

## Substitution

The morning Substitute Dispatch sent me to Voit School was back when it was called the School for Crippled Children. But I didn't know that and they didn't tell me. I was still figuring out whether I ought to stay married to Eli, so it was all about the money; other details were not on my list. The voice on the phone gave me the address and told me to be there by 7:45 for five English classes and cafeteria duty in three of the four lunch periods.

The voice did not mention that I would be spoonfeeding sixteen year old boys with cerebral palsy who didn't feel grateful, boys who had to use their rage and shame to humiliate the unconscious ignorant strangers assigned to "help" them – and that I should dress accordingly. But I learned quickly, just as fast as I learned that even though the blind kids couldn't see me, they could feel my stupid pity vibing at them from the front of the room.

The blind kids were my last class of the day, so I was exhausted and demoralized before I got to them. They knew I was a substitute the second they walked in the room. They responded to the situation like any other sophomore English class. They ignored me. They talked to each other and laughed and threw things around the room. Finally, I yelled at them: Hey! Let's get it together here! I couldn't believe I was yelling at a room full of blind people, blind tenth graders. But, like any other sophomore English class, they shut up when I yelled.

Their regular teacher had left no lesson plan, so I picked up the anthology on the desk and paged through it. I spotted Edgar Allen Poe, the story about the dead body hidden under the floorboards. I asked them if they'd read his stories yet. They said they hadn't. All of them said this, even the ones who tried to make me believe they were supposed to get out early because, they said, the blind kids always get out before everybody else, to give us time to find the buses. This was funny, and I could laugh when they did.

When we stopped laughing I looked up and down the rows; I looked at the back wall. I looked at them and then, the way you know you're going to throw up or sneeze, I knew I was going to cry. And that would be the single most insulting thing I'd done on this hapless, useless day. I turned around, as if I thought they could see me, and pressed my face hard into the center crease of the open book, squeezing the text of "The Telltale Heart" against my lips and forehead.

I leaned against the blackboard, pushing my face into the book, onto the chalky slate, my eyes and nose running, my throat closing. There was quiet behind me

for a few minutes. Then I heard them getting up out of their nailed-down desks, packing up and leaving early, going out to Franklin Avenue to find the buses.

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