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Just Another Kid

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Extract

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Chapter 1

It was a hodgepodge setup, that classroom, not unlike the rest of my life at the time. The room was huge, a cavernous old turn-of-the-century affair with a twelve-foot-high ceiling and magnificent large windows that looked out on absolutely nothing worth seeing: a brick wall and the chimney stack of the heating plant next door. A hefty chunk of the room had been partitioned off with gray steel industrial shelving units, used to store the school district's staff library. The L-shaped area that was left, was mine. Windows ran the length of the wide, long arm of the L, where the chairs and worktable were; the narrow, shorter arm of the L contained the chalkboard on one wall and the door at the far end. It was an adequate amount of space; I had taught in considerably more cramped conditions, but it was a quirky arrangement. The blackboard was useless because it couldn't be seen from the work area. And short of standing like a sentry at the junction of the two arms of the L, I could not monitor the door. Most eccentric, however, was the district's decision to combine a classroom for disturbed children with a staff library.

This was to be the first official self-contained classroom in the district for E.D.—emotionally disturbed—

children since the mainstreaming law had come into existence back in the seventies. I was called a consultant resource person in my job description; the children were termed behaviorally disordered; and the classroom was known, on paper, only as The Center, but we'd come full circle. For me, walking back into the schoolroom that late August morning, having been gone from teaching almost six years, had provoked a sense of intense déjà vu. It seemed simultaneously as if I had been away forever and yet had never left at all.

I hadn't meant to be teaching again. I'd been abroad for almost two years, working full time as a writer, and I intended to return to my life in Wales, to my stone cottage, my dog and my Scottish fiancé. But family matters had brought me home, and then I'd gotten embroiled in the interminable red tape involved with gaining a permanent British visa. Every conceivable problem cropped up, from lost bank records to closed consulates, and one month's wait stretched out to three and then four, with no clear prospect of the visa's arrival. Disconcerted and annoyed, I traveled among friends and family.

A friend of a friend rang me one afternoon. I'd never met her, but she'd heard of me, she said. And she'd heard about my problem. They had a problem of their own, it seemed, and she was wondering if maybe we couldn't help one another out. One of their senior special education teachers had been taken unexpectedly and seriously ill. There were only ten days left before the beginning of the new school year, and they had no immediate recourse to another special education teacher. Would I be interested in some substitute teaching?

No, I'd said immediately. I was waiting for this stupid visa. If it came through, I wanted to be able to leave instantly. But the woman wasn't easily put off. Think about it, she said. If my visa did come through early, I *could* leave. They could find another substitute, if necessary. But otherwise, it would be a good way to spend my time. Just think about it, she urged.

Still I'd said no, but by the time the Director of Special Education contacted me, I had mellowed to the idea. Okay, I said. Why not?

Sitting there amid the paraphernalia accumulated for the start of another school year, I stared out the window at the smokestack, dull and gray in the summer sunshine. I was coming to the nettling conclusion that I wasn't a very well directed sort of person. I didn't have a career so much as a series of collisions with interesting opportunities. After ages away from teaching, an abortive Ph.D. attempt, several years in private research, a spell as a clinical psychologist, and time abroad spent writing, here I was again, sitting at a table converted by clutter into my teacher's desk. I enjoyed such unpredictability and diversity; indeed, I thrived on it. But I was also growing increasingly sensitive to how capricious my lifestyle actually was.

A knock on the door brought me sharply out of my thoughts.

"Torey?" a voice called. I couldn't see who it was from where I was sitting, so I rose. A secretary from the front office had her head around the door. "One of your kids has arrived," she said. "The parents are in the front office."

The old building was no longer used as a school, but rather it housed the district administration offices,

most of which were on the ground floor. I had the entire upper floor to myself as the rest of the rooms were used only for storage. In fact, there were only two functional classrooms in the whole building, mine and that of the full-day program for educable retarded preschoolers two floors below, in the basement. So the halls were hauntingly quiet on this first day of school.

I followed the secretary down to the large main office, alive with clacking typewriters and cluttering word processors. A man and a woman were standing in front of the chest-high barrier that served as a reception desk. They would have been a remarkable-looking couple in any circumstance. The man must have been at least seven feet tall, because I, at almost five feet ten inches, did not even reach his shoulder. But in spite of his size, he was soft and delicate looking, with gray hair in loose, tousled curls, like a child's. He appeared to be in his late fifties, and although not particularly handsome, he was attractive in the way aging men are, an attractiveness born more of confidence than anything physical.

The woman, who looked to be only in her thirties at the most, was startlingly beautiful. Indeed, I had never seen anyone up close who looked like she did. She was tall and angular, with chiseled cheekbones and a Kirk Douglas cleft in her chin. Her eyes were pale green, genuinely green, like cat's eyes, only lighter, and quite prominent, giving her an intense, almost arrogant appearance. Her hair was a dark, tawny blond and very, very long. Although straight, it was thick and unruly, flowing about her like a lion's mane. Hers was an elegant, assured kind of beauty, the sort one doesn't usually find outside fashion magazines, and it seemed

rather out of place in real life, but it had an arresting effect on me.

"Good morning," I said and extended my hand. "I'm Torey Hayden."

The man reached forward and gave my hand a quick, damp shake. The woman didn't move. She was very casually dressed and made up, but there was nothing casual about her demeanor at all. Every muscle was taut. It made her beauty more impressive. She bristled with beauty, keeping it drawn up around her like a cloak.

Silence followed. I didn't have a clue as to who these two were.

"You'll have to excuse me," I said. "Mrs. Adams, who was supposed to be teaching this class, has gone very unexpectedly into hospital. I'm her replacement, and I just took this job a few days ago. I've got to admit—"

"We can't get her out of the car," the woman blurted.

"Oh."

The man was glancing around, as if not paying particular attention. The woman regarded me intently. While her expression was not precisely hostile, neither was it very friendly. She studied me with the kind of unabashed scrutiny not usually tolerated among adults.

"Let's just leave it for today," the man said, still gazing off. Languidly, he looked down at me. "Perhaps she'll feel more like it tomorrow."

Without any warning, the woman's eyes filled with tears. She blushed brilliantly, and all the muscles tightened along her jaw. "*No,*" she said through gritted teeth. Then she turned abruptly and bolted out of the office.

The man shifted his feet uneasily, and I half expected him to take off too, but he didn't. "My wife's a bit upset about this," he said softly.

"So I see."

A pause. The man looked down at me. He had blue, watery eyes. "I think we should just leave it."

"Why don't I come down and help? I'm quite used to this sort of thing. It's pretty normal. New teacher, new room, all that."

He shook his head. "No, let's just leave it. I'll bring her in tomorrow." And he turned and left before I could say more.

I gazed in stunned disbelief at the empty doorway. Turning, I saw the three secretaries watching me. We all burst out laughing, for lack of a better reaction.

"Can you believe that?" I asked. "I don't even know who they were."

"The Considynes," replied one of the secretaries. "They're our answer to *Dallas.*"

My second student arrived shortly after I returned to the room. Mariana Gilchrist. With her was her mother, a young woman who couldn't have been more than twenty-five. Her hair was cut short and greased into thin, wet-looking spikes that stood up all over her head. Her eye makeup, a combination of heavy liner and pearly shadow, made her look like Cleopatra. By contrast, Mariana, in a red tartan jumper over a frilly white blouse, seemed sweetly old-fashioned.

"Am I the first kid here?" she asked. "Oh, goody. I get everything first. I get to pick everything I want first." She pulled away from her mother.

"You behave yourself in here," Mrs. Gilchrist said. "You got to behave. This here lady'll make you. You can't go effing around in here like in that other class."

"Where's my place?" Mariana was asking. She was at the far end of the room already. "Where's my place going to be?"

"I'm going now," her mother said.

"Are these toys for us kids?" Mariana had opened the cupboard under the sink and was hauling everything out.

"Good-bye. I'm going now. I'm leaving you in this here place."

The girl never looked up.

Mariana was eight and came with the kind of profile that was almost a cliché in this sort of classroom: borderline IQ, short attention span, overaggressive. She also had a history of precocious sexual behavior. Her entire short career at school had been spent in one special setting or another, and she had achieved virtually nothing. After three years, she could neither read nor write and could understand only the most basic math.

"Where's the other kids at?" Mariana asked suddenly. She rose, leaving a litter of puzzles, games and art materials behind her on the floor. "Who else is going to be in here? Will there be any girls?"

"Yes, one. There're only going to be three of you in here to start with, although I expect we will have others join us as we go along."

"What's the other girl's name? Is she eight too?"

"She's seven, and her name is Leslie."

"How soon's she going to be eight? When's her birthday?"

"Next spring."

"Well, we'll probably be best friends anyway, even if she is a bit young for me." Mariana took up a pencil and tried to drill a little hole into the Formica tabletop.

The door banged, and my third student entered.

I was well prepared for Dirkie. They had all told me about Dirkie. He was eleven and had spent virtually all his life in institutions. He had had an early childhood history too horrible to bear thinking about, a litany of abandonments, abuse and bizarre family acts. Then had come a long spell in the state mental hospital. Eighteen months earlier, a husband-and-wife team of psychologists had met Dirkie while they were working at the state hospital. They had fallen in love with him, with his curiously lovable ways, and had decided to become his foster parents in an attempt to give him some chance at a normal family life. Dirkie's problems, however, were rather more than love alone could conquer. He was diagnosed as having childhood schizophrenia and had a very poor prognosis for improvement. As a consequence of his truly amazing assortment of peculiar behaviors, he had not managed to survive the previous school year in a regular classroom and had ended up being taught at home.

Both Dirkie's foster parents came with him that morning, dragging Dirkie between them. He struggled and screamed. "No! No! No! Don't make me go in there! No! Help!" he yelled, nonstop.

I held the door open. Once inside, he broke free and bolted across the room. "Hoo-hoo-hoo!" he squealed with sudden glee, and leaped up on top of the table. Mariana's eyes grew wide with surprise.

"Come down from there, please, Dirkie," his foster mother said in a soft, patient tone. "Tables aren't for standing on, remember. Come down now."

"Hoo-hoo-hoo!" He was down from the table and under it.

I smiled at his foster parents. I felt an instant empathetic fondness for them. "I think we'll be all right."

The woman smiled back, and I saw her relief. I couldn't tell if it came from my confidence that we really would be all right or if it was the prospect of being free of Dirkie for six hours.

After his parents left, Dirkie remained under the table and hooted like a demented monkey.

"That kid's crazy," Mariana said seriously. "Did you know that? Did you know that kid was going to be crazy?"

I nodded.

"The other one's not going to be crazy too, is she? The girl, I mean. The girl's not going to be crazy too? She's going to be my best friend."

"I haven't met her yet, so I don't know. But she's not going to have Dirkie's problems, if that's what you mean. Everyone's different."

"Dirkie? *Dirkie?* Gad, what a stupid name. No wonder he's crazy. Hey, Turkey-Dirkie, how you doing under there?"

"Mariana ..."

"Dirkie-Turkey. Dirkie-Turkey." Then suddenly she stopped short. She dropped down on her hands and knees to see Dirkie better through the tangle of chairs. "Gad. Look what he's doing. Teacher. He's rubbing hisself. Look, he's humping. He's humping that chair leg." She leaped to her feet.

I moved forward to take the chairs away and then reached down for Dirkie. "Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!" he squealed with excitement.

"Come on, Dirkie. Come out from under there. Here, take my hand. Let's sit up in a chair. I've got some interesting things in store for us today."

Rising, I dragged Dirkie out.

"Mariana!" I cried in surprise. "What *are* you doing?"

She had her jumper hiked up around her waist and was removing her underpants.

"Put everything back on this instant and pull your dress down. *Now!*"

"Oooooh!" Dirkie said. Excitement brightened his eyes, and he slid off the chair like butter melting into a pan. The chair beside me began to convulse as he masturbated against it.

Beyond the shelving, the door to the classroom unexpectedly opened and shut, and before I could extract Dirkie from under the table again, Mrs. Considyne appeared with her hand clenched around the back of her daughter's neck.

"Good morning again," I said and smiled. I was acutely aware of Mariana, just beyond me, her underpants not yet up. Dirkie hooted maniacally.

Mrs. Considyne pushed her daughter forward. Her fingertips were white from the pressure of her grip on the child's neck.

"Hello, Leslie," I said. "I'm so glad you could make it after all. We were just preparing to start."

Leslie did not look at me but rather through me. Her expression was completely vacant.

"Here, come here. I'll show you where your cubby is. You can put your lunch box in there." I laid a hand

on the girl's shoulder and gently eased her away from her mother's grasp.

Mariana materialized, fully dressed, at my side. "Hello, you," she said to Leslie. "I'm the other girl in this here class. You want to be my best friend? You want to sit with me?"

Leslie screwed up her face and slapped her hands over her ears.

"Oh, *shit,*" Mariana muttered. "She's crazy, just like him."

I returned to Mrs. Considyne, who was looking fairly horrified. "I'm sure Leslie will be all right. Things are always a little hectic the first few days of a new year."

She said nothing, but rather looked past me, over my shoulder toward the children.

"I do appreciate your having gone to the trouble to bring her in, Mrs. Considyne. I realize there were problems, but it is probably a good idea that she comes on this first day."

She nodded. Looking down, she opened what I had assumed was her handbag. Instead, it was sort of a little medical kit full of bottles and cups. "Here are Leslie's things. The testers and the insulin and all that. I've put extra candy in, in case of shock. You *do* know what you're doing?" she asked, glancing up.

I hoped she meant regarding Leslie's diabetes. I nodded. "I've been shown. But Mrs. Whicker, the school nurse, is coming in to give the injections for a few weeks."

I put the bag on one of the upper shelves of the library to keep it out of the children's reach and then moved around Mrs. Considyne in an effort to encourage her to leave. Turning, she came with me.

"Oh, by the way," she said, as we reached the door, "I'm not Considyne. My husband's Considyne. My name's Taylor."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Ms. Taylor."

She shook her head. "Not Mzzz. I'm Dr. Taylor."

I felt myself blushing. "Oh. Okay. I'm sorry."

Dirkie sidled up. Standing beside me, he gazed up at Dr. Taylor for a long moment. "My," he said in a very solemn voice, "what big tits you got."