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A Tutor with Much to Learn

“Mrs. Simone?” I asked as I rapped lightly on the door. She looked up from her desk.

“Yes,” she said. “Are you here to tutor?” I nodded, painfully aware of what I wore. Maybe I should have gone without the UGA sweatshirt. The students might think I was pretentious or too foreign. The Meyers City High School was an alternative school, and I had no experience tutoring in a setting like this.

“I’ll find you someone to work with,” she announced and left the room. The classroom was small and carpeted with a strange configuration of desks. About ten students worked silently on their laptops. I sat at an empty desk and squinted at the many equations written on the white board. Math had never been my strength, and the five minutes I spent trying to figure out the first two problems only reaffirmed my choice to be an English teacher.

“No one said they needed help next door,” she sighed as she walked back in. “Does anyone in here need tutoring?”

The students were silent. They looked on at their computer screens with blank expressions.

“Alicia?” Mrs. Simone prompted. “Do you need help?”

She shook her head.

“Jackson, what are you working on?”

“Portuguese,” he huffed.

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes I am!”

Mrs. Simone sighed, and her kind eyes fell back on me. “I can tell you right now that almost all of them are failing English.”

I laughed nervously, unsure of what to say to that.

“We’ve been missing one of our teachers,” she continued. “They need help. They just don’t want to admit it yet.”

I pondered that as she turned to her desk to find me some papers to file. When I was in high school, I happily asked for help. I’d stayed after school almost every day to work on math. I wondered why the twenty something students in the after school program were too self-conscious to ask for help, especially when it seemed like they were all in the same boat.

No one asked for my help that first day, but they did ask plenty of other questions.

“What’s your favorite band?” One kid, Alex, asked me. He wore clunky headphones around his neck, and he slouched comfortably in his chair.

“Umm, Panic! At the Disco,” I answered.

“What song would I know?” he asked. I breathed a sigh of relief. I had been so nervous about connecting with these kids-especially since I had a difficult enough time connecting with people my own age- that I hadn’t expected them to be just as interested in me. Where my understanding of their lives failed me, their curiosity bridged the gaps.

I told him their most popular song, and he looked it up. It turned out, he did know it, and I heard it blasting faintly from his headphones as he worked at his computer for the rest of the period.

The students were restless today. There were more of them than usual. Six of them sat clustered around one table, laughing and yelling and cursing.

“Watch your language,” Mrs. Simone snapped. They didn’t pay her much attention.

“Watch your language,” Nick repeated in a mocking voice. The others laughed.

Mrs. Simone sighed. “I can’t control them today. I love them but I’ve had enough.”

I didn’t know how she’d managed them for so long. She joked with them as well as scolded them. She nurtured them but knew when to challenge them. She took their disrespect as a sign of love as expertly as any mother would.

A girl named Nia breathed a particularly nasty string of curse words.

“Nia, you talk like that around your daughter?” Mrs. Simone admonished.

Nia’s voice sobered as she replied, “I don’t cuss around my daughter.”

I eyed her. Nia was maybe just two years younger than me, and she had to take care of a child. I looked around the room and wondered what kind of lives the other kids lived. They were awfully young. If not for teachers like Mrs. Simone, teachers who truly cared, they might not have been in this room. They might not have been enrolled in high school at all.

“Their teacher is sick,” Mrs. Simone told me in a low voice, so the others wouldn’t hear. “Today was her last day. She isn’t coming back. The kids are confused and hurting. I’ll give them a break.”

I nodded. Even if the students sometimes disrespected Mrs. Simone or the other teachers, it was clear that they still cared about them deeply. Many of them probably didn’t have much stability in their lives. This school meant more to some of them than my high school had ever meant to me.

Mrs. Simone kept working at her desk-sometimes ignoring their yelling, sometimes snapping at them to hush, and always shaking her head to herself with the wariness of someone who cared for them all very much. I respected Mrs. Simone, maybe more than I’d ever respected anyone.

Taylor was going through her English coursework. I sat beside her, helping her work through the questions.

“Oh! King Arthur!” I exclaimed as the excerpt appeared on the page.

We read the excerpt together. It featured Queen Guinevere and Lancelot’s illicit love affair. I’d recently studied some Arthurian tales in my British Literature class, and I was excited

to discuss it with Taylor. The questions, however, weren't engaging. They asked about punctuation, tone, and diction. Taylor stared at the computer screen with bored eyes. I was instantly filled with a sense of helplessness. Literature should be something that students can connect to. It should be exciting, evocative, limitless. Instead, it was being defined by grammar and multiple choice questions.

I tried to imagine my life if I'd been taught literature in the same fashion. I probably would have hated English. I would never have chosen to dedicate my life to sharing the joys of literature with others.

We completed the questions. She made an A on the quiz, and although I was happy for her, I couldn't help but mourn the excitement for English that she didn't feel. It was lost somewhere in the dull, stagnant light of the computer screen.

I was sad to leave on my last day. I looked at all the faces that I had seen every day in the after school program. There was Alex, who I had helped complete two projects. There was Taylor, working quietly on her computer. There was Jackson, who had claimed to be working on his Portuguese every day even though Mrs. Simone never believed him. I looked at all of them, and I imagined them as my own students because someday, my classroom might very well look like this one.

I would try to treat my students the way Mrs. Simone had. I would try to anticipate when my students were hurting or frustrated. I would try to know when they needed a break and when they needed to be challenged. I would try to show interest in my students, in the same sense that Alex had shown interest in me. My main goal would be to teach students to connect with the

literature, rather than selecting the right answer without any regard for the text itself. I would care for my students, and I would give them the greatest gift I ever received- the privilege of learning something that they might carry with them forever.