded adventurers and braves in headdress are familiar figures from popular culture. How is Jessica supposed to enthrall three dozen city kids with the self-lacerating verse of a seventeenth-century religious fanatic? She thinks of what Denise Simone always says: "We have to compete with sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, and MTV."

Seeing the pens halt, Jessica solicits the students' answers, and a list spills across the blackboard. Walkman, guitar, cat, teddy bear, gold coin, T-shirt collection, self-confidence, a happy family.

"My guns," someone shouts.

"I don't want to think about what caliber or how many," Jessica says. Experience has taught her how to disarm a heckler with humor or indifference. Jessica is no naif when it comes to street violence or its potential inside Seward Park, but in her nine years at the school she has never once been threatened. The most dangerous kids on the Lower East Side do not bother attending school to study Anne Bradstreet or anything else.

"Now," Jessica says, "imagine how you'd feel if it went up in flames." No one answers. "Your favorite thing, up in flames." Again, silence. She sees something in the third row. "Harry, what's that? Do your physics homework in physics." She frowns with real dejection.

"What a slow class. Tomorrow I'm gonna bring orange juice to wake you all up. You've got to get a little more energized."

Point made, Jessica moves to the next stage of the lesson, reading the poem aloud. She stands erect, stiff as a schoolgirl in a spelling bee, and her voice issues flatly. The dry delivery is deliberate, because she leans harder on the words when she reaches the two key stanzas:

Here stood that trunk, and there that chest,
There lay that store I counted best.
My pleasant things in ashes lie,
And them behold no more shall I.
Under thy roof no guest shall sit,
Nor at thy table eat a bit.

No pleasant tale shall e'er be told,
Nor things recounted done of old.
No candle e'er shall shine in thee,
Nor bridegroom's voice e'er heard shall be.
In silence ever shall thou lie.
Adieu, adieu, all's vanity.

"So what's Anne Bradstreet's first response?"

"Scared," Aracelis says.

"Does anyone know what it's like to be in a fire?" Jessica asks.

"Anyone ever been in one?"

A number of hands rise. Arson is distressingly common in the neighborhood, but no one responds to Jessica's tacit request for details. She decides the subject is too personal and returns to the text.

"So she's made it out alive. Standing in the cold. Seeing everything burned up. What's her first thought?"

"Her belongings," says Addie. "She's mourning for everything she lost."

"Just think," Jessica says, opening her palms in a gesture of appeal.

"You're standing there. Everything's lost. But your family survived. What are you thinking?" A hand shoots up. "Aracelis?"

"Thank God."

"*Thank God,*" Jessica repeats firmly. "We're all safe. 'And when I could no longer look, I blest His name that gave and took.'" She closes the book, her forefinger marking the page. "Then what? Raquel?"

"She starts to feel bad about losing her things."

"How do we know?"

Following her finger across the smooth page, Raquel reads, and as she does Jessica writes on the board the various belongings mentioned in the poem. Trunk, chest, and table appear beside Walkman, guitar, and teddy bear, making the point for Jessica.

"So she's getting sad about these possessions," Jessica says, turning again toward the class. "But what else? Wilfredo?"

"Her memories."

"Think about losing what you care about," Jessica says, now erasing the two lists from the board. "Your records. Your stereo. Your bike. They can be replaced. Anne Bradstreet can build another house. Like Wilfredo said, it's the memories of that house. It's the way everyone hung around the kitchen telling stories. That's why she's bummed out. But then she changes gears again. 'Adieu, adieu, all's vanity.' What does 'adieu' mean?"

"'Goodbye,'" Raquel says.

"See, all the French you took came in handy. What about 'vanity'?"

"Prince's old girlfriend."

"That lady who turns the cards on 'Wheel of Fortune.'"

"The things you don't have to have," says Raquel, unruffled, "but that you want to have."

"Anybody else?" Jessica asks. She rarely settles for one answer, because that lets thirty students, timid or unprepared, hide behind an outspoken four or five. It is the quiet ones who she presses hardest to trust their own judgments, to search beyond easy answers. "C'mon. 'Vanity.' Hint: 'Vain.'"

A Chinese boy named Alex Tang extends his arm, which Jessica takes as a hopeful sign. She had Alex in the Lower East Side class last year, and remembers him as a sharp, irreverent kid strangely committed to failure. She has been trying to draw him out all term, from the very first day, when she asked him what he looked for in a blind date. Maybe her efforts are finally succeeding.

"Just concerned with your looks," Alex says.

"Suddenly she's calling all these dear possessions 'vanity.' Just wipes them all away." Jessica drags her hand across an imaginary slate. "And if you look further in the poem, she uses three metaphors for her possessions. Anyone know what they are?" She waits. "Anyone know two?" She waits again. "One?"

"'Dunghill mists,'" Raquel says softly.

"What's a dunghill?" Jessica asks, scanning the room. "Roberto knows, I can tell. Maribel knows, too. I can see her smiling. It's a hill of what?" She fixes on Truman Chang, an honor society member doing dishonorable work for Jessica. He wears a T-shirt of the heavy metal star Ozzy Osborne swinging a cross-ax. Scatology ought to be his sort of subject.

"I don't know how to say it," Truman says, unexpectedly avoiding the chance to outrage. "It's, um, waste."

"Waste," Jessica says. "That's a nice word."

"Doo-doo?" Truman offers.

"It's a pile of shit," Jessica says, and the room explodes with laughter and shock, almost drowning out the bell.

As coincidence has it, Jessica commences her first period class the following morning on the subject of dunghill mist. Once again, her blunt definition delights some and appalls a few. Either way, the snoozers awake.

"My God," whispers a girl in the front row, touching thumb and index finger to forehead. "I went to Catholic school last year."

"Eunice can't believe a Puritan lady would talk like this," Jessica tells the rest of the class. "What's that saying?"

"She's showing how much she loves her possessions," Angel says.

"Loves? That's why she compares them to *shit*?"

"But it's like if you lose your bike," Angel argues. "Once it's gone, you think, 'I didn't care that much about it.'"

Jessica locks arms behind her back and paces the horizon of the room. Her contemplation is affected, but the performance has a purpose. Angel challenged her, intelligently and specifically, and by weighing his dissent she wants to encourage more. For most of these students, hearing a teacher admit error is rarer than hearing a teacher say "shit."

"So Angel thinks she's putting it on," Jessica says as she strides. "Think about how that works with the stanza before. 'Adieu, adieu, all's vanity.' Elvin?"

"Her stuff don't mean anything."

"Why?"

"Because she don't have it anymore."

"What are her feelings now? She's gone through all these changes. First she's happy to be alive. Then she thinks . . ."

"Rotten," someone calls.

"Worthless."

“Useless,” Jessica says, and then she reads aloud the final stanza of the poem:

A price so vast as is unknown
Yet by His gift is made thine own;
There’s wealth enough, I need no more,
Farewell my pelf, farewell my store.
The world no longer let me love,
My hope and treasure lies above.

“What’s she saying there?” Jessica asks the class.

“That her stuff is priceless,” Mike says.

“Priceless? She says, ‘Farewell my pelf.’ What does the book say ‘pelf’ means?”

Mike and the rest find the footnote, which defines the archaism as “Wealth or money looked upon with contempt.”

“If it’s priceless,” Jessica says, “why the contempt?”

A girl in glasses and a ponytail raises her hand. On the first day of class, she had seated herself in the front right corner of the room. The front declared her dutiful intents, the corner her timorous instincts. Jessica nearly needs her Delaney card to remember the girl’s name is Donna.

“She wants to go to heaven,” Donna says.

“Good thinking, Donna,” Jessica says, certain to honor the girl by name. “And what does that tell us about a Puritan’s view of life? This is a short poem, but it can tell us a lot about what’s in here.” She taps her temple. “What does being a Puritan mean?”

“Someone who’s clean.”

“Kind of,” Jessica says affably. “What else?” She leans against the corner where the south wall and the blackboard intersect, pretending the patience of a police interrogator. The class outlasts her. “Folks,” she says, “maybe you slept through American History One, but you can make some connections. I know you think English is English and history is history and they’re separate parts of your notebook and blah, blah, blah. But they’re connected. See if you can fit the pieces together.” She moves to her desk. “Why did the Puritans come here?”

“For their religion.”

“They were persecuted by the Church of England.”

“Awright,” Jessica exults. “Ten steps forward. They thought the

Church of England was too lax. They wanted to purify it. What were their rules like?"

"Strict. *Stone* strict."

"Like?"

"No drinking. No smoking. No premarital sex."

"Oh, man," someone moans, and the class laughs.

Jessica, though, believes that the Puritan injunctions are not so distant from her students' lives as they may like to think. She feels the gravitational tug of Catholicism every time the subject of abortion arises. And where the Catholic Church has ebbed, particularly in the Hispanic community, Protestant evangelical denominations have begun to thrive. Inside trendy teenage cynicism, faith persists, promising explanation for the inexplicable and comfort for the unendurable.

"The main purpose for people on earth," Angel says, "is to get prepared for the afterlife."

"Absolutely," Jessica affirms. "And how could that philosophy come in handy in the New World?"

"The New World," Angel says, "is rough."

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Jessica's battle to keep Wilfredo Ayala begins during first-period English 7. Tom Borelli, the acting coordinator of the Program Office, appears at the door of Room 336 with the names of four students, all of whom are being shunted into an eighth-period English 7 class and assigned a first-period typing course they probably neither want nor need. An agreement between the Board of Education and the United Federation of Teachers, designed to help faculty and students, limits the size of a high school class to 34. In a school like Seward Park, too large to begin with and constantly adding "over-the-counter" enrollees, a class that falls within the limit in September often exceeds it by October. The Program Office, charged with the unenviable task of organizing 3,500 students' schedules, then undertakes a process called "equalization," whirling about kids like cards in an immense game of three-card monte. All the effort amounts to exchanging the intolerable situation of overcrowded classes for the intolerable situation of upheaving students in midterm. But it placates union watchdogs, board bureaucrats, and state auditors.

Losing those four kids from the first-period class bothered Jessica, especially hearing one say in parting, "I really liked your class." So

when Borelli's assistant turns up at the second period session asking for Wilfredo Ayala, she refuses to surrender him. Wilfredo is a muscular, big-shouldered boy, like Ottavio Johnson one of the Dog Brothers, but Jessica physically bars his exit. "They told me to go to the other class," he says with resignation. She shakes her head and says, "Just stay here."

In Wilfredo's rejiggered schedule, he would be taking English 7 with Lavinia Rausch, a disciplinarian generally loathed by her pupils. A steady stream of students, students who delight most other teachers, have landed in the English office this fall for violating Rausch's various rules. She provoked an otherwise docile Chinese girl into a shoving match. A Chinese boy once lamented to Steve Anderson, "Mrs. Rausch for English. Third time. Much unlucky." A self-possessed student, Jessica figures, can always survive an uninspiring instructor. Wilfredo, though, is someone on the brink, only beginning to treat his life seriously, and for all his brawn quite vulnerable.

Image normally means little to Jessica, but she can hardly miss a fastidious quality in Wilfredo. His handwriting displays the clean lines and precise corners of a draftsman's. He carries himself with a correct, soft-spoken manner that obviously serves him well in his part-time job at a Wall Street law office. While other boys maintain a stable of five or ten pairs of basketball sneakers, Wilfredo sticks with one set of white Nikes, which he launders religiously. Jessica feels certain Wilfredo is capable of far more than the 71 average he has compiled so far at Seward Park.

In his autobiography, Wilfredo said he regretted his former indifference toward school, but such admissions in Jessica's experience are not unusual. Where he separated himself, and struck her, was in the depth of his contrition, in his desire not for improvement as much as redemption. "When I look around me," Wilfredo wrote, "I see a lot of people around the neighborhood, and a couple of family members, wishing, Oh, how they should've gone to school, how they should've gotten a good education, how they could have made something out of themselves. Basically they go through life with a whole bunch of 'What if's.' At that point, I said to myself, 'Hey, self, you don't want to be a 'what if' person. Go to school. Get a good education. Have a future to look forward to. And let the world know you want to succeed in life.'"

Jessica does not know exactly what underlies those words, and Wilfredo is not the type of young man to volunteer intimacies. His

parents, who left Puerto Rico for the promise of better employment in New York, are disabled, jobless, and dependent on relief. Of his older siblings, one brother works as a hospital aide and another as a parking-lot attendant, while his sister quit her accounting job to care for her children after her husband left. None of them failed, Wilfredo feels, but neither did they fully realize their possibilities.

In junior high school, when raging hormones transformed many of his classmates into fledgling hoodlums, Wilfredo remained a solid, serious student. It was when he entered Seward Park that he began to drift, cutting class two or three periods a day, once going an entire term without submitting a single piece of homework. Because Wilfredo was such a quiet, polite boy, not the sort to draw attention to himself, his absences generally went unnoticed. And once he felt it mattered little to his teachers whether he appeared or not, he vanished even more frequently. Sometimes he lounged outside the Ludlow Street bodega, and sometimes he strolled back to his apartment in the LaGuardia Houses, a subsidized project. When his parents scolded him, he ignored them. With the \$150 a week he was making on his job, he was already supporting himself, and moving beyond the orbit of their influence.

Midway through his junior year, Wilfredo started to awaken. He told his guidance counselor that he wanted to attend Baruch College, a branch of the City University of New York, and that he had ambitions of becoming a doctor. The counselor said that with Wilfredo's 65 average he'd be lucky to get into a junior college, much less Baruch and then medical school. Wilfredo wanted something better than his siblings had, and he wanted to get out of the neighborhood, especially since the arrival of crack. The couple next door were addicts, supporting their habits by renting the premises to fellow smokers, and obliviously allowing their baby to wander into the Ayala apartment. "All raggedy," Wilfredo remembered. "Like a Cabbage Patch doll."

Wilfredo pulled his average above 70 by the end of his junior year, but he still took a few too many sabbaticals, often joined by two friends from the LaGuardia Houses. Then, in the summer before his senior year, both the friends were jumped by members of Here To Chill in a disagreement about a girl. Here To Chill continued threatening the two boys during the school year, until they deemed it wiser to transfer to another high school, Julia Richman. Their departure had two very different effects on Wilfredo. Without their company, cutting class wasn't nearly as much fun. And the spectacle of seeing them

strong-armed out of Seward Park made him obstinate about staying. What he couldn't understand was why this Miss Siegel, who hardly knew him, should care. Teachers before her had never missed him when he was gone, and now she was refusing to let him go. "She saw something in me," Wilfredo would say months later, "that I didn't see in myself."

Jessica commences her campaign with a visit to the Program Office. She locates Tom Borelli amid computer terminals and bound volumes of printouts, a harried man.

"Tom," she says, "I want to . . ."

"No."

"You didn't even hear what I'm asking."

"It's about putting kids back who've been equalized out." He raises his eyebrows. "Right?"

"Not kids," Jessica says. "One kid. I really like him. I don't mind having him in class."

"Thirty-four in a class. That's the rule."

"Even if the teacher doesn't mind? Even if the teacher requests it?"

"That's the rule," Tom repeats. "What happens if the auditors come?"

"That rule has no connection to human needs," Jessica says. "I connect to this kid, and he connects to me." She brakes her accelerating anger, careful not to alienate a potential ally. "I'll take the extra kid. I'll give you a requisition in writing. You can show them."

"No. They may change the rule in two years. Then we can do it."

Tom's best isn't good enough for Jessica. In two years, Wilfredo Ayala might be parking cars. Jessica goes to Helen Cohen; Helen says she cannot intercede, but advises Jessica to talk to Emma Jon; Emma says she sympathizes, but she cannot override Tom. Jessica heads back to the Program Office, and there she runs into Larry Schwartz. Larry splits his time between programming and teaching English, and he is a friend who shares Jessica's passions for theater and baking. He also represents, at this moment, her final line of appeal. She tells him about Wilfredo.

"Oh, yeah," Larry says, "he's a great kid."

"He's changed a lot," adds Veda Luftig, an aide in the Program Office.

"So what do I do?" Jessica asks Larry. "I'm concerned about this kid sitting in my class."

"He's still sitting there, isn't he?"

"Yeah," Jessica says, "but what happens?"

"Nothing happens," Larry says. He presses his palms together and beams beatifically. "Wilfredo sits there and you teach him and you give him a grade." He points to a computer terminal. "And I put it in."

* * *

Jonathan Edwards, Tom Paine, Washington Irving, William Cullen Bryant, and Herman Melville all visit Room 336 as the weeks pass. The Great Awakening and the American Revolution come and go as rapidly as fruit flies or crocuses, and the Republic launches into the building of railroads and sailing ships and cities. A one-term survey of American literature is by nature an exercise in time-lapse photography, and Jessica is racing to reach the Civil War by Christmas, leaving January for the twentieth century. This Monday morning, well into November, she is embarking on Walt Whitman, although all her students know is that they are being asked to write in their journals whether they would prefer living in the country or in the city. But then, most of them realize by now that no question from Miss Siegel can be considered innocent because she always wants an answer.

"The city," says Maribel Mendez.

"Why?"

"That's where I grew up."

"Raquel?"

"City. More quick and advanced."

"José?"

"The country."

"Why?"

"I could have rabbits."

"So what's the argument for each?" Jessica asks. She smooths a rose-print blouse over a matching skirt as she waits. "I want you to think about them. Because the next couple of people we'll read were writing at the same time the cities were growing up. We're going to look at Thoreau in a couple of days. But right now we want to ask how Walt Whitman communicates his feelings about New York."

She commences a brief biography of Whitman, and without using the word, she paints him as a populist. In his homage to bustle and clamor and diversity, Whitman's vision of New York encompasses and enlarges Jessica's vision of New York; his poems throb with the same

energy as the Red Grooms paintings Jessica so savors. With all the bums, drugs, and gangs in the New York of her students, she wants to remind them that it is, too, a city of magic.

Jessica hands out a rexo she typed early this morning of Whitman's poem "Mannahatta." The ragged edges of the verses instantly distinguish "Mannahatta" from the straight boundaries of Bradstreet's writing. What strikes many of the students, no doubt, as Jessica's sloppy daybreak typing is, in fact, one of the objects of her lesson. Suspecting the confusion free verse can cause, Jessica recites the first few lines herself:

I was asking for something specific and perfect for my city,
Whereupon lo! upsprang the aboriginal name.

Now I see what there is in a name, a word, liquid, sane,
unruly, musical, self-sufficient, . . .

Then she asks for someone to finish. José and Raquel both volunteer, and José, gallant, defers. His chivalry is fortunate, because Raquel speaks poetry with ease and affection, and her throaty, Spanish-tinged voice glides through Whitman's tongue-twisting encomium. Whether anyone else understands equally well is the question.

"How does Whitman describe New York?" Jessica asks. "Julio?" She sees a head turned sideways on a desktop. "You awake?"

"Big time," he mutters.

"What do you mean?"

"Big time."

"Julio, you make me feel like I'm pulling teeth," she says, and her eyes trawl. "Truman?"

"Crowded streets."

"What else? Elizabeth?"

"A lot of immigrants are coming."

"How do we know?"

"Immigrants arriving, fifteen or twenty thousand in a week."

"Better," Jessica says. "Lun?"

"Talks about ships."

"Remember," Jessica says, "New York used to be a big seaport. They didn't just build South Street Seaport to put in all the shops." There is laughter. The Seaport, a short walk from Seward Park, is a favorite weekend hangout.

Jessica rests her chin on her fisted hand in a pose of inquiry. "So what's Whitman's attitude about New York?" she asks. "Which side of the argument would he come down on?"

"He loves it," says José, legs sprawling into the aisle. "He says, 'It's my city.'"

Moving from student to student, Jessica elicits examples easily, for "Mannahatta" is nothing if not a litany of praises, the "I ♥ New York" campaign of its era. That takes care of content, which for a few of Jessica's colleagues is destination enough in a literature lesson. For her, the harder part of the class lies ahead, the journey from the concrete of narrative to the abstract of style. She begins by rereading the first lines of the poem. Then she asks, "Where does the name 'Mannahatta' come from?"

"Indians," Lun says.

"Whitman says that name's 'specific and perfect' for his city. Why?" No answer comes. "Read those three lines." She taps her copy of the rexo. "It's down there in purple and white." She waits again. "Take a stab at it. Paulette? Addie? Joanna?"

This silence is not affected. The students are stymied. Jessica asks them to consider the difference between "Mannahatta" and "New York." But the onomatopoeia, the jazz of language, eludes their grasp. Jessica decides to drop the point for the moment, intending to circle back to it by another route.

"What do you notice about the form of the poem?"

"It's like a paragraph," Jose says.

"Not exactly. But you're on the right track. Explain it more."

"It looks like a story."

"No stanzas," adds Harry.

"What's a stanza?" José whispers to him.

"What else do you notice?" Jessica persists.

"No rhyme," Aracelis says.

"And?"

"It's boring."

Jessica laughs easily, then slides back into the lesson.

"In other words, as José and Harry were suggesting, it's one continuous sentence." She pulls back behind her desk. "Now, the poetry you usually read in school has rhyme. And what goes with rhyme? I'll give you a clue." She marches across the room stiff as a wooden soldier in *The Nutcracker Suite*. "Da-dum, da-dum, da-dum." She executes an about-face. "Da-dum, da-dum, da-dum." At ease. "What's that called?"

“Beat,” Jose says.

“Beat,” Jessica confirms. “Or meter.”

She draws an equation on the board: “No rhyme + no meter = free verse.”

“Think about how this poem is constantly moving, constantly changing,” she says. “It doesn’t stop anywhere.” She pauses. “Like New York City.” She pauses again, letting the syllogism register. “You can see how Whitman gets across the feeling of New York. Not only from the words he chooses, but from the form he chooses. What he called”—she taps the board—“free verse.”

* * *

Ben Dachs calls Jessica at home a few nights later. She is glad to hear from him and at the same time a bit suspicious. Somewhere amid the small talk, he asks Jessica how she’s been getting along with Emma, and then it dawns on her that Ben is subtly sounding an alarm. Emma is Ben’s successor as well as his friend, and it only makes sense that she would confide in him about her friction with Jessica. Jessica appreciates Ben’s gesture toward diplomacy, but she rues its necessity. The problems with Emma are clearly more serious than she had gauged.

They are, in fact, utterly fundamental. Jessica earns an additional \$800 a year for her work with *Seward World*, but for years she has wanted to trade the money for an additional free period—a dispensation known as a “point-two” because it relieves a teacher of two-tenths of the daily class load. She pled her case most mightily to Ben when he was chairman, and he frankly believed it a lost cause. Some faculty members received point-twos under the union contract, Ben knew, while the remainder were given by Dr. Kriftcher to teachers with administrative appointments. Ben could not imagine Dr. Kriftcher giving Jessica a point-two and setting a precedent for all the coaches and advisers who, like her, receive cash stipends rather than lighter loads.

Yet Ben saw all the dim mornings and dusky afternoons that Jessica poured into *Seward World*, and he could reckon by her reddened eyes and raw nerves how many midnights and weekends. So he engineered a little subterfuge. He won a point-two for the position of assistant chair, claiming there was a surfeit of clerical work for any one person, and he appointed Jessica. Then he gave a paraprofessional most of the clerical work and Jessica the free period for *Seward World*. But then Ben went to Beach Channel, and everything changed.