

## New Things All the Time

“You nervous about school?” Mom asked the evening before school started. She was washing potatoes at the sink as I packed a peanut-butter sandwich at the table.

“No, it’s going to be fine,” I said, thinking of being in the same class with Rachel and no more Special Needs in the hallway.

“You do, huh. Well, I hope so.” Mom gave me a poison eyeball. I guess she was not thinking about my being with Rachel and no more Special Needs in the hallway. I slowly folded the foil around my sandwich and slid it into my backpack.

“All those books you read,” she went on, not even looking at me while she peeled potatoes in short, fierce strokes. She was smacking them with

the peeler like she wished they were my bottom. “What a waste, Sahara, what a waste. Talk about a crying shame, Sahara, it’s just a crying shame, you read all the time and what for? Repeating fifth grade! How can such a smart . . . ! Tsk! Huh! I just don’t understand you.” She turned around suddenly and faced me, her chin jutting out and moving back and forth, but no words came then. She turned back to the sink. Peel. Peel. Peel. Trying to find me somewhere under the skin, the daughter she could be proud of. I just ran my finger over the smooth finish of my folders. I’m getting better at keeping things tidy, I told myself.

“I’m going for a walk,” I surprised myself by saying.

“Oh, no you’re not,” said Mom. “Where you think you’re walking to?”

“It’s still light out,” I said. I walked out before she could say anything and ran down the stairs, even though I could hear her through the door, calling me.

I walked toward the corner store, but once I hit the corner, where was I supposed to go? I still

turned it, because I knew my mother was watching me through the window, and I was mad at her.

But once I was out of her sight I didn't walk anymore. I just sat on somebody else's stoop and put my head on my knees and cried.

My mom was there in a minute. She walked me back, holding my shoulders.

She sighed. "Let's just take it a day at a time, okay, Sahara?"

*But I'm too lonely, I wanted to tell her. I can't do it.*

But the sun rose again, on the first day of fifth grade for a second time. It rose and said, You're going to have to do it.

As I was walking in, no teacher was there, and the door was open. I took a seat in the back of the room, like always. Rachel chose a seat in the row in front of me, to my left. She turned and smiled apologetically. I smiled back. No hard feelings; the back row's not for everybody. She motioned to the seat in front of the one I'd chosen, but I pretended to be busy organizing my folders. I couldn't explain to Rachel that the seat in front of

me was reserved, hopefully for someone very tall and easy to hide behind.

I looked at my new classmates. I knew a few of the girls from double Dutch: there was Sakiah and Tanaeja, and I knew Kiarre by sight, she's so tall and tough. I knew a couple of the boys: big-mouthed Raphael, Ernie who comes to the library sometimes, and Darrell, held back like me, legs spread, frowning in the back-row corner. Was that handsome boy's name Dominique? There was Paris on the other side of the room, and the girl with the black hair, too, chatting away. Paris waved, and I waved back. They seemed nicer than my old class, maybe because Cordelia hadn't made it back in time from her family vacation to Disney World, maybe because it was the first day, and everyone was clean, everyone was on good behavior. I looked at Darrell. *Better* behavior. The class was smaller than most. I noticed that this was usually the case when Darrell was in the roll. *Maybe I'll have new friends*, I thought fleetingly, but my mind was not really on my classmates. There was someone left I needed to meet.

The vice-principal was standing there. "Are you our new teacher?" someone asked.

"No." He looked relieved. "The fifth-grade teacher moved on over the summer," he said.

"She quit!" a voice called out.

The vice-principal frowned, but he couldn't tell who said it, so he ignored it. "Yes, well! Your new teacher is on her way."

"Is she a teacher from another class?" someone asked. Our minds raced. The patient kindergarten teacher, wagging a puppet on each hand? The short-tempered seventh-grade teacher with hair growing from his ears, the one who likes to be called "Lieutenant"? I shivered.

"It's no one you know," the vice-principal explained. "She'll be transferring in from somewhere else. Be seated. Someone will be with you shortly." He excused himself.

A teacher from Somewhere Else sounded good to me. Sometimes, I wish I were from Somewhere Else myself. I wish I were from the sort of place that inspires you to write long sentences about the shapes of clouds and the smell of things growing. But when

you're from Chicago, it's hard to write sentences that sound like anything except coins going into the change machine on the public bus. *Clink. Clank. Clunk.*

*Clunk.*

"Teacher's coming!" hissed a boy who was standing guard at the door of the classroom. "I think this is her!" He slid into his chair.

"Is she ugly?" asked another boy.

"Shhh! She'll hear, fool," snarled a girl. "Momma says, 'You never get a second chance to make a first impression.'" She folded her hands and smiled at the ceiling.

I closed my eyes and tried to enjoy the feeling of the teacher not knowing me yet. I think I could do my work here. It's been a while. But what's the use? Even if this teacher I'm dealt is a queen of diamonds, I don't want to give them any more material for their file about me. Their precious file, so different from my own file of my summer, tucked behind books in the low shelf of the library. I try to put this file out of my head and sit up straight.

And that's when I notice it is so quiet we can hear her coming down the hall. We are not even blinking, frozen like statues in our first-impression poses.

What's in *her* file, I wonder? And then I can't help snickering a little, even though it breaks my pose.

Because if they kept files on grown-ups, it would be a different story, wouldn't it?

## We Got Her

**I**n she walked. Our new teacher!

I blinked, and blinked again. Her hair was copper like a lucky penny, but when the light hit it a certain way, it seemed almost green, a deep green, like she colored it with a dye made from tree leaves. It was held back with sparkling dragonfly barrettes, but there was no help for it. It was wild hair. She was pale, but I couldn't decide for sure if she was white or Asian or Puerto Rican, or maybe light-skinned black. When someone is wearing lipstick as purple as an eggplant, it's hard to tell. She wore lime eye shadow and heavy black liquid eyeliner, making her expression catlike. She wore a yellow dress that looked like it was made of tissue paper, kind of old-fashioned and grandmotherly,

but hanging slightly over her shoulder. Her bra strap was showing. It was also purple. She looked less like a teacher and more like one of those burnt-out punk-rocker teenagers who hang out in front of the Dunkin' Donuts on Belmont, near the L stop. Only grown.

Her arms were full of flowers. She opened up her desk drawer and pulled out a scissors, and sat down, cutting each stem at an angle. Then she swiveled in her chair and pulled out a vase from a cabinet behind her, and arranged the flowers. We all watched, caught up in where she moved the daisies and sunflowers, tilting our head along with her, this way, then that way. "Ever been to a farmers' market?" she asked the air, her eyes still on the flowers. "The flowers there aren't like the ones at the grocery store, oh no, it's a whole different deal. Imagine, these beauties, for sale in the middle of a parking lot! I swear, you can get anything your heart desires in the city, I don't see why *anyone* ever settles for *less*." She swiveled again, and pulled out a watering can. "Please." She thrust it at a girl in the first row. We all jumped—it was the first time

she seemed to notice that any of us were there, and we had all forgotten where we were, too.

The girl left the room to fill the can. In the meantime, the woman sized up the space on the wall behind her desk. Then she whipped out a hammer, and a nail went into the wall with a brisk *bang, bang, bang*. We jumped again. She hung a framed diploma on it. If I narrowed my eyes, I could see it said MRS. FRUMPER'S FABULOUS SCHOOL FOR TEACHERS in fancy handwriting. She straightened it carefully, put her hand over her heart and blew through her lips in a satisfied way. Then she pulled out a table lamp with a shade of thin red glass, shaped like a tulip. Six clear crystals hanging all around the base of the shade shimmered and sang like small bells when they moved against each other. She unhooked each crystal and polished it with a handkerchief she pulled out from whatever it was she was wearing under her clothes. She held each crystal up to the light in turn, and squinted. We all squinted.

A boy raised his hand.

The teacher glanced at the clock on the wall, five minutes until nine, then back at the boy.

"Do you have to go to the washroom?"

"No."

"Then put your hand down," she said, hard and quick, like the hammer banging. The boy obeyed.

She hung the last polished crystal, and turned the little lamp on and off, to test it. "Working lights are important things," she remarked, again, to the air. "A light that won't go on, well, that's just sad."

The girl returned with the watering can. The woman filled the vase and pushed it forward on her desk. She felt for her pearls and adjusted them, making sure the clasp was at the nape of her neck. Then she sat, her lips against her fist, and looked us over one by one, with the concern of a dentist peering into a very wide and decaying mouth.

The bell rang.

The teacher sighed and got up, moving around to the front of her desk and leaning against it, her arms crossed. She looked like she might be smiling, but the smile was tucked away like a mint

against her gum and cheek. "Well," she said. "Another year."

"My name is Madame Poitier, Miss PWAH-tee-YAY. It rhymes with *touché*, a French word that means, 'you got me.'" She smiled openly then, even though it was the first day of school. I had never seen a teacher do that before.

"Most children call me Miss Pointy," she continued. We giggled. "Some children just call me Madame."

"My damn what?" Darrell called out.

"Your damn teacher," Miss Pointy replied without blinking, "and this seems like a perfect moment to talk about rules. What do you think some good rules would be?"

Kids called out. No talking. No pushing. No chewing gum. No taking other people's stuff. No swearing. No not doing homework. No pulling hair. No chair-kicking. No copying. No calling names.

Miss Pointy yawned. "How about, No rules that start with the word *no*? Haven't you kids ever heard the word *yes*?" She wrote on the board:

*YES looking**YES listening**YES consideration*

"What's consi . . . consid . . ."

"Consideration? Treating other people the way you want to be treated. If you don't like being pushed, or having your stuff taken, or having your hair pulled, don't do it, or you may be paid back in the same coin. That's common sense. YES common sense. And YES, hard work, harder than you've ever worked in your whole lives, so if you want extra credit, get a head start on sweating. I'm the meanest teacher in the west."

"Do you shoot from the hip?" snickered Raphael.

"You'll find out, cowboy." Miss Pointy's nostrils flared.

She wrote the schedule on the board.

*Puzzling, 9:10 to 10:40**Time Travel and World Exploring or**Mad Science,**alternate days, 10:40 to 11:30**Read Aloud, after lunch**Read Together after Read Aloud,**Read Alone after Read Together**Art of Language, end of the day*

What did it all mean? We looked at each other. None of us knew, none of us asked. We were all feeling too shy, except for Darrell, who maybe didn't care.

Miss Pointy passed out thick composition books with black-and-white marbled covers. "You each owe me two dollars," she announced as she passed them out.

"I don't got two dollars," complained a boy.

"You may not *have* two dollars now, but someday you will. Then you'll pay me."

She continued to pass out the books, and one skidded across my desk. I stopped it with my hand, and smiled. It was nice to get something new.

"This is your journal," she explained. "You will

write in it every day. Begin each entry with the date. 'Dear Diary' or 'Dear Journal' is *optional*, or up to you. I'll read and sometimes comment on what you write, unless you make a 'P' with a circle and a line through it on the top of the page, like this." She drew on the board.



"This means, 'None of your business, Miss Pointy.' What you write is between you and the paper, and sometimes me," she promised.

"And the Special Needs teacher," Darrell grumbled.

"I don't like bureaucrats," she told Darrell, "but I don't mind cynics."

"What's a bureaucrat?" Darrell asked suspiciously.

"A tattletale who likes to write things down," Miss Pointy explained.

"Oh, like Sakiah," a girl called out.

"I don't know that Sakiah tells on people yet," said Miss Pointy. "So far, I only know that about you." The girl turned red; Miss Pointy winked, forgiving.

"She does shoot from the hip!" Raphael howled. We laughed some more.

"What's a cynic?" asked Paris.

"Someone who sees the world through mud-colored glasses. Mud's easy enough to clean up, though. 'God made dirt and dirt don't hurt,' that's what my little brother used to say. Right before he ate dirt."

We looked at Miss Pointy and couldn't help smiling. A teacher who had a brother who ate dirt! A teacher who would lend you two dollars! A teacher who was going to show us how to travel through time and to solve puzzles! So, she used big words and shot from the hip. Those two things could be overcome. All other signs pointed to human.

"Now. Line up against the wall. I'm picking your seats. No whining. Come on, come on. Now. You—there. You—there. You—there; no—there." I was relieved when I was seated in the back of the room again. When all of us were seated, she scrutinized the arrangement. "You," she pointed.

"Who, me?"



"Change places with her."

Second row. Rachel and I passed each other. How did Miss Pointy know I was . . . well . . . hiding? "And you," she pointed to Darrell Sikes. "Up here, too."

"Why I gotta sit in the front row!"

"All the better to see you, my dear," said Miss Pointy.

"Dang!" Darrell got up as slowly as if he weighed eight hundred pounds and sauntered forward. He finally slammed his book bag and body into place with such force, he could have been crash-landing off the top of a skyscraper.

"Oh, a thespian." Miss Pointy sniffed. "Your stage business is sluggish. We'll have to work on your pacing."

"What's a thespian?" asked Tanaeja.

"An actor."

"I ain't no actor!" Darrell exploded. "I'm Darrell Sikes, and you better watch your back, teacher!" All of us straightened. One boy made a sound, and was quickly hushed by another. Miss Pointy raised an eyebrow and scratched it.

"How is it I'm supposed to watch my back? I haven't any eyes in my back." She seemed genuinely perplexed by the request. She even glanced over her shoulder, to see how it felt. "No, I'd never be able to watch my back and teach at the same time. Never." She shook her head sadly, and sighed. "Oh, well. Can't be helped. Note to self." She wrote on a pad on her desk. "Assign. Back. Watching. Monitor. Darrell? Darrell Sikes, isn't it? Would you mind watching my back for me, since you were initially kind enough to show concern in that regard? It would be the first assigned job of the school year."

He was confused. We were all confused. But we were smiling. Darrell was not.

"YES make life easy on yourself," Miss Pointy said. "Don't mess with your teacher. Speaking of making life easy and of messes, I need your help to lighten the daily load. First, may I have a volunteer to stay and help me after school, clean up the erasers and such? Someone from the neighborhood, no one who needs to catch the school bus, sorry. This is a permanent job. I'll

call and get permission from your parents. Your name?"

"Rachel."

There went my walk home. Oh, well. I thought of raising my hand as she named other classroom jobs, ones that would rotate so we all would get a turn: messenger, homework returner, current-events reporter, on and on. Maybe she could use more help after school, maybe I could ask her and she would say yes and I could clean erasers with Rachel. But I hadn't raised my hand in years. I wasn't sure my hand still knew how to raise. I lifted my wrist limply. It wasn't going to happen.

"You'll be leaving before lunch today. Just enough time to pass out textbooks." Miss Pointy let out a little private laugh. "Any of you ever read a textbook under the blankets, with a flashlight?"

We looked at each other, then shook our heads.

"Anyone ever recommend a textbook to a friend? Did you ever say, 'This is so great! You've got to read this!'"

No.

"Anyone cry at the end of a textbook?"

We laughed. No.

"Huh," said Miss Pointy. "Well, they make lovely paperweights anyway, don't you think? I'll find something else for us to read for the most part. Now, while I'm passing these out, as I'm mandated—"

"What's 'mandated'?"

"Bossed. You work in your new journals. Some days you will write about your life—"

"Bo-ring," someone called out.

Miss Pointy stopped cold. "Who said that?" Nobody answered. "Boring is a swear word in this class. I don't want to hear boring. Ever." She picked up a textbook, a heavy one, and slammed it on her desk. We all jumped. "If that word comes out of your mouth you will be sent down to the nurse. She'll give you a shot on your south side to cure your boringitis and send you home. You just test me once and see if I'm kidding. Understand? Anyone here *not* understand?" Her voice was low. She really looked angry. She was crazy. She walked

a full circle around her desk and took a deep breath. "As I was saying, you will write about your life. If your life happens to be b-o-r-i-n-g," she spelled, "then you had better learn to make life a little more interesting, because I don't read anything b-o-r-i-n-g."

"Why not?" Raphael ventured.

"Because. It's . . . it's . . . b-o-r-i-n-g." The mood seemed to lift as suddenly as it had come. "Now. I've told you all about myself, haven't I? How my first husband was a pirate, and I'm using this job to supplement my night job selling encyclopedias, yadda-yadda-yadda? Now, I need you to tell me everything I need to know about you."

Everyone stared at her.

"Make hay while the sun shines! Today! Go!"

We all started writing, or asked to borrow something to write with. Miss Pointy rolled her eyes, passed out a School Supply List and a *Lista de Utencilios Escolares*. Soon everyone was either writing or chewing on their pens and looking like they were trying to see their eyebrows. Everyone except me. I stared at

everyone in turn, imagining what they would write.

Rachel:

I really don't see why I should sit in the back row plus something you should know is I need new glasses only my mother has not taken me yet so I don't see why I must sit in the back row where I can hardly see so please teacher please please change my seat.  
Love your loving helper Rachel.

Or Darrell:

Somethin you shid no about me is I ant gon wach your back you wach your own back teecher p.s. you are stopid and ugly. and BORING BORING BORING BORING BORING BORING

And then everyone else:

*I like recess.*

*My big sister is going to have a baby in three months.*

*I want a Game Cube for my birthday.*

I WANT A PET BUT IN MY BUILDING  
IT'S NO DOGS ALLOWED, NOT EVEN CATS.

*Taco day is best in the lunchroom, but they don't give enough cheese.*

I spend summers with my grandma in Alabama.

I like boys even though they can be sooo immature.

*I have to go to the bathroom a lot, please don't yell at me.*

soree teacher, no speck inglish.

Then, I tried to think of what I wanted to say. I thought of saying how I was held back, but then I realized this wasn't something I wanted to say. I wanted to say I was sorry I made my mother feel

so disappointed, but then I realized that was something I should say to my mother, not my teacher . . . and this, too, wasn't something I wanted to say. I wanted to tell Miss Pointy I am good at looking at things and smelling things and seeing things and touching things and hearing things and thinking things and remembering things, but so what? These aren't things that are important to know at school, are they? They don't fill in any blank, do they? So all these things I know are a secret, I keep them inside myself, in a box made of myself. Only I seem to have lost the key and now I don't know how to take it all out when I need it.

I wanted to tell the teacher that the world looks different from the second row, that I liked the flowers and the red lamp, and that I wished she knew I wanted to be a helper even though I didn't raise my hand. I wished she were a goldfish bowl turned upside down and could see me reflected in her, the way I want to be seen, without my having to tell her. I want to be seen in a way that takes her by surprise, upside down and backward from what's before her eyes.

The bell rang. A blank page stared up at me.

"Pass up your journals," she instructed. Kids started twisting around in their seats, collecting books from behind them. I felt panicked. I picked up my pen. I wrote:

*I am a writer*

And then my journal was one in a pile, being pushed forward. I could not tell which one was mine. I grew red and hot and foolish-feeling at the thought of Miss Pointy looking at those words. What was I thinking?

After all, in the end, she was going to be a teacher about it.

*I am a writer*

*I believe you.*