

## La Miss

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Last September I was assigned a new identity. I became *la Miss*.

Less than a year out of college, I was hired at Futures High School (pseudonym) in Providence, Rhode Island. The students at Futures are mostly Black and Latino/a and almost all receive free lunch. I was given one class of ninth-grade English learners and two classes of senior English learners. Over the course of the year, I discovered a brand of love I'd never known before: a love for my students, fierce and full.

I loved Jean-Paul because he loved to read and Emely because she always checked her spelling (student names are pseudonyms). I loved Yoselin because, on the bus back from the field trip, she showed me a picture of her sister. I loved Raquel because she always apologized after she yelled at me, and I loved Ernesto because I know he hates school but comes anyway because he loves his mom. I loved Jamila because she wants to be an architect so she can build a homeless shelter back in the Dominican Republic and Yunitza because she's going to be a teacher just like me one day. I loved Joaquin because he pulled it together at the end of the semester, and, moments after I changed his grade from an F to a D-, he sent me a short but pointed message: "D+?" I loved Daniel because he laughed when I translated "YOLO" into French, and I loved Francois because he never stopped erasing until I said it was perfect.

I knew I wasn't supposed to pick favorites, but I must admit, I loved Carlos most of all. Carlos worked more than fifty hours a week, washing dishes and chopping fruit, yet his attendance was almost perfect. He wrote reverently of the Guatemalan countryside where he had grown up. In November, he told me, "Miss, I never thought that I could use writing to say something important, but you showed me that I can." He wrote with purpose

and with poetry. But, until April, he refused to consider college. I loved him for letting me change his mind.

I loved the way my students cared for me. Once, in October, I cried in front of my ninth graders. I stood at the board with my hand in the air, signaling for their attention, but they ignored me, absorbed in their phones and in each other, emanating a sort of omnipresent chatter. Without my consent, a tear slid out the corner of my eye. "*La Miss está llorando*," someone whispered, and, like magic, silence fell. Sheyla burst from her seat to stroke my hair. That afternoon, on my way to my car, I saw Boris.

"Miss," he asked me, "you normal now?"

I loved the way they let me care for them. One day in March, Dayalín arrived to class with her arms crisscrossed in fresh, sharp cuts. I knelt by her desk. "*Yo veo los brazos*. Can you please stay after class?" And when she did, she cried to me for the frightening loneliness of her life with her silent, angry father. We walked to the counselor together.

I loved the ones who came every day. Their return, morning after morning, revealed a faith in possibilities even I have to squint to see. I loved the ones who trusted me enough to steer head-on into the challenges I laid before them—essays, résumés, annotations—while the purpose of this work, I'm sure, often seemed elusive. I loved the ones who declared college an inevitable future, despite never witnessing anyone in their families receive a diploma in higher education. I loved the ones who picked up their pencils and gave it a shot even when nobody was watching.

I loved them enough to call them out. Struck by a wave of springtime inspiration, a group of my seniors decided to have a yard sale to raise money for college. It soon became clear, though, that they had not anticipated the grunt work involved in

actually bringing the yard sale to fruition. We convened. Did they want to go through with this or not? They hemmed and hawed; I called it off. I had posted signs around the school urging teachers and students to bring their old stuff to my room. Tahiil and Jean-Paul promised, twice, that the signs would be gone by morning. When I arrived at school the next day, the first thing I saw was a sign. They were everywhere! I wrote Tahiil and Jean-Paul a strongly worded letter, which concluded, “As you go out in the world as young men, I encourage you to show respect for yourselves and for others by always doing what you say you will do, no matter how small.”

We had a lot of fun too. And, man, I loved our shenanigans! On a Tuesday in May, Tahiil arrived to class too much in love for essay writing. He had met a girl—the most beautiful Congolese girl in all the world!—but their romance was short-lived because she had returned to college in Texas. Now their undying passion unfurled in a rush of filtered Snapchats. On receiving each one, Tahiil writhed and moaned, “I am in loooooove.” I took his phone and saw the girl. I declared her stunning, magical, luminous—indeed, perfect!

“I am in loooooove!” we howled together.

I loved my Haitian boys’ soccer obsession and how they’d stake out in my room after school and watch the game on their cell phones, split into viewing pods according to team allegiance. I loved when Reggie laid out his sneaker cleaning regimen for me. I loved how Summer and her boyfriend wore custom-made, coordinated outfits to prom, his slacks sporting strips of the blue, West African print of her gown. I loved when Frantz and I played the chipmunk-nut-eating game on Snapchat . . . and when I won. I loved when we all went outside during advisory and screamed when we saw the dead squirrel.

One day in May, Abran, from the Dominican Republic, tripped on a backpack belonging to Stanley, from Haiti, and Futures erupted with the Haitian-Dominican tensions that have gripped the island of Hispaniola since Spanish and French colonization. While both countries have suffered from years of conflict, Haiti has been burdened by a greater

load of poverty, bloodshed, and discrimination. In my classroom, too, Stanley was the underdog, one of four Haitians in a class with sixteen Dominicans. When Abran tripped on his backpack, Stanley felt slighted. Perhaps he twitched his nose, hunched his shoulders an inch or two, grunted something in Creole. Whatever it was, by the following afternoon, the baseball team, almost entirely Dominican, had been organized to set matters straight.

The bell rang for fourth period, and the air bubbled with the anticipation of violence. Stanley stood outside my classroom, alone with his fear and his fury. Brawny and unified, the baseball team sauntered up the hallway. They were here to defend their friend, but I believe that national pride rested at the heart of their mission.

I was inches away from Stanley’s quaking face when the first punch made contact with his cheek. His features wriggled across his skull in slow motion, like a UFC playback reel. A capsule of rage burst in my stomach and tremors ran down my arms and legs. How dare they release their hate on one of my students? But I was powerless here. I stood against the wall and watched while an administrator broke up the fight.

A month later, an American kid I didn’t know followed Stanley into my classroom and sat down inches from his face, legs spread wide. “You got a problem?” he taunted.

Stanley didn’t speak Spanish like the majority of the kids learning English at Futures. He didn’t yet speak English and he struggled to read and write in French. He existed, instead, in a silent world of Haitian Creole, which Google Translate botched to nonsense. He shook his head at the kid. “No.”

I felt the shaky rage again, a shove of adrenaline. Here, I knew, I had some power.

I teacher-voiced that kid out of my classroom. “These are my students.” I locked eyes with him. “They are new in this school and in this country. It is your duty to welcome them here.” My face twitched at him. “Don’t you dare let me see you threatening them. Ever.”

I breathed out. Stanley, I promised, was going to be OK.

And maybe so would Carlos and Tahiil and Day-alín and Abran and Boris. Maybe, just maybe, I had loved each of them enough so that one day, when everything gets too terribly hard, they might reach

down into a pocket and find a tiny box bursting with teacher love, and perhaps then, for a moment, everything could be really, truly OK. **EJ**



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## Comma Karma

My crooked comet,  
a feathery warped wisp,  
yin for a yang,  
curlicue concentrate,  
my minuscule punctuator,  
penmanship-shaper,  
there,

there,

and there.

I have used it to tag my word-thoughts,  
to look both ways,  
a breath before the whistle,  
caesuras between *dubs* and *lubs*, as in  
*lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, always lub dub.*

Come, comma, come.

Stay with me.

Clasp my thoughts to the sentence clothesline.

Curate my mind for those cluttered, unconcealing moments  
when I exhale, when I muse, when I love, when I write.

Come, stay, and give good pause.

Since everything is timing,  
everything begins with a pregnant pause,  
karma *comma* karma.

—MARK VALENTINE

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